

# **Childhood and Adolescence**

## **Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Applications**

*Second Edition*

**Uwe P. Gielen and Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, Editors**

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## **Chapter 13**

### **Chinese American Adolescents and Emerging Adults in New York City: Striving for a Place in the Sun**

**Jennifer Ho and Uwe P. Gielen**

*Born and raised in New York City, 16-year-old Sophia Ling (a pseudonym like all names in this chapter) had two unevenly shaped eyes—the double-lidded eye proclaimed her “American side” while the other proclaimed her “Asian side”—representing the duality of living in two cultural worlds. Growing up as a minority, Sophia disliked being grouped in with Chinese stereotypes and was unsure what it meant to be a Chinese American. Her parents had immigrated illegally to the United States to pursue better economic opportunities, a sacrifice that Sophia understood only too well. “Grow up, earn money, and send us back to China” was her parents’ mantra, and she felt it to be her duty to fulfill their wish despite her own lack of attachment to her ethnic country of origin. Her parents heavily emphasized education but were not involved in her academic endeavors. Furthermore, they expected her to fulfill her household duties as a woman: expectations that were not imposed on her brother. Sophia placed extreme pressure on herself to excel and pursue a life of independence. Through the years,*

*her perspective had slowly shifted, and just as she was beginning to accept her physical appearance, she had found ways to gain more confidence in herself and reconcile her dual identity.*

In this chapter, we discuss how Chinese American adolescents and young adults such as Sophia Ling attempt to come to terms with their multicultural identities which are jointly shaped by growing up in a minority Chinese immigrant family and by their attempts to create a future for themselves in the larger American mainstream society. We examine their family lives, evaluate the considerable demands their parents tend to place upon them, and then ask: What emotional price might some of these young people have to pay for their elevated educational aspirations and achievements?

The Chinese initially came to the United States in the 1850s in the wake of the California Gold Rush. Working as indentured laborers in the mining industry and subsequently on the transcontinental railroads, they soon found themselves the steady target of racial exclusion and anti-Chinese riots. To escape some of the persecution, a few hundred Chinese moved to New York where during the last three decades of the 19th century they founded New York's oldest Chinatown, in Manhattan. By the 1890s, about 12,000–13,000 racially isolated Chinese eked out a meager living in the New York area.

As late as 1950, only about 18,000 Chinese lived in Manhattan's Chinatown, an impoverished, inward-looking and hierarchically organized society that included many bachelors. But all of this would change dramatically after 1965, the year when the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, also known as the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act. This revolutionary act of legislation changed the very nature of immigration into the United States. Whereas laws prior to 1965 almost exclusively favored European immigrants, the post–

Hart-Cellar period saw a rapidly expanding influx of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. Large numbers of ethnic Chinese or *Han* immigrants began to arrive from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Mainland China, Malaysia, and elsewhere. By 1990 the U.S. Census Bureau counted 238,919 Chinese in New York City and in 2013, their number had reached 558,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Even so, these already-very large numbers are generally believed to seriously underestimate the Chinese population since many undocumented Chinese immigrants attempt to avoid any contact with census workers. Having been smuggled into the United States by so-called snakeheads or else overstaying their visitor's visas, they try to live beneath the radar screen of the authorities (Keefe, 2010). Altogether, the number of persons of Han descent in the larger New York Metropolitan Area probably now surpasses 800,000, making it the largest "Chinese Metropolitan Area" outside Asia.

A traditional entrance door for immigrants, over three million of New York City's 8.4 million residents are foreign-born. Around 49% of all New Yorkers speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). As one of the most ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse metropolises in the world, the city hosts numerous ethnic neighborhoods ranging from Hispanic and Chinese to Russian and Arabic (Kiersz, 2014). In fact, Asian Americans comprise the third-largest ethnic minority in New York City after African Americans and Hispanics. And so, with the Chinese population expanding dramatically, the city's Chinatowns have continued to grow rapidly both in number and in size. Today, New York can boast of three major Chinatowns in Flushing-Queens, Sunset Park-Brooklyn, and Lower Manhattan as well as five smaller ones that are scattered throughout the boroughs.

Many Chinese American children in New York City grow up in working-class and lower middle-class environments, with hopes of rising above the low socioeconomic status that tends to

be the fate of so many of their parents. In the public view, these students shine brightly in the academic realm, but little research has offered a qualitative inquiry into their thoughts, feelings, and psychological health. This chapter provides a glimpse into the family dynamics of these Chinese Americans and the psychosocial adaptations they undergo as they attempt to reconcile their ethnic cultures with the American mainstream.

Our observations and analyses derive not only from current literature but also from our own studies that include 86 in-depth interviews with Chinese American adolescents and emerging adults as well as 82 autobiographical essays by high school and college students. While many other studies of Chinese Americans have investigated middle-to-high-income families, our research projects include many young people who have grown up in low-income households. The purpose of our studies is to provide vivid portraits and authentic documentation based upon firsthand accounts of Chinese American New Yorkers. In our interviews, we have explored a variety of topics such as moving from East Asia to New York; growing up in often modest circumstances; assuming various roles in one's family; being reared as a "satellite baby"; the nature of parent-child relationships; gender roles and gender-related body images; questions of identity; the interviewees' emotional attachments and emotional health; and their educational involvements and successes.

Our research focuses on 1st, 1.5, and 2nd-generation immigrants who have either spent a major portion or all of their youth in New York City. In this context, we define 1st-generation immigrants as those who were born overseas but subsequently migrated to New York, 1.5 generation immigrants were born overseas but arrived in the new country before adolescence, and 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation immigrants are those born in New York to immigrant parents. This special focus means that we will not explore the lives of foreign college and graduate students who spent

their youth in China nor do we examine here the lives of the many Fujianese working-class immigrants who have been arriving in the city in their 20s or 30s and tend to speak little if any English. Finally, this chapter does not aim to encapsulate the diversity of experiences within the Chinese American community across the United States and Canada that includes many upper-middle class residents in the suburbs and so-called Asian “ethnoburbs.”

We are interested here in the lives and subjective experiences of immigrant Chinese Americans adolescents and emerging adults who are coming of age in the Big Apple. We believe that the meeting in their hearts and minds between the Chinese and American cultures is not only a manifestation of the accelerating process of globalization but also represents an intimate and sustained encounter between the world’s two most influential sociocultural visions. Although the family lives we analyze in this chapter are varied, tied to New York, and often modest in nature, they can nevertheless tell us something important about the global encounter between East and West: As so often in recent cultural psychology, the story we tell is “glocal” (i.e., simultaneously global and local) in nature.

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## **From Asia to New York City**

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Whereas recent Chinese immigrants have come to New York from a considerable variety of provinces in China as well as from other Asian countries, most families prior to the 1970s originated in the Taishan (Toishan) area and some other towns and villages located in the southern Guangdong Province. Speaking Taishanese or the related Cantonese dialect, these families and their descendants continue to make up the nucleus of the “Old Chinatown” in Manhattan, with Mott Street as its center. In the 1980s and 1990s, they were joined by often



well-educated immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Malaysia, and elsewhere. Feeling no close kinship to the working-class Taishanese, many of these immigrants began to settle in Little Asia, a multiethnic area centered on the Flushing area in Queens. This wave of immigrants was followed by still another group of families and individuals originating in the Min River Delta in Fujian Province. Speaking entirely different dialects such as the Fuzhou dialect, these newcomers began to grow roots around the East Broadway area, thereby creating Manhattan's "New Chinatown." Other Fujianese (also called Fukienese) moved to Brooklyn where, together with Taishanese and Cantonese speakers, they helped to create a new but rapidly expanding Chinatown in the Sunset Park area.

Altogether, the Chinese immigrant community in New York is highly diverse in terms of geographical origins, languages and dialects spoken, date of arrival, immigration status, the degree of exposure to American mainstream culture, social class, cultural and political orientations, and various other characteristics. Nevertheless and regardless of their immigration status, most adolescents we interviewed called themselves "Chinese" or "Asian American" in order to distinguish themselves from those they labeled "Americans"—such as non-Hispanic Whites. This linguistic usage suggests that they perceive themselves as members of a distinct minority group that has not quite arrived yet in the new society. At the same time they perceive themselves as being quite distinct from African Americans and Hispanics not only in their physical appearance but at times also in their behavioral tendencies. This statement holds true especially for the less-assimilated parents who may convey skeptical opinions about these groups to their teenagers and hope that they will not marry one of "them."

McGlinn's report (2002) on Chinese Americans in the United States distinguished Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong from those from Mainland China. He

discovered that the median household income of Taiwanese or Hong-Kong families was nearly 50% higher than that of families from China. Furthermore, 43% of immigrants from China arrived with less than a high school education compared to 12% of Taiwan/Hong Kong immigrants. Whereas better-off immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan typically settle down in middle-class areas of Queens, Manhattan's Upper West Side, and suburban New Jersey, Long Island, and California, Chinese from the more rural regions of the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces are often compelled to work in New York's Chinese ethnic enclaves because they offer varied job opportunities as well as communal support. While these ethnic enclaves continue to serve as the favored destination spots for many incoming Chinese immigrants, a large proportion of them has dispersed across the metropolitan area over the years. This holds true especially for the economically successful "uptown Chinese," whereas the largely working-class and lower middle-class families residing in Manhattan Chinatown are sometimes referred to as "downtown Chinese" (Kwong, 1996).

Chinese immigrants have been coming to New York for a variety reasons including economic prosperity, social mobility, better educational opportunities for their children, and sometimes also for political and religious reasons. Seventeen-year-old Julia Ho aptly summed up the American dream embraced by those crossing the country's borders:

My family came because they wanted better job opportunities and a better life for their children. Coming to the United States was this goal that everyone wanted to achieve because there was just this ideal [of making a lot of money] that was associated with the United States.

Indeed, the pursuit of this goal has led thousands to leave the comforts of their homes behind in the search for Golden Mountain, a hopeful Chinese term for the United States that was

first coined during the Californian gold rush. Today, however, while New York has experienced considerable economic recovery since the 2009 recession, the 2013 poverty rate of Chinese in New York City has remained at a high 21.2%, well above the country's average of 15.8% and the national Chinese population's average of 15.9%. While there exist an increasing number of economically well-off Chinese especially in Queens, the median income of a Chinese household in New York City continues to remain below the city and national average, and its working-class Chinese population remains the largest in the nation. They are, however, less likely than other ethnic groups to utilize government subsidies such as welfare payments nor do they tend to be politically very active. For these and other reasons, their poverty and acculturation struggles remain largely concealed from the general public.

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## **Adapting Family Roles**

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Leaving the comforts of their communities behind, first-generation immigrants also lose their social roles that provided them with a sense of belonging in society. Feelings of loss and incompetence are common as they navigate a whole new world, fighting against discrimination and marginalization in the workforce (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). While parents struggle to establish economic stability, their children face a different sort of challenges at school and in the social realm. Like their parents, they are no strangers to racism and prejudice. 1.5 and 2nd-generation children in particular grow up in a unique environment of divergent cultures. Most adolescents we met described living two different identities that they alternate between home and school: At home, they speak one of the Chinese dialects and attempt to live up to the values their parents endorse; at school, they don the character of the American teenager—at least

up to a point. As they navigate through the confusing maze of seemingly divergent cultural rules, psychological distress can arise when they are unable to resolve these separate identities into a coherent whole.

On the whole, first-generation immigrants remain closer to the Chinese culture, whereas second-generation immigrants become more Americanized. Those immigrants who came to the United States in their teens often struggle with the English language, remain fluent in spoken and written Chinese, like to watch Chinese TV programs and listen to Chinese or Korean pop music, form friendships with other Chinese and Asian teenagers, and find it easy to understand and sympathize with their Chinese parents (Jia, 2004). In contrast, many American-born Chinese teenagers and young adults move away from some important aspects of their parents' culture, speak their parents' Chinese dialect only imperfectly, and cannot read Chinese characters. Their world is much more Americanized: They tend to have both Asian and non-Asian friends with whom they converse in English, may think of their parents as old-fashioned and out of touch with their own teenage world, and at times perceive themselves as more American than Chinese. Indeed, a few of them commented ironically in their interviews that they were a "twinkie" or "banana": externally yellow, but internally white. Still others have learned to live comfortably in the two cultural worlds by forging an "integrated identity," and they tend to be optimistic and well adjusted (cf. Berry & Vedder, chapter 12, this volume). As several studies have shown, language proficiency in both Chinese and English and pride in one's ethnic culture are positively correlated with self-esteem. Moreover, Tsai, Ying, and Lee (2001) found that for Chinese American women, self-esteem was largely associated with pride in their ethnic culture whereas language proficiency was more salient for men.

Nevertheless, immigration places enormous stress on the relationship between parents and children and can significantly alter the family dynamic. The pressure of having to survive in a new land inevitably places the immigrant family in a precarious position of having to redefine and alter the responsibility of each member. Boundaries between the roles of children and those of adults may thus become blurred, with the child sometimes taking on parental responsibilities well beyond their age.

Mo Li Kao came to the United States at the age of 14 from Taiwan, living with her relatives before her mother joined her four years later. They lived in Flushing, a neighborhood known as “Little Asia” that includes a considerable Taiwanese population which meant that her mother could communicate with others. Mo Li, now a social worker, spoke about the poverty surrounding immigration and the familial obligations:

The reality is I took care of everything. [My mother] was a cleaning lady in Taiwan, and it was very difficult for her to make a living. Over here [in the U.S.] as a housekeeper, while they didn't pay a lot—I mean, \$800 a month—it was a lot more than what she was making in Taiwan. It was tough for her, and I think coming here actually was easier, even though compared to a lot of other people, it still seemed hard. Like when we first moved to Flushing, we lived in a room the size of an office. It was the cheapest accommodation we could get, so we shared the kitchen and bathroom with 10 other people. But in Taiwan, we had our own apartment. . . . My stepfather was still in Taiwan. We were sending money back for him, but he was still kind of not making it or fell into a great depression of some sort and had like a temporary psychotic break. He stabbed himself a few times and nearly died . . . I said to my mom, “I think you should go home and take care of him. You married this guy.” [But] she was too scared. She was too scared to give up her 800-dollars-a-month job. And so, I dropped out of school and went back to take care of him until he was well enough, and then I brought him over

. . . [We are] not close, but we're not distant. I mean, once you sign the papers, you're family, you know.

Many of our Chinese American interviewees possessed a similar sense of familial obligation, learning to become independent early on and taking on responsibilities beyond their age. While the parents work long hours to establish themselves in the new country, the children have to maneuver through the school system on their own, learning social norms and doing homework with little parental guidance. Once the child achieves a fair grasp of the language and the norms of the community, the parents may come to rely on the child to help them navigate the new world. Language brokering—a practice expected of some children in immigrant families whereby they serve as linguistic (and cultural) mediators between their parents and the outside world—becomes a major aspect in the parent-child relationship. Their duties typically involve translating and fulfilling various administrative duties such as checking mail and buying groceries. Older siblings usually hold the additional responsibilities of looking after their younger siblings and helping them with homework.

Julia:                   The Chinese friends I have are more Americanized, more second generation. They were born here and some of their parents came here at an early age, so they can speak English fluently or at least they can kind of understand bits and pieces. I feel like it's easier for them in a way because their parents already had this experience of the United States that they can pass on to them, but it's different for me because I sort of support my parents socially.

Interviewer: Socially? How is that?

Julia: Well, after being here for 18 years, they still can't speak any English, so ever since I was about 7 years old and in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, I have been attending parent-teacher conferences, going to court, taking care of utility bills, even the most basic things.

Interviewer: So you had to grow up really quick. Do you wish like you had more of a childhood?

Julia: I guess so, but I feel like my past was kind of a blur. I don't remember being depressed or anything, but...

Interviewer: It's just the way life was?

Julia: Yes.

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## **Rearing “Satellite Babies”**

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The makeup of a traditional Chinese family frequently involves grandparents living with their children's families. Despite the growth of urban cities constraining living spaces, the practice of involving multiple caregivers is still endorsed today as it also serves to relieve the burden of childcare from working parents. This type of three-generation childcare arrangement functions well when the family members live in close geographic proximity within a given cultural and linguistic context, but it becomes much more problematic when it is implemented across the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, for Chinese parents who cannot afford to raise their children, the practice

of sending their children back to China to live with relatives remains an unpleasant alternative (Bohr & Tse, 2009). Termed “satellite babies,” these children are shuttled between vastly different cultures and are being physically separated from caregivers multiple times until the parents are financially stable to care for them.

Such practices can be psychologically traumatic in the child’s developmental trajectory that can later manifest in behavioral and emotional problems in life although systematic longitudinal research on Chinese satellite children is missing. For instance, although Chinese immigrants have lower rates of violence than most other groups, 17-year-old Julia recounted her troubling brother who constantly got into grapples at school. He ended up being expelled after smashing a classmate’s head into the wall. Julia spoke sadly about her brother’s violent behavior and attributed his aggressive temperament to having been sent away as a child:

Julia: My brother went to school in China for two years, and when he came back my parents already had another baby. I think even to this day those four or five years apart have made my parents care for him just a little less. Even though he is still their kid, just the fact that he was away for that time makes them not love him as much. I think he feels that he is being victimized in a way.

Interviewer: Does he remember being sent back?

Julia: Yes, and this actually happens to a lot of Fujianese kids. All of my cousin’s kids are with their grandparents in China, and they get brought back something like seven or



eight years later. When they come back, they are just kids, but I don't know how they could be close as a family after that.

Interviewer: There is no real connection?

Julia: No, they definitely don't treat them the same way.

Interviewer: Do the kids ever ask why their parents got rid of them?

Julia: I don't think the kids ever say that, but they certainly wonder about it.

Interviewer: Do you think they feel abandoned?

Julia: Yes.

Interviewer: Has your brother ever said anything?

Julia: No, I don't think he knows how to express it in those words. I think the only way he knows how to express himself is through retaliation.

Unlike children raised by parents, satellite babies undergo a traumatic exchange of caretakers at an early age. Some may experience abandonment more than once in their lives as their parents initially hand them to grandparents to only take them back later. Some of these children may see the parents "as strangers who had stolen him away to a strange land," and they may require intensive psychological aid to help them adjust to the shifting, oftentimes confusing changes in their environments (Bernstein, 2009, p. 1). The psychological consequences that

result from such practice can be serious, including behavioral problems such as head banging, tantrums, and acting out. Appropriate attention needs to be focused on this population with the goal of reestablishing the parent-child attachment bond and addressing the children's psychological needs.

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## **Parenting and Familial Relationships**

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### ***Emotional Expression***

Parental emotional restraint and a perceived lack of affection in the family are some of the most common complaints that some of our participants raised. The family stress model delineated by Benner and Kim (2010) demonstrated how the stress of immigration and acculturation can place an increased strain on the parents' emotional state, thus affecting their parenting performance and causing them to grow less in tune with their children's emotional needs. Even so, the relationship between the older and younger generations involves a two-way dynamic: Many Chinese parents, while maintaining a miserly attitude toward most commodities, would not hesitate to shell out money for their children's school books and afterschool fees. In exchange, most participants acknowledged their parents' efforts and expressed a profound sense of obligation to return this generosity.

Having spent the first four years in another person's care, 18-year-old Nancy Xian recalled the desire to impress her parents and gain their approval, but her parents failed to acknowledge her efforts. "Tough love," she justified. Like many Fujianese, her parents emphasized hard work and held traditional beliefs that children should take care of them later in life. Being raised in this environment has affected Nancy's perspective on social relationships.

She felt she had no best friends, only mere acquaintances. Despite the lack of affection in the family, Nancy claimed she nevertheless felt obligated to help the family relieve their financial burden and therefore became financially independent after high school.

## ***Gender Roles and Body Image***

During the course of development, identity formation is contingent on the gender roles imposed by the residing culture. However, children of immigrants often grow up negotiating their gender between conflicting cultural expectations. Chinese parenting practices are often heavily influenced by patriarchal Confucian and post-Confucian values (Qin, 2009). Girls were traditionally expected to play more subordinate roles such as cleaning and childrearing, whereas boys were (and often still are) expected to carry on the family name. Although such strict gender delineation has blurred over the years, as social reforms have gradually permeated and changed time-honored practices in China, gender-specific expectations and discrimination are still evident in a good many Chinese families. This holds especially true for working-class families whose origins can be traced back to rural and small-town China but tends to be less evident in more educated middle-class families from big and more globalized cities such as Shanghai, Taipei, or Hong Kong.

Chinese parents typically keep a close eye on their daughters, encouraging them to stay at home while discouraging interactions with boys. Dating early is not only seen as a distraction from schoolwork but also as a shameful reflection of the family's failure to properly rear their daughter. For Chinese American adolescents, upholding their parents' expectations becomes difficult in New York's high schools where sexuality is ubiquitous. Furthermore, social acceptance often involves materialistic acquisitions, a concept that contradicts the traditional

Chinese value of frugality. Qin's study (2009) discovered that, when faced with these conflicting messages, girls tend to internalize their parents' expectations and socialization. As difficult as it may be, they are able to structure their identity in contrast to the image of their more fashionable and popular peers. Most of our female participants echoed these findings, sacrificing transient popularity for academic excellence. However, some added that their parents have lower expectations of their abilities to succeed when compared to their brothers. Performing household chores is also one of the expected duties imposed on some of the female interviewees.

On the other hand, traditional Chinese Confucian values for boys emphasize "education, self-cultivation, and gentleness" (Qin, 2009, p. 42). Contrary to predominant American attitudes, masculinity in Chinese culture stresses high educational attainment rather than physical prowess. As Qin pointed out, the Chinese boy is taught to use "his wits, not his fists" (2009, p. 42). This can pose a serious conflict for Chinese American boys who have to navigate the American social realm. Like the girls, boys feel the pressure to excel academically; however, unlike the girls, they seem to have a harder time internalizing their parents' values. In addition to warding off social pressure to not appear a "nerd," boys in school are expected to participate in physically demanding sports (Qin, 2009). Unfortunately, their naturally smaller statures place them at a physical disadvantage compared to their non-Asian peers, and a considerable number of them have reported incidences of being bullied and demeaned (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Even so, some of our male participants agreed that, if they were girls, they would not be accorded certain privileges at home. The price for such privileges comes with the enormous pressure of having to carry on the family name. For those who are homosexuals, there lies the additional difficulty of coming out to their parents for fear of bringing them shame.

Benjamin was a proud gay Chinese American who spoke extensively about the (in his view) unwarranted expectations in the Chinese American community to become “normal.” He talked at length about his passion to inspire Chinese Americans to fight against stereotypes and be open to others and themselves. Living in a loving middle-class family, Benjamin also admitted the pressure of being the only son in the family, and he felt he would never be able to live up to his parents’ expectations due to his homosexuality. Like many male Chinese in particular, he was not very communicative about personal issues. Instead, he found a safe haven in being involved in political movements where he could interact with like-minded, passionate people. He hoped to become a positive influence in the Asian American community by becoming a professor.

Beyond readily voiced prohibitions against dating for the girls, sexuality is rarely discussed among Chinese families. Rather, Asian parents tend to convey their opinion about sex indirectly, but children are able to pick up these subtle cues, acknowledging their parents’ discouraging attitude regarding dating without recalling explicit conversations with them. Indeed, Asian American teenagers are less likely to recall having discussions about sex with their parents than their non-Asian peers (Kim & Ward, 2007). While language barriers may be one factor supporting the lack of communication, sexuality remains an awkward or taboo topic in many Asian families. Whereas boys rarely receive sexual information, girls often report receiving too much information from their mothers about the negative consequences of sex and pregnancies (Kim & Ward, 2007). The messages that boys and girls receive are also inherently different: While boys may be educated about safer sex, girls are often blatantly warned against being victimized by men and are taught to avoid them altogether. For instance, parents’ stress on academic achievement renders dating to be a form of distraction from the single-minded search

for success. Faced with the disparaging outlook of dating at home, Chinese American adolescents struggle to redefine their perspective on sexuality in the American environment where sexuality is omnipresent in both the media and schools. Despite the cross-generation conflict, Asian American teenagers seem to have adopted some of their parents' values, initiating sexual activity at later ages and having fewer sexual partners in their lifespan compared to other ethnic groups (e.g., Kao & Martyn, 2014).

American media propagate a form of unattainable beauty that many female adolescents strive hopelessly to achieve (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway, 2008). The hopelessness of this effort is even more pronounced among Chinese American adolescents who do not physically align with the American conceptualization of beauty:

Vivian: It's just sometimes when I'd watch TV, I'd be like, oh, I wanna be that person, just like a fantasy world, really.

Interviewer: Anything but Chinese, is that it?

Vivian: Yeah.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that today?

Vivian: I'm actually pretty okay with it now. In my school there's an Asian cultural society, and they talk about issues like this and once you get it in and you have a group of people that feel the same way, I think it's easier to accept it.

Interviewer: So is this common among young Chinese girls that they want to be anything but Chinese?

Vivian: Yeah, I think that's why they dye their hair or they wear colored contact lenses to change themselves pretty much. I don't think they explicitly think or say that, but when they use those products or when they dress that way, I think yeah they're trying to assimilate into white culture pretty much.

Interviewer: Do you believe that's the perception that other people have of Chinese people? Or is this your perception of Chinese people?

Vivian: I think it's... mine... But now that you ask, I hope other people don't have this outlook on us. I'm not actually sure.

Benjamin Wong shared a similar story of trying to fit into mainstream America as a Chinese American:

Benjamin: I think that body image is something that's not talked about a lot of the times because it is [connected to an] individual sense of insecurities. I think these things are necessary to talk about because no one talks about them, especially inside the Chinese community. When my aunt says I look like everyone else, I know that outside the Chinese community, even more people think that all Asians or all Chinese people look alike. Whenever I see different

Chinese people who are younger, males or females, with no fashion sense, glasses, moppish hair, or fattish, I know what it is like to feel like a nerd and to be susceptible to the brunt of many different stereotypes and jokes, and being teased.

Interviewer: What did people use to say to you?

Benjamin: That's the thing. No one really ever said too much about it, although I heard that one person said I was the third ugliest male in the class in my Catholic elementary school.... The thing about race and being Chinese is it's very hard to pinpoint when it affects certain things. It's that feeling where sometimes you go, "Does my race have something to do with things like that?" I think it definitely did. Yeah.

Interviewer: Reading your essay, it seemed like you were on the outside looking in.

Benjamin: I always feel that way; it's hard to always feel completely inside something. When I was younger, there was a certain community within my family, but as we got older, I became more politicized about issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and all these different types of things. My different family members didn't. There are all these different facets of me that I feel are never completely encapsulated within a



certain group of friends or peers or loved ones. I always  
kind of feel semi-outside.

Chinese American girls and boys face many pressures and gender trends comparable to those of other ethnic groups. Perhaps as a result of being more closely supervised and the more consistent internalization of their parents' values, girls tend to perform better academically than boys and are also less likely to drop out of school or to "get into trouble" (Kasinitz et al., 2008). Boys face the pressure of conforming to the American mainstream norm of being physically stronger and aggressive, traits determined to a significant extent by genetics that are out of their control. This may contribute to feelings of resentment or a sense of helplessness that can lead to greater difficulty in internalizing parental expectations and more behavioral problems both at school and at home.

## *Compliance*

Chinese Americans encounter stereotypes as being too passive or overly compliant. Many participants voiced their concerns about Asians being too shy and lacking self-confidence, traits that conflict with the American emphasis on boisterous assertiveness. Although compliance may initially bring forth connotations related to weakness, studies have found that the development of compliance is essential in the process of socializing and imparting moral values to children. How children then internalize the process provides a script for how to adjust and adapt to changing environment stimuli.

In Huang and Lamb's comparative study (2014) of Taiwanese, Chinese immigrant, and British children, the authors observed two forms of compliance: committed compliance and

situational compliance. Committed compliance is based on the stable internalization of parental motivation and values, whereas situational compliance occurs when children comply with parental wishes without internalizing the desired motivation. Examining how parental practices across cultures impact compliance style, the authors found that Western rearing customs generally encourage parents to adopt a “child-centered” perspective that promotes increasing sensitivity to the child’s needs while decreasing control (p. 511). In comparison, self-control and compliance with authority are both explicitly and implicitly a part of the Chinese culture. As the authors noted, children are consistently praised for being well behaved (*guai*) or obedient (*ting hua*), values Chinese parents endorse in a more consistent and absolute manner than Anglo-Saxon parents. Indeed, this study replicated findings that, when compared to their English counterparts, the Chinese and Taiwanese mothers exhibited more controlling behaviors that are consistent with the Confucian value that children be obedient to their parents. The results showed that only situational compliance, and not committed compliance, differed significantly among the three groups. Taiwanese children exhibited the most situational compliance in which, when under pressure to obey, they demonstrated higher obedience, self-control, and compliance.

The finding that Chinese immigrant children demonstrated less situational compliance than their Taiwanese counterparts suggests that they had internalized not only Chinese beliefs but also assimilated to the norms of the mainstream Western society where they reside. Similarly, parents undergo various degrees of acculturation. Far from their original hometown, immigrants lose the stable community supports that provide childrearing advice. We have found that, while some parents continue to rigidly apply childrearing practices modeled from their own childhood experiences, others may modify their rearing behaviors to be more in line with the Western emphasis on individualism. Although many interviewees complained about their

parents' attempt to dictate their social lives (e.g., forbidding dating, playing with friends, or staying out late), they also conceded that their parents had little actual, physical control over them. Still, the Chinese parenting style of consistent control facilitates the internalization of the value of education in their children, and the results are reflected in Chinese American adolescents investing more time in studying than their non-Asian peers even in the absence of parental supervision.

Asakawa (2001) delineated that the process of internalization involves three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to parents. The study generally supported other findings that, compared to their white Americans, Asian Americans exhibited higher levels of competence in areas concerning academic and work activities, allowing them to internalize their cultural values of hard work and education. Asakawa also added that Asian parents from intact families are more likely to assert greater control and involvement over their children's academic pursuits. However, unlike their white American peers whose own educational aspirations are correlated with performance, Asian American children's academic performance was more associated with parents' expectations than their own. In other words, regardless of whether the parents are involved in school, children tend to perform better in schools if education is a value that the parents heavily emphasized. This latter explanation fits most of our Chinese American participants who, though lacking parental help in the academic realm, have nevertheless internalized their parents' educational expectations.

## ***Control***

The American emphasis on freedom may lead mainstream parents to adversely react to the word "control" by associating it with coercion and loss of autonomy. However, this is simply not the

case: Motivation comes from a variety of sources, and high control does not necessarily entail the loss of autonomy. There is some evidence that, unlike Western children who derive their motivation from making personal decisions, Asian American children are more motivated by others' choices (Bao & Lam, 2008). What this suggests is that motivation is not influenced in a straightforward manner by the existence of freedom of choice; rather, interpersonal relatedness between the parent and child tends to facilitate the internalization of motivation and values. However, the need for freedom of choice does appear to be more salient among children who have a limited socioemotional connection with their parents in order to establish a sense of personal autonomy.

Some studies have shown that whereas Asian parents heavily emphasize academic achievement, they can do so while still maintaining warmth and open communication with their children (Juang, Qin, & Park, 2013). Baumrind's (1971) well-known classification of parenting styles as either "authoritarian" or "authoritative" greatly undervalues the diversity of parenting practices across cultures. Compared to Western values emphasizing individualism, independence building, and parental warmth, Chinese childrearing practices follow modernized Confucian principles such as collectivism, parental obedience and control, and emotional restraint that do not align well with the American emphasis on individualism (Chao, 1994; Cheah, Zhou, Leung, & Vu, in prep.; Chen & Luster, 2002; Ho, 1986). Even so, Chinese parents can offer their children a sense of safety and satisfaction without endorsing overt American gestures of hugs and words. Chao (2001) has suggested that authoritative parenting styles may work better for whites and second-generation Asian immigrants but not for first-generation Chinese Americans who are used to what Westerners deem an "authoritarian" style. Indeed, most of our participants, while not receiving the overt American warmth they see their peers enjoy, nevertheless retained

some level of obligation toward their parents to help them financially in the future, a belief that American mainstream adolescents are less likely to endorse.

## ***Motivation***

Motivational beliefs differ across cultures. In a sample of ninth graders, Eaton and Dembo (1997) found that although Asian Americans (mostly Chinese) held lower situational self-efficacy beliefs than their Caucasian counterparts, they consistently outperformed Caucasians and demonstrated higher motivation across a variety of tasks. Academic success is touted among most Asian immigrant families, and failure to achieve can result in family shame and parental punishment. American parenting styles have generally encouraged positive feedback and reinforcement to enhance children's self-esteem. However, Eaton and Dembo's research implies that self-esteem is not necessarily a crucial component for success. The Caucasian students in their study may have overestimated their abilities, a form of self-illusion that can disrupt positive performance. On the other hand, the lower sense of self-efficacy among the Asian American sample may have derived not merely from low self-esteem, but even more from having more stringent internal standards, higher goals, and a culturally valued emphasis on humility: traits that spur Asian Americans to work harder and perform better than their non-Asian peers in academic and probably also in certain non-academic situations.

Taken together, a clear majority of our research participants displayed an inherent understanding of the sacrifice and hardships that their parents endured while and after immigrating to the United States. This knowledge further augments many students' tendency to strive for success in the hopes of rising above their socioeconomic status and supporting their parents financially in the future. This sense of obligation, called *filial piety* (*hsiao* or *xiao*), is one

of the most valued qualities in Confucianism; it encourages appreciation for the tangible and intangible gifts that parents have bestowed upon their children, and the sense of duty to pay back signifies respect, humility, and gratefulness.

Sixteen-year-old Dung is aware of her parents' sacrifices and the hardships they endured when migrating to America. She recounted how her parents, with only a middle-school education, had managed to complete the necessary immigration paperwork to escape the destructive refugee camps in Vietnam during the late 1970s:

They make a lot of sacrifices for me in general. In fact the whole idea of them coming here was the biggest sacrifice. They sacrificed nearly their lives [because] they could have died easily by trying to come here. And day in, day out now like today, they sacrifice their hours. My dad gets out of the house at five in the morning and doesn't come home 'til like eight at night. My mom gets out at nine, and doesn't come home 'til like 10. So they both sacrifice long hours of work trying to get the most money [so that] I don't have to work. They don't want me to work. They want me to go to school, and they want me to be successful in the educational system here.

Even 12-year-old Yang Wang—our youngest interviewee—understood that Chinese parents often do not enjoy the immediate reward of their immigration. As much as Chinese culture emphasizes filial piety, it seems to equally place a strong obligation on parents to offer the best opportunities for the next generation:

Interviewer:           Why did your family come to the United States?

Yang:                    I guess to have a better life for my brother and me.

Interviewer: Do you feel they made a sacrifice when they came to America?

Yang: Yeah. My dad was an engineer which was like high-paying, and he went to like the highest rated college in China, but now, when he came to America, he had to work in a restaurant. So it's like a really big difference.

Interviewer: So did your parents ever mention making a sacrifice to you?

Yang: Well, they could already have been pretty rich, like have a lot of money in China, even here in America if it wasn't for like tuition bills and all.

Interviewer: Now, do you feel a little bit stressed or anxious that you have to do well in school because your parents spent so much on tuition bills?

Yang: Yeah.

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## **Emotional Attachment**

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Qin (2006) observed that a difference in cultural expectations can result not only in parent-child alienation but also in psychological maladaptation. Unlike children who grew up among peers experiencing similar upbringings, Chinese American children may derive mixed messages from what their parents teach and what their non-Asian school peers endorse. Qin coined the term

“parallel dual frame of reference” to illustrate how both parents and children endorse different anticipation about each other: Parents yearn that their children act in accordance with Chinese teachings, whereas children also hold expectations on how their parents should behave.

Immigrant parents face the difficult task of modifying their childrearing practices in a new country. The manner in which Chinese immigrant mothers tend to raise their children is neither identical to their Chinese counterparts in China nor does it simply follow the mainstream practices of white parents. One study has shown that Chinese immigrant parents, estranged from the community where they had grown up, tend to exert less emotional, more traditional, and more familiar forms of parenting when compared to parents in China where more liberal practices have slowly permeated mainstream society (Wang, 2013). This pattern also emerged in another study focusing on Taiwanese immigrant families in which the immigrant mothers exerted more authoritarian control over their children than their native counterparts (Huang & Lamb, 2014).

Similar to their children, immigrant parents stand at the crossroads of two divergent cultures, and in the realm of parenting, several studies have demonstrated that immigrant parents who are aware of and better at negotiating with the new culture tend to have better relationships with their children (Chiu, 1987; Lin & Fu, 1990; Qin, 2008). Middle-class, highly educated immigrant parents have the financial resources to learn the new language and social norms. On the other hand, struggling working-class parents may experience more difficulty. Not only do they have less time to spend with children, they frequently also lack the linguistic and cultural means to fully integrate into mainstream society. For them the nation’s Chinatowns provide ethnic enclaves where they do not need to acquire proficient English to go about their daily lives.



Moreover, the Chinese American working-class parents originally came to the United States with the intention of “making it,” but that ambition frequently creates a dilemma for them. On the one hand, they are forced to work numerous hours at poorly paid jobs to enable their children to go to school and hopefully on to college. This holds even truer for those parents who were smuggled into the country by snakeheads and who therefore tend to owe large amounts of money to family members and friends who had originally helped them pay off the smugglers. Their difficult monetary situation, in turn, forces them to work even longer hours. At the same time it means that they have hardly any time left for their children. In response, some will decide to send their young children overseas as satellite babies—and yet that decision can easily undermine family cohesion, the children’s sense of contentment and happiness, and their mastery of the English language. In addition, some adolescents grow up as “latchkey children,” that is children who return to an empty home after school because their parents are at work. In either case, attachment between the parents and the children may be undermined and cause some children to develop feelings of depression, loneliness, and even abandonment.

On a more positive note, in Chinatown’s blended, yet divergent, cultural environment, many second-generation Chinese Americans develop useful skills to navigate successfully both within the mainstream community and within their Chinese families. Placed in this demanding situation, they learn to embody different motivational values and forms of adaptation that allow them to endorse and negotiate between the two cultures, thereby adopting an integrated bicultural identity (Berry & Vedder, chapter 12, this volume). More generally, Chinese American children must learn to endure the stresses deriving from processes of acculturation and cultural reconciliation. While most of them understand the parental sacrifices and are willing to fulfill

their filial obligation, a good many of our participants did report a certain lack of emotional attachment to their parents.

For instance, Cameron's father grew up in an impoverished area in Guangzhou (Canton), Guangdong Province of China. He dreamt of America as the "freedom" path toward a better life, but when he arrived reality did not meet his expectations. Formerly a teacher in China who commanded respect, his father began to work as a delivery man earning a meager salary in New York. Cameron is fully aware of the sacrifice his parents had made immigrating, but while he is sympathetic, he does not feel emotionally close with them:

Cameron: I'm pretty private about my school work.

Interviewer: So is every aspect of your life kept hidden from your father?

Cameron: Not like every aspect. I mean it's not like hidden. It's not purposely hidden. It's just that I don't feel the need to expose it.

Interviewer: And your mother?

Cameron: She doesn't need to know either.

Interviewer: So do you feel that you've never really had an emotional connection with your parents?

Cameron: No, no. I mean I care for them and everything, but you know I just don't talk to them about school or anything.

Another issue that Chinese American families encounter is the language and cultural barriers between the parents and the child. Twenty-year-old Pearl Wu described her struggles:

It's just we're really not that open with each other. Moreover, my Chinese isn't one hundred percent and there is some vocabulary I can't pick up on. I can't just go up to them and ask them questions. It's weird if I do that. We are not like an Americanized family that you would see on TV where the daughter goes and asks her mother about anything she wants to. It's more like a "Oh-hello" kind of a relationship. But it's not like we don't get along . . . I think that if the parents were the ones who just came to America from China, and those kids are the first ones here, that relationship with those parents wouldn't really "mix" because the kids have something else going on than what their parents would have wanted them to have in China. I don't really know how to explain that... It's just Asian parents aren't really that open. It's stricter. You should do well in school and that's that.

Raised by her grandparents, 20-year-old Sandy Hsu experienced a similar emotional distance: "I love my parents. They work so hard. I understand what they're going through... trying to keep a roof over my head. [But] I won't say [we have] a close relationship." As a child, Sandy felt neglected and lonely, experiencing bouts of depression that she kept to herself. Although she was grateful and understood her parents' sacrifice, she could not help but feel detached from them. Her parents' unhappy marriage has affected her outlook on social relationships, acknowledging that she had trust issues. She felt she could not meet her parents' expectation both physically (to be a "pretty, skinny, smart" Asian girl) and academically, and the pressure made her self-conscious and insecure. Although they do not project any obligations, she still felt obligated to take care of them. Over the years, she had been trying to be more independent and gain more confidence in herself.

Not every Chinese parent endorses such a style, although the same emphasis on education can be generally seen through most interviews, as is the following observations by 19-year-old Carrie Wei:

Carrie: I think that [my parents] would be better off if they had stayed in Taiwan. My dad lived in a big house in Taiwan, and now we live in a small apartment in Manhattan. I think the quality of life would have been better in Taiwan, but the opportunities for growth are much better in the United States.

Interviewer: Do you feel that your parents made a sacrifice when they came here?

Carrie: Yeah. They could have found jobs easily in Taiwan since they speak Chinese fluently, whereas going to the United States, their English isn't very good. I feel they definitely made a sacrifice in terms of their job.

Interviewer: I'm guessing your parents mentioned their sacrifice to you?

Carrie: They have mentioned it, but it's not like they remind us about it a lot. My parents are really great because they just want us to do well. They're not going to complain about what they sacrificed. I have a lot of Asian friends whose parents force them to study a lot. They force them to go to

prep schools. My parents weren't that harsh on me and my sisters in terms of grades, but we all just want to do well on our own. We were lucky in that our parents weren't forcing good grades down our throats. We just wanted to do well anyway.

Some other interviewees, however, perceived their parents to be overly strict and unbending while holding unrealistic expectations. They also complained that their parents do not recognize their achievements and that they suffered the humiliation of being compared with more successful relatives and peers. Chinese parents are also less prone to express affection to their children overtly, something that many interviewees picked up as a clearly recognizable difference between them and their American peers. "We don't go around saying I love you. We don't hug. We don't kiss on the cheek or anything," Pearl observed. However, it is an aspect of behavior that many said they would change when raising their future children. Their intentions are supported by research findings indicating that parental acceptance and warmth in Chinese (and other) families are correlated with positive child mental health and adaptation when compared to child-perceived parental neglect and rejection (Li, 2015a, 2015b; see also chapter 5 by Ahmed et al. in this volume).

Yet even with the cultural and familial tension among Chinese American families, many of our participants did not resent their parents. Rather, it seems that like Pearl, they have accepted many of their parents' values as well as their hopes, inspiring a strong sense of confidence in their abilities to achieve social mobility and rise out of poverty.

Well, they do so much for me. They've struggled a lot. They expect your children to take care of you. I don't have a problem with it because, financially, we're struggling right now, which is why I can't wait to get my career going and get that paycheck to help them out, to relieve them of some stress. So I'm not obligated, I just want to.

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## Emotional Health

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Parent-child acculturation discrepancy is related to negative child adjustment and poorer mental health outcomes in immigrant children (Ho, 2014). As children gain more proficiency in the English language, more so than their knowledge of their ethnic Chinese dialect, they may find it more difficult to communicate with their parents. This can cause a critical emotional deficiency in their developmental growth as parents are not able to offer their children the support they need. Parents' inability to provide emotional support is further compounded by the long hours parents spend away from home because of work. It is not exaggerated to say that a good many parents—and especially so the working-class fathers—become “working machines” to pay back debts while trying to save money for their children's education and, hopefully, establish their own modest restaurant or business.

“For a long time, I was kind of detached from my emotions,” Mo Li said, “like I was kind of described like that I see the world through kind of like a... like the world looked like a fish tank to me.” This form of emotional detachment is not uncommon in our Chinese American participants. In addition, the adolescent years are racked by developmental challenges, and so we have heard frequent instances of depression and anxiety. These mental health issues are troubling, even more so since they remain frequently unknown even to their Chinese peers and

the parents. “I don’t want to bother my parents with my problems since they already have to struggle so hard,” interviewees told us in this context. Others indicated that we were the first ones to hear about of their emotional problems because of their fear that if they told their best friend(s) about them, they might become the object of gossip and thereby bring shame upon their family.

Teachers are frequently unknowing participants in the circular process of racial discrimination and bullying that many Asian Americans face especially in New York’s poorer neighborhood schools where Asians often form a minority (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Zhou Peverly, Xin, Huang, and Wang (2003), for instance, reported that in their New York–based study, a sample of first-generation Chinese American adolescents displayed more negative attitudes toward their teachers than comparable samples of European American adolescents and students in China. They also reported higher levels of depression and stress than the other two groups; in part because they were the recipients of racial harassment by their non-Asian peers. They typically suffered these harassments in silence, neither telling their teachers nor their parents because they believe that they will not be understood by them. Their silence is not a sign of psychological strength but a resigned belief that they have no one to depend on.

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## **Academia**

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Because many Chinese American children and young adults have deeply internalized their parents’ relentless emphasis on the practical as well as symbolic value of education, it comes as no surprise that they are frequently successful in the academic realm. Chinese students typically spend more than twice as many hours studying than their non-Chinese peers on a weekly basis

(University of California—San Diego, 2011). Many Chinese families believe that their children's admission into a top-tier college is the key to financial mobility. Moreover, in the past two decades, the three most important public elite high schools in New York City have seen a dramatic increase in the admission rate of Asian Americans. Admission to these often extremely selective high schools is strictly based on the score a student receives on a citywide entrance examination. As of 2013–2014, Asian Americans dominate the academic scene in a number of top schools, comprising 73% of the student body at the famous Stuyvesant High School, 62% at the influential Bronx High School of Science, and 61% at Brooklyn Technical High School. These percentages are staggering given that the Asian Americans comprise a mere 15.6% of the New York City public student population (between the ages of 5 and 17) (NYC Department of Education, 2014).

Kasinitz et al. (2008) compared 24–32-year-old New Yorkers from eight ethnic groups, including a group of second-generation Chinese. Of all the groups, the Chinese were the most likely to score in the upper performance quintile of the public high school they attended. Moreover, they were also the most likely to have received at least a BA (64%) and the least likely to have dropped out of high school—a finding that held true above all for the Chinese girls. In these achievements, they substantially outpaced native-born whites although the average level of their parents' education and income was substantially below that of the white parents.

Hsin and Xie's study (2014) threw into serious doubt the idea that Asian Americans are genetically predisposed to excel in schools. Rather, the major factors that exert the strongest impact on academic achievement involve a special kind and intensity of cultural orientation as well as immigration status, not their socio-demographic characteristics or superior cognitive abilities. "Cultural orientation, immigrant selectivity, and adaptive strategies that emphasize



education for upward mobility all play a part in shaping AA youth's outlook toward the value of effort in attaining achievement" (p. 8420), the authors state. New York City's Chinatowns also offer a plethora of tutoring classes and college preparatory resources, both reinforcing the importance of academic success and providing the means to do so. Additionally, the "model minority" status that Asian Americans hold in the eyes of many can also have the indirect effect of bolstering confidence and the ability to succeed just as negative stereotypes can hinder other minority youths from reaching their full potential.

Indeed and across the country, among the major ethnic groups, Asian Americans are most likely to have graduated with at least a bachelor's degree. On a national level, 70.3% of Chinese in 2007 had a bachelor's degree, a percentage much higher than that of whites (32.6%), blacks (17%), and Hispanics (11.2%). However, this does not hold true in New York City where Chinese (39%) fell far behind whites (63%) but still outranked blacks (31%) and Hispanics (23%). These statistics represent the many rural and working-class immigrants who arrived in the United States with limited education throughout the 1970s to 1990s, and who in many cases would become the parents of the adolescents and emerging adults in our study. The wave of immigration was not evenly distributed throughout the United States. Whereas most educated and wealthier Chinese are scattered throughout the country, with a concentration on the West Coast and some suburban areas on the East Coast, New York City exerted a natural pull for those who came from a less educated background. Indeed, most of our participants had working-class or lower middle-class parents from small towns and rural areas in China who were working toward the American dream by providing their children with the opportunities they themselves would never enjoy.

In Chinese societies, parents entrust teachers with the complete authority to supervise the students in their respective classrooms, while they structure the learning environment at home by making sure that the often extensive homework is completed. However, in the United States, American parents tend to play more active roles within the school grounds in a variety of ways, for example, by joining the Parent-Teacher Association or addressing complaints directly to the teacher. Compared to other ethnic groups, Chinese parents may seem to adopt a passive approach when it comes to advocating for their children in schools. They may also downplay the importance of extracurricular activities such as sports that, in American society, serve as the ladder to peer group acceptance and fame.

However, as heavily as Chinese immigrant parents emphasize academic success, their ability to assist their children in this process is severely limited in this new land. Their frequent lack of English proficiency, unfamiliarity with the American educational system, and having to work long hours place them decidedly in a disadvantaged position when attempting to play a more active role in their child's school life; moreover they may feel hesitant about confronting school administrators whose language and cultural background they tend not to share. Above all, these Chinese-speaking parents push their children to achieve what was impossible for themselves, and they therefore cannot serve as distinct role models or supervisors of their children's educational efforts. Yet for all of that they are often surprisingly effective in inculcating their high expectations in their children.

Despite their inability to assist with schoolwork, the values and motivations that Chinese parents instill in their children have far-reaching consequences. Compared to other ethnic groups, young Chinese adults are more willing to stay home, defer sexual gratifications, and marry at a later age, thus saving money, reducing debt, and having the time and resources to obtain higher

education and build a solid financial foundation (Chen & Kim, 2009; Kasinitz et al., 2008). Their willingness to delay marriage, and thus childbirth, stems from their focus on achieving financial stability before starting a family. The low birth rates among the Chinese American population serve individual families well in that they can pool their resources together to achieve social mobility, but the larger, inadvertent consequence is that fewer children in the next generation are able to launch off of their predecessors' success.

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## Conclusions

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In the foregoing we have attempted to depict the inner emotional world of immigrant Chinese American adolescents and emerging adults in the context of their (more or less) bicultural environment. Given the complex circumstances that have surrounded them since their early years, their often-mixed emotions and subtle assessments of themselves and their relationships to loved ones may not come as a complete surprise. Many of them deeply respect the many sacrifices their parents have made for them, yet they may also feel a certain affective distance to them. A few others, such as Sophia, whose self-observations we noted in the beginning of this chapter, experience a deep ambivalence about their parents' culture of origin that reaches into the very depths of their body image. Most of them have internalized the rigid educational expectations of their parents and, indeed, their educational successes as a group are outstanding. But we also found that many of them are paying an emotional price for their successes. A significant portion of them did report that attempting to meet such sky-high internal and external expectations caused them to suffer from self-doubts, bouts of depression, and social anxieties. Indeed, although Chinese children tend to work hard in school, the boys in particular often

dislike their schools. In a comparative study of 411 immigrant students' adaptation in school, Qin-Hilliard (2003) found that among various cultural and gender groups, Chinese boys were the *least* likely to experience positive attitudes toward school. At the same time, they spent considerably more time on homework than, for instance, their Dominican peers who were much more likely to be distracted by outside jobs.

Similar tensions between reported family conflicts, self-reported adjustment, and academic achievement were observed by Qin, Rak, Rana, and Donnellan (2012) in their comparison of high-achieving Chinese and European American ninth graders at an extremely selective magnet school located in New York. The Chinese American students, many of whom came from poor families, reported lower levels of family cohesion and psychological adjustment, but higher levels of family conflict than their economically better-off European American peers. Furthermore, the ethnic differences in psychological adjustment vanished once the researchers controlled for the variables of perceived family cohesion and conflict. This points to difficult family conditions as a key reason for the Chinese students' lower levels of psychological adjustment. To this it may be added that because the Asian students dominated the school's student body, it is unlikely that the obtained results were influenced by perceived racial handicaps at the school.

To grow up as a Chinese American child and adolescent in New York City, then, can be an emotionally difficult experience. But despite the stresses of economic hardship, acculturation, linguistic handicaps, cross-generational negotiation, racial-ethnic minority status, prejudice and discrimination, and pubescent development, many of our Chinese American adolescents demonstrated powerful resilience in the face of these adversities. Most of them are on their way to success, which suggests that they will not have to endure their parents' harsh working

conditions and hard scrabble lives. They are bound to make a major contribution to the life of the city and, more generally, to the country's overall welfare. New York City has always been a place where immigrants step ashore (or get off the plane), buckle down, and attempt to realize the American dream either for themselves or, if that is not possible, for their children. Most Chinese American "children" we interviewed were prepared to endorse this demanding tradition, do everything they could to fulfill their parents' dreams, and secure a place in the sun for themselves and their loved ones. But, for too many of them, their journey on this promising path has been, and will be, accompanied by considerable inner and outer struggles.

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### **Reflective Questions**

1. How and why did the Chinese originally end up in New York City, and why do so many Chinese immigrants continue to settle down in the Big Apple?
2. What are some of the main pressures that Chinese American teenagers and young adults face in New York City?
3. What are some of the family dynamics that predominate in Chinese American immigrant families from a working-class background?

4. What impact do gender roles have on the adjustment and educational success of Chinese American immigrant adolescents?
5. What are some of the differences in the cultural and emotional adjustment of first- and second-generation immigrants?
6. Chinese American students often do well in school. What are some of the reasons for their success and what is the emotional price they may have to pay for it?

## Suggested Readings

### Books and Articles

Kasinitz, P., Mollenkopf, J. H., Waters, M. C., & Holdaway, J. (2008). *Inheriting the city: The children of immigrants come of age*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. This is the leading comparative study of second-generation, immigrant young adults in New York City.

Qin, D. B. (2009). Being “good” or being “popular”: Gender and ethnic identity negotiations of Chinese immigrant adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24(1), 37–66. Qin is the author of several research-based articles on Chinese immigrant children and adolescents that are relevant to this chapter.

Rosenbloom, S. R., & Way, N. (2004). Experiences of discrimination among African American, Asian American, and Latino adolescents in an urban high school. *Youth & Society*, 35(4), 420–451. The authors investigated a lower-tier public neighborhood high school in New

York City, finding that Asian American students reported extensive physical and verbal harassment by their non-Asian peers.

Sung, B. L. (1987). *The adjustment experience of Chinese immigrant children in New York City*. New York: Center for Immigration Studies. Although now outdated in a few respects (e.g., the earlier prevalence of violent Chinatown gangs in the 1980s), this remains the most detailed study of Chinese immigrant children in the Big Apple.

Zhou, M. (2009). Conflict, coping, and reconciliation: Intergenerational relations in Chinese immigrant families. In N. Foner (Ed.), *Across generations: Immigrant families in America* (pp. 21–46). New York: New York University Press. This chapter presents a well-balanced sociological analysis of intergenerational relationships among Chinese Americans.

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