

Young Female Chinese American Immigrants in New York City

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The Research Project

- The interviewees include 52 Chinese American females aged 14-32 years.
- Predominately working-class and middle-class backgrounds and growing up in gritty neighborhoods.
- First and second generation immigrant families of Cantonese, Toishanese, Fujianese, Taiwanese, and other ethnic backgrounds.
- 21 wrote autobiographical essays on the theme “Growing up Chinese in New York City.”
- 31 were interviewed for 1 ½ - 3 ½ hours about family conditions, questions of identity, gender roles, dating practices, perceptions of Asian and non-Asian peers and friends, school conditions, perceptions of ethnic differences within the Chinese community, etc. A good number of these detailed interviews included deeply emotional discussions.
- We also interviewed males but their interviews are not discussed here. On the whole the female interviewees and essay writers tended to be more revealing, emotional, and at times more troubled than most of the male interviewees and writers.

Case Study: Pearl Wu - The Two Sides of Americanization: Fulfilling One's Dreams and Growing Apart from One's Parents

- Pearl is a hard working, goal directed nursing student attending college.
- Parents: Working-class, Toisanese and Hong Kong background, not well-educated.
- Has a very good relationship with her older brother but not a very close relationship with her parents who treat her in a matter-of-fact way. She nevertheless is deeply grateful to them.
- She hopes to marry her Jewish-Russian boyfriend who is extremely important to her. Her parents, however, want her to marry an Asian person. Nevertheless, this topic as well as many similar ones, is largely avoided at the dinner table.
- From a young age, Pearl was sometimes bullied as an “Asian nerd with chinky eyes” by whites and African Americans, a memory that brings tears to her eyes.
- Conclusion: Pearl is very Americanized. While she is a responsible daughter feeling deeply indebted to her parents, the cultural, educational, and communicative gaps between her parents and her are difficult to bridge. Still, she soldiers on claiming that living astride two cultures is “not a big deal.”

Mei Fan: Life in America: The Other Side of Glory

- Because of her father's gambling addiction, the family lives in a slum.
- Her family experiences severe harassment from her immediate (white) neighbors and also reports social-cultural acceptance problems in her school.
- She is bitter about her experiences and, partially in reaction to them, has developed a strong sense of pride in her Chinese identity.
- Two years after completing her essay, she was admitted to a highly selective high school with a majority of Asian students. She is beginning to feel better about her life, trying to overcome her negative feelings about non-Asians and her general unhappiness, and attributing some of her negative reactions to "teenage angst."
- Conclusion: Experiences of prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, falling victim to crimes committed by non-Asians, are frequently reported by students attending neighborhood schools in predominantly African American, Hispanic, and White working-class neighborhoods.

Jenny Hsu: Haunted by Memories of Maternal “Abandonment”

- After her birth as a third daughter in China, she lived in hiding with her aunt and uncle because of China’s strict one-child policy. Throughout her young childhood, she circulated in different households made up of extended family members. Moreover, at the age of four, her family migrated to America while she stayed in China until early adolescence.
- In her essay, she ponders her reunion with her family and the years she has spent in America with them. She wonders what her place will be in the future and asks herself whether her life resembles a train traveling from one place to the next.
- She admires her older sister, who endorses an American lifestyle, as a role model who can teach her how to fit better into American society.
- Jenny respects both of her parents though she honors her father more because he helped her with school work when she came to America.

Main Research Findings

- Many of our female writers and interviewees report emotional problems including low self-esteem, experiences of self-doubt, feelings of depression, and social anxieties. Systematic research by Desirée B. Qin at a highly selective New York high school is in line with this conclusion.
- Most parents come to the U.S. so that their children can get a better life and a college education. Several interviewees report that because they were academically mediocre, one or both of their parents were disappointed in them and told them so repeatedly. Some of the most devastating interviews were those reporting maternal rejection
- Because working-class Chinese American parents must work relentlessly, many have little time for their children who may be brought up mostly by grandparents. This creates an emotional distance between the parents and their children that may be intensified by linguistic and cultural gaps.
- Parental physical punishment is common until puberty and strict parental rules throughout childhood and adolescence are reported by many respondents.

Main Research Findings cont.

- A number of interviewees stated that they had disclosed personal information and feelings in the interview that they had not shared even with their closest friend(s). Family problems, they said, should not be shared with others. This attitude leads to “pluralistic ignorance” in the Chinese community about such problems.
- Many babies especially in the Fujianese community are sent back to China because the parents work relentlessly. The children are then returned to the US around age 6 but frequently do not speak English.
- The practice is especially common in families whose members were smuggled into the country by “snakeheads” for a fee of \$65,000-\$80,000. This is an enormous amount of money for most Chinese who will go deeply into debt in order to come to the US.
- A significant portion of these children experience continuing attachment problems, with girls more likely to “act in” (depression, anxieties, self-esteem issues), and boys to “act out” (truancy, rebelliousness, hanging out with undesirable peers).

Suggested Remedies

- Opportunities for counseling and psychotherapy for mental health problems may be ignored by Chinese immigrant working-class parents and other family members. They believe that such measures are only appropriate for treating “crazy people,” bring dishonor to the family, and lead to loss of face.
- Given this situation, it is often preferable to embed counseling in educational, pediatric, and community contexts and activities in which advice giving by authority figures is considered appropriate.
- Because most Chinese American teachers and counselors speak English, Cantonese, and/or Mandarin but not the quite different Fujianese “dialects,” they may not be easily understood by Fujianese parents and first generation students. Therefore, there should be an increased emphasis on training counselors coming from a Fujianese background.

Suggested Remedies cont.

- Mental health professionals should consider developing brochures discussing family and community practices conducive to mental health. They should also discourage parental practices such as sending babies back to China, using excessive physical punishment, and failing to use sufficient positive reinforcement.
- Community agencies such as the Chinese American Planning Council, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, and others have developed youth-oriented programs in areas such as teaching English and Chinese to children (and adults), peer tutoring, sports, dancing, musical activities, celebrating special Chinese and American days, martial arts, performing lion and dragon dances on special occasions, and more.
- Youth leaders in such organizations should be exposed to mental health oriented information and workshops since they are in contact with numerous young people and can serve as a “first line of defense.”