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Permalink
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Publication Date
2020-09-25

Peer reviewed

**Divergent Experiences and Patterns of Integration:
Contemporary Chinese Immigrants in Metropolitan Los Angeles, USA**

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Abstract: Since China's open-door in 1979, new waves of emigration from the country have been increasingly diverse with highly skilled immigrants on one end and unskilled or undocumented immigrants on the other. Based on data from an online survey and in-depth interviews of contemporary Chinese immigrants in metropolitan Los Angeles, USA, we explore two main questions: (1) How do Chinese immigrants negotiate integration and identity as they navigate multiple pathways to resettlement? (2) Why do patterns of convergence and divergence emerge simultaneously and within the same ethnic group? We find that, although Chinese immigrants as a group are economically well-integrated, their lived experiences on the ground do not fit neatly into the linear models of assimilation. We also find their patterns of integration, identity formation, coethnic interaction, and sense of belonging are multivariate, and even peculiar and counterintuitive. These divergent patterns emerge from the interactive processes of immigrant selectivity and social transformations in the context of reception at the dual levels of the host society and ethnic community.

Key Words: Chinese immigration, segmented assimilation, immigrant selectivity, intragroup diversity, integration, ethnic community

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Divergent Experiences and Patterns of Integration:
Contemporary Chinese Immigrants in Metropolitan Los Angeles, USA

Chinese comprise of the largest Asia-origin ethnic group in the United States (U.S.). Although the history of Chinese immigrants in the United States can be dated back to more than 150 years ago, more than two-thirds of Chinese Americans of the 21st century are foreign born. Contemporary Chinese immigrants have achieved remarkable success on measures of education, occupation and income. However, their lived experiences on the ground are divergent, and patterns of integration more complex than generally expected from the perspective of assimilation. This paper aims to explore two main questions: (1) How do Chinese immigrants negotiate integration and identity as they navigate multiple pathways to resettlement? (2) Why do patterns of convergence and divergence emerge simultaneously and within the same ethnic group? In the pages that follow, we first offer a theoretical discussion on assimilation and the intersectionality with immigrant selectivity from which we develop our main argument. We then provide a brief overview on Chinese immigration to the U.S. with a descriptive analysis of their socioeconomic characteristics. Third, we analyze stories told by immigrants themselves to enhance understanding on issues regarding integration, identity formation, coethnic interaction, and sense of belonging. Finally, we discuss alternative explanations and lessons learned from our findings.

Theoretical Considerations

Classical ideas of assimilation—where newcomers adopt the dominant language and culture of the host society and gradually become socioeconomically similar to natives in the host society — have long dictated the general life prospects of immigrants in the United States. The classical theory considers ethnic traits as well as ethnic enclaves, hindrances to successful assimilation and predicts the steady fading and eventual disappearance of ethnic distinctiveness (Gordon 1964). Such model assumes immigrants to be culturally backward as well as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Thus, immigrants should start from the bottom rungs of the host-society's social ladder and gradually ascend to the mainstream and may do so across generations (Gordon 1964; Warner and Srole 1945). Once set in motion, the process of assimilation is irreversible. While factors like English language proficiency, exposure to the mainstream culture, and time since immigration are strong predictors of assimilation outcomes, Individual socioeconomic characteristics (education, marketable skills) as well as such structural factors (race, residential segregation, and labor market exclusion) are generally treated as independent variables less of interacting with one another to produce varied outcomes. For example, some ethnic enclaves may be better able than others to generate socioeconomic resources conducive to immigrant social mobility without losing ethnic identity and solidarity (Zhou 1992, 2009).

As a critique of straight-line assimilation, the segmented assimilation theory offers an alternative perspective for understanding the process where contemporary immigrants become incorporated into the different segments of the host society in divergent ways (Portes and Zhou 1993). The theory operates on the assumptions that the host society is a stratified society where the white middle class makes up the mainstream, that immigrant cultures are not necessarily backward and inhibiting, and that the process of assimilation is multidirectional. This alternative model identifies three pathways to social mobility and corresponding forms of integration: one is the time-honored path of classical assimilation; another is the path of downward mobility into marginal positions also by abandoning ethnic cultural ways; and still a third is the path of upward mobility into the American mainstream with lagged or selective acculturation *and*

deliberate preservation of an ethnic group's values and norms as well as social networks and institutions (Portes and Zhou 1993). The role of the ethnic community is central to segmented assimilation since the ethnic community is considered an important context of reception. Under certain conditions, ethnic communities can develop structures of support to facilitate rather than to hinder assimilation (Zhou 2009). In sum, segmented assimilation concerns how immigrants' premigration socioeconomic characteristics and contexts of reception interact to produce divergent outcomes of integration (Zhou and Bankston 2019).

The neoassimilation theory rejoins segmented assimilation (Alba and Nee 2005). While acknowledging the diverse socioeconomic origins of contemporary immigrants and the possibility of a segmented mainstream, the neoclassical theory takes into account structural changes such as post World War II economic restructuring, civil right movements, reform of immigration policy, and multiculturalism. However, neoassimilation, like classical theories, overlooks the impacts of immigrant selectivity—a group-level socioeconomic construct—and the effects of its interaction with contexts of reception in producing divergent outcomes at both the structural level—economic integration—and the cultural level—formation of multiple identities.

Originally, immigrant selectivity is defined by the difference between the average level of formal education (measured by years) of an immigrant group in question vis-à-vis that of the adult population in the sending country (Feliciano 2005). If an immigrant group's average level of education is higher than that of its sending country population, that group would be positively selected to the receiving country; otherwise, negatively selected. While this concept provides a nuanced understanding of the interaction effect between group level socioeconomic characteristics and context of reception, it lacks analytical power in situations where variations are few. For example, since most immigrant groups in the United State are positively selected, immigrant selectivity as a concept would appear more a constant than a variable, which weakens its explanatory power to account for variations in integration outcomes across ethnic or national origin groups.

Deriving from the idea of immigrant selectivity, Lee and Zhou (2015) propose an alternative conceptualisation. The new concept of immigrant selectivity has improved on two front: one is using the percentage of college graduates rather than average years of education; the other is refining it into three measures—*hyper-selectivity* on one end and *hypo-selectivity* on the other, with *positive selectivity* in between. From this view, hyper-selectivity refers to a situation where an immigrant group in question has a higher percentage of college graduates than the adult populations in both the sending and receiving countries, and hypo-selectivity points to the direct opposite, referring to a situation where an immigrant group in question has a lower percentage of college graduates than the adult populations in both the sending and receiving countries (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Lee 2017). Positive selectivity simply replicates the original concept, except measured by the percentage of college graduates rather than the average year of education vis-à-vis that of the sending country population. This refined conceptualisation is analytically more rigorous as concepts of hyper-selectivity and hypo-selectivity enable researchers to unfold the dynamic processes in which premigration socioeconomic characteristics intertwine with context of reception to produce advantages or disadvantages. For example, a hyper-selected immigrant group, as Lee and Zhou find, is likely to have several advantages over other groups: a favorable starting point, a constrictive success frame (stellar academic performance, degrees from prestigious colleges, and well-paying professional jobs in science, engineering, medicine, and law, etc.) prescribed by the group, richer ethnic capital (resources generated from the ethnic community) to support the success frame, and positive

perception of group members by the larger society, or a 'stereotype promise' (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Lee 2017). The group-level advantages provide the basis for the formation of ethnic capital conducive to upward social mobility that benefits coethnic members of disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Keister and Borelli 2015).

In this paper, we draw insights from classical and contemporary perspectives of assimilation and the concept of immigrant selectivity to examine how well Chinese immigrants adapt to life in metropolitan Los Angeles and what causes the convergence, or divergence, in their patterns of integration. In our view, integration outcomes encompass not only observable socioeconomic characteristics, but also individuals 'perceived and lived experiences of well-being and identity. We argue that integration is a two-way process, where context, socioeconomic characteristics, and ethnicity play major roles. We argue further that resettlement experiences are shaped by the intersectionality of immigrant selectivity undergirding social transformations in the host society including the ethnic community.

Data and Methods

We draw our data from a larger three-city comparative study of new Chinese and Indian immigrants residing in Singapore, Los Angeles, and Vancouver (Zhou et al. 2016). The study adopted a mixed method approach to incorporate survey data, in-depth interviews, and focus group sessions, as well as content analyses of relevant policy briefs, archival materials, and media reports. The Los Angeles part of the data included an online questionnaire survey with a valid sample of 283 Chinese foreign-born respondents, aged 22 or older, from Los Angeles County[1], 30 in-depth interviews, and one focus group conducted between June 2017 and September 2018.[2] Survey respondents were sampled through the purposive snowballing method. The questionnaire was designed in English and Chinese. The survey, containing basic demographic information, socioeconomic characteristics, immigration histories, labor market experiences, well-being, social reception, and use of information and communications technology (ICT), took about 15 minutes to complete. In-depth interviewees were selected randomly from those survey respondents who indicated willingness to be re-interviewed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English or Chinese, each lasting from one to two hours. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions which ranged from their modes of entry, naturalisation, work, family life, identity, coethnic attachment, felt and experienced discrimination, to long-term plans for settlement or return migration. We assigned pseudonyms in this paper to protect respondents 'confidentiality.

Immigration, Context of Reception, and Socioeconomic Integration

Chinese Immigration to the United States

Chinese immigration to the United States dates back to the late 1840s. Arriving as laborers, most Chinese immigrants were men. They first worked in mines and then toiled in the most difficult part of the transcontinental railroad west of the Rockies (Chan 1991). However, poor economic conditions in the late 1870s and the fear of the 'yellow peril' made Chinese laborers targets of nativism and racism (Saxton 1971). In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to restrict Chinese immigration. The Chinese then were forced into residential

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[1] A small number of cases from Orange and San Bernardino counties was also included.

[2] Included in the Los Angeles study was also a sample of Indian immigrants (158 survey respondents, 35 interviews, and one focus group), as well as 20 interviews alongside two focus groups with native-born Americans of other ethno-racial backgrounds were also conducted (Zhou et al. 2016).

segregation and retreated to ethnic enclaves – Chinatowns – for survival (Zhou 1992). As a result, the ethnic population shrunk from 107,488 in 1890 to a historic low of 85,202 in 1920. The number grew slowly following the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the end of World War II. In 1960, the ethnic population reached 237,292, but Chinese immigrants and their U.S.-born children were largely excluded from mainstream American life. Consequently, the largest Asian-origin group remained a largely invisible ethnic minority in the American society.

The demographic profile of Chinese Americans has changed drastically since 1980. A key structural factor that perpetuated Chinese immigration was the passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. The new act reformed the U.S. immigration law by abolishing the national origins quota system while favoring family-sponsored and skilled immigrants. Such reform provided a more welcoming context of reception to Chinese immigrants, but mass emigration from mainland China to the United States did not surge until late 1979 as the normalisation of Sino-US foreign relations coincided with China's open-up economic reform program. Since the 1980s, migration to the U.S. from mainland China has accelerated without any sign of slowing down. Mainland Chinese have benefited from both family reunification and skilled migration favored by the liberalised U.S. immigration policy. Initially, especially in the 1980s, most mainland Chinese hailed from Guangdong Province, the traditional migrant sending region with longstanding and close family networks, and then from all over the country since 1990 through student migration and undocumented immigration (Chin 1999; Zhou 2017).

As show in Figure 1, immigration from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan grew steadily from 1960 to 1990 and has surged drastically since 1990. From 1960 to 2018, more than 2.6 million Chinese were admitted to the U.S. Between 2000 and 2018, annual admissions for Chinese averaged more than 70,000. International migration has resulted in the exponential growth of the ethnic Chinese population. The U.S. censuses show that the number of Chinese Americans increased from 240,000 in 1960 to more than 1.6 million in 1990, which furthered to more than 5 million in 2017.[3]

[Figure 1 about here]

Unlike the conventional images of Chinese immigrants who are tired, poor, and 'huddled masses yearning to breathe free,'[4] contemporary Chinese immigrants are hyper-selected with much higher percentages of college graduates than their compatriots in China and the general population in the U.S. More than half of foreign-born Chinese in the U.S. had a bachelor's degree or higher, while the percentage was below 30 percent for the general adult population in the U.S. and below 6 percent in China (Lee and Zhou 2015). Chinese immigrants were also more likely to be employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations — 52 percent of foreign born Chinese as compared to 32 percent of the general foreign-born population and 39 percent of the general native-born population nationwide (Zong and Batalova 2017). Similar patterns of socioeconomic success are also present in other industrialised societies, like Australia and the OECD countries, yet cultural adaptation does not come hand in hand (Guo and Wong, 2021; Gao 2021). In the U.S., however, Chinese immigrants are more likely to report having limited English proficiency (speaking English less than 'very well') than the general foreign-born population (61% v. 49%).

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[3] Estimated in 2017 American Community Survey, see 'Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2019,' https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2019/asian-american-pacific-islander.html, accessed on 12 September 2020.

[4] See 'The New Colossus,' https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm, accessed on 12 September 2020.

It should also be noted that, unlike other hyper-selected Asian origin groups such as Korean and Indian, Chinese immigrants are extremely heterogeneous in socioeconomic origins and therefore undergo varied resettlement pathways. Intragroup diversity is evident as H1B visa holders, investment visa holders, student migrants, unskilled laborers, and undocumented migrants are well represented within the Chinese immigrant community. For example, 12 percent of H1B visas went to Chinese in 2016, though a distant second to Indians who took the lion share (70%) of all H1B visas issued (U.S. Department of State 2017). Meanwhile, three-quarters of all EB-5 investment visas issued in 2017 went to Chinese nationals (Oppenheim 2019). In terms of localities, traditional gateway destinations, such as California, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois, continue to attract disproportionately large numbers of Chinese immigrants; meanwhile, new destinations like Arizona, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and Florida have also witnessed fast growth of the ethnic Chinese population (Zong and Batalova 2017). The nationwide geographic dispersion replenishes old Chinatowns and promotes the development of new Chinese ethnoburbs (Li 1998).[5]

Converging in Metropolitan Los Angeles

Los Angeles has been one of the largest and most preferred destinations for immigrants from Asia to the U.S. since 1970. The metropolitan area, or Los Angeles County, includes the City of Los Angeles and 87 suburban cities. Prior to the surge of contemporary immigration, the area was a predominantly 'white' place, where non-Hispanic whites comprised of more than 70 percent of the total population. International migration transformed the place into a majority-minority multiethnic metropolis by 1990, when the percentage of non-Hispanic white dropped to 40 percent. As of 2017, LA's population grew to more than 10 million with 26 percent non-Hispanic white, 48 percent Hispanics, 8 percent black, and 14 percent Asian (U.S. Census Bureau 2017).

Compared to cities with few international migrants, Los Angeles as an immigrant gateway city has its own unique advantages. One advantage is its tremendously rich cultural diversity. The inclusive receiving context allows newcomers relatively easy access to preexisting ethnic communities, or form new ones, where they find familiar languages, cultural practices, ethnic-specific goods and services, and networks of social support to ease resettlement stress. A second advantage is its multi-layered, highly internationalised labor market, in which newcomers from various human capital have more potential job options and entrepreneurial opportunities. A third advantage is the development of formal institutions and civil society organisations sensitive and responsive to the diverse needs of immigration populations (see also Yu 2021). As such, Los Angeles is the top receiving city for the largest numbers of Chinese and other Asian immigrant groups, except Indians,[6] as well as Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States.

As of 2015, 72 percent of Chinese (of 434,786) in metropolitan Los Angeles were foreign born, compared to 63 percent nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Table 1 presents selected characteristics of Chinese in Los Angeles County, estimated by the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS). Overall, Chinese made up 4 percent of LA's total population, 54% were female, about half were married, and more than two-thirds were naturalised US citizens. Table 1 also reveals that 41 percent of Chinese were college graduates, which was ten percentage points higher than Los Angeles' adult population. Also noted, however, is the notably high percentage those who did not go beyond high school (40%). Corresponding to educational attainment, Chinese were highly represented in managerial and professional occupations with

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[5] A term coined by Wei Li (1998) to refer to middleclass suburbs dominated by non-white minorities groups.
[6] The top-three metropolitan areas receiving Indians were New York, New Jersey, and Washington D.C.

very low rate of unemployment. Furthermore, Chinese had a higher average household income than the general population in Los Angeles. The socioeconomic profile of Chinese in Los Angeles is illustrative of immigrant selectivity and intragroup diversity.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 2 reports selected characteristics from our online survey with a focus on immigration status. As shown, the majority of our respondents cited family and economic opportunities (employment or business) as primary reasons for migration. Nearly 70 percent of the sample had family members in Los Angeles prior to their arrival in city. The employment-sponsored migration pattern fits those of recent Chinese immigrants in industrialised countries: international students arrive for higher education, receiving their degree, and remain for employment opportunities. However, unlike their counterparts in Australia and the OECD countries (Gao 2021, Guo and Wong 2021), Chinese immigrants in the U.S. are less circular but more permanent. Naturalisation rate is high, at about two-thirds, as shown by our survey data and ACS data. Data from our in-depth interviews also confirmed these two main pathways, while a small number of respondents came to the U.S. through investment or undocumented immigration. This speaks to the hyper-selective, yet extremely diversified nature of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles.

[Table 2 about here]

Upon arrival in metropolis Los Angeles, Chinese immigrants show unique residential patterns. On the one hand, few make their first stop in LA's old Chinatown, and many are dispersed into LA's vast suburbia. On the other hand, they are highly concentrated in ethnoburbs in the San Gabriel Valley, which is made up of 47 incorporated cities and unincorporated places in the eastern part of Los Angeles County east of LA. Table 3 shows the percentages of main racial groups in seven suburban communities of the San Gabriel Valley. All seven cities may be called Chinese ethnoburbs as they have high concentrations of Chinese, ranging from 36 percent in Rosemead to 45 percent in Arcadia, with non-Hispanic white constituting a numerical minority. Monterey Park, originally dubbed 'Little Taipei' in the 1980s, was the first Asian majority city in the U.S. later taken over by new Chinese immigrants (Fong 1994). Arcadia and San Marino are upper-middleclass communities, where many affluent immigrants purchase homes upon arrival, bypassing the time-honored mobility path of starting from the bottom and gradually moving up socioeconomically (Zhou 2009). Visible in these ethnoburbs are not only recent arrivals from China, but also a wide range of Chinese-owned businesses forming a strong ethnic economy, as well as a high level of institutional completeness but with strong bridging ties to mainstream U.S. society (Zhou 2009). The development of ethnoburbs, intertwined with hyper-selectivity, gives rise to new resettlement patterns quite different from those presumed by the classical notion of assimilation.

[Table 3 about here]

Negotiating Integration and Identity in Metropolitan Los Angeles: Findings from Lived Experiences

The data we have presented so far speak clearly to the fact that the socioeconomic origins of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles are extremely diverse with hyper-selected immigrants on one end and unskilled or undocumented immigrants on the other. In terms of key socioeconomic measures,[7] Chinese immigrants generally fare well in the labor market and are economically well-integrated in metropolis Los Angeles as a group. However, their lived experiences reveal

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[7] For example, education, occupation, income, and place of residence.

that their integration paths, identity formation, and coethnic attachment are not linear but multivariate, and even peculiar and counterintuitive. Among our Chinese immigrant interviewees, a fairly large number of them speak fluent English (some even preferred to be interviewed in English), work in mainstream firms, live in ethnically diverse middle-class neighborhoods, but have strong likings toward their coethnics or things Chinese. Yet, a good number of them speak little to no English, work in ethnic economies, live in Chinese ethnoburbs, but have negative feelings about their coethnics. More remarkably, even though these Chinese immigrants hail from different socioeconomic backgrounds and end up occupying various positions in the host society, they share a generally positive image of whites in the U.S. and a lack of interest in other ethno-racial groups. Although they tend to hold negative views about their coethnics, they nevertheless identify as unhyphenated Chinese and feel proud of being Chinese. However, their sense of home is bifurcated: while some would like to remain in the U.S. in the long run, others do not preclude the possibility of returning to China; and either way, their sense of belonging is ambivalent. Furthermore, they rarely report experiences of discrimination; when they do, they consider coethnics as the main perpetrators. They are generally enthusiastic about President Trump and supportive of restrictive immigration policy. Presented with such counterintuitive evidence, we might ask: where do their everyday experiences converge or diverge? Our in-depth interviews offer a glimpse into the ways in which immigrants make sense of their multifaceted patterns of integration.

The Citizenship-Cultural Membership Divide

For immigrants, integration involves not only doing well economically—well-being, but also gaining membership into the nation—belonging. Scholars of international migration have pointed out the dual aspects of national membership: legal membership on one hand and membership in practice on the other. Legal membership is manifested through one's citizenship status and operates as a formal institution, which delineates resource distribution and legitimate trajectories of action. Membership in practice pertains to immigrants' lived experiences and is practiced through sociocultural ways. The intersectionality of these two aspects is commonly observed, but they can also be two independent processes: a naturalised citizen (legal membership) might not feel a sense of belonging to the receiving society (membership in practice); vice versa, sociocultural transformations do not always coincide with formal citizenship (Bloemraad 2006; Joppke 2010; see also Gao 2021).

Our in-depth interviews show a clear citizenship-cultural membership divide among Chinese immigrants who tend to reject an ethnic, or hyphenated, American identity and identify themselves unequivocally as 'Chinese,' regardless of citizenship status. With the exception of two, our Chinese interviewees did not see a contradiction between U.S. citizenship status and an ethnonational identity. Their Chinese identity, therefore, predominantly represents membership in practice—the informal aspect derived from shared cultural roots. Wendy, a naturalised U.S. citizen since the early 1990s, spoke of this idea,

> *'I never think myself as an American, I might not do so ever. I think Chinese culture has rooted so deeply in me… I agree to American spirits, but I don't think I am an American. Because the concept of American, it's like it will include a lot of stuff, like your life habits, your stuff.'*

Gabby, another Chinese woman in the process of applying for her U.S. citizenship, agreed. She noted the lack of association between a formal U.S. citizenship and an ethno-cultural identity in particular. She said, 'Having an American citizenship is not going to change [the fact that I'm Chinese]… It's good to be Chinese, the culture and stuff.'

With such strong ethnonational orientation in membership identification, Chinese immigrants usually associated the hyphenated Chinese-American identity with the second generation, as those born in the U.S. are culturally more American than Chinese compared to their foreign born parents. As Amber, another naturalised U.S. citizen since the early 1990s, put it,

> '*My daughter grows up here… she can say she is Chinese American. But I think we came here as adults, I don't think I am Chinese American, I still think I am Chinese. Because you see you come here around 30 years old, like from 0 to 30, this is a big range… you can't say you are American, because you didn't grow up in this environment, you don't know anything.*'

Perceived Integration

The aforementioned citizenship-cultural membership divide points to the complexity of identity formation. Chinese immigrants generally hold U.S. citizenship in high regard, and most desire to become naturalised U.S. citizens as soon as they become eligible. However, while two-thirds of them are naturalised, most Chinese immigrants think that integration would be impossible for them. As Mark, a long-time California resident since 1976, put it, 'In our life Chinese dishes are definitely more. You could not completely understand American ways… you couldn't possibly integrate into that [American] society.' Another Chinese immigrant, John, who came to the U.S. in 1978, echoed,

> '*Integrating into [American] society is impossible… Unless they came at the age of 4 or 5, they started from the kindergarten, then the accent they speak is completely different. When they've passed 10, they already have formed an accent. People listen and can tell, you are completely different... To integrate into this society, here, you have to start from very young. If you don't start from very young, you are already left behind. You don't play with them [Americans] from very young and go to school together, so you can never say you have integrated.*'

More than participating in mainstream institutions or knowing the behavioral norms and expectations of the host society, our Chinese interviewees tend to see integration as acquiring cultural intricacies, such as accent-less English and Western tastes in food, sports, music, and religion. William, who came to the U.S. in 2010, elaborated on this point,

> '*I think to integrate into American life, the first thing is to integrate into American culture, one thing is sports, one thing is music... the music they like, you need to like music. And there's sports, I think sports and music are both pretty important. Another one is the religion, basically Christian... Our own understanding is that it takes at least three generations, the second generation might be fine, the third generation is actually integrating into America.*'

It appears that Chinese immigrants tend to see integration more in cultural than structural terms even if they have achieved middleclass status and acquired US citizenship. Language barriers and cultural differences seem to be determining factors in their lack of sociocultural integration and therefore, lack of membership in practice.

Peculiar Patterns of Ethnic Attachment

Although identification with the ethnic community imply a sense of belonging under selective acculturation, ethnic identity maintained or re-developed in the host society does not necessarily translate into strong emotional attachments to coethnics here or to the home country there. In fact, Chinese respondents in our online survey showed low levels of both attachments while maintaining a strong ethnocultural identity. For example, 33 percent of them considered it very important to keep close contact with families in China and 34 percent made frequent trips to go back, but only 13 percent preferred the company of coethnics in the U.S. and 25 percent identified very strongly with the Chinese nation.[8]

Findings from our in-depth interviews have further elaborated the mismatch between ethnic identity and emotional attachment. The maintenance of a strong Chinese identity simultaneously coexists with bifurcated patterns of attachment. Some Chinese interviewees advocated for both coethnics and the home country, while many intentionally dissociated themselves and even felt ashamed of being physically close to other coethnics. For example, Wendy felt uncomfortable when she told others she was Chinese. She reasoned,

> *'When Chinese people are together, they are easy to take the Chinese culture here, but not really integrate into American good culture... Actually they ignore some of the more valuable stuff, they don't really understand this society. I think it is really sad. Why do you come to this country then?'*

The clear distinction between Chinese culture and 'American good culture' that Wendy articulated suggests a normative divide: Chinese culture is bad, and American culture is good. Another long-term California resident Brenna, an immigrant herself, also shared such view. She argued,

> *'I can say they [Chinese immigrants] have no intention to integrate into the community unless they have to go—they have to send their kids to school, then they will talk to the school district. But I don't think they have—a lot of them don't have—communication with their teachers and participate in school activities like fundraising... They don't understand the meaning of their participation. But I know a lot of them have their own groups, their own community but again they are not related to anyone else. So it's just themselves, shopping, eating, and you know.'*

The good-bad cultural distinction again sets the ground for individual judgement. Chinese immigrants, especially the more recent cohort from mainland China, are often seen as inherently carrying these 'bad cultures,' and are thus viewed as the troublesome lot. The sheer number of these new arrivals then projects onto the host society a bad image of Chinese, which taints the reputation of more established Chinese immigrants. John had the exact issue with these 'new immigrants.' He said,

> *'When there are more Chinese people coming in, it's more troublesome... a lot of phone scams, frauds, fake calls from the consulate asking for money. We didn't have that before... Now these Chinese came to America, I said they were psychopaths... their education was problematic... You see when people came to America for a long time, they'd go to eat at McDonald's and clean it up well, it*

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[8] Table not shown.

won't be messy, because you are used to it... But some of these new people don't
care, they even smoke there. They don't learn those good, civilised things, they
brought all the bad things.'

At the other extreme, some of our Chinese interviewees were positively disposed to their coethnics and saw their ethnic community as a coherent collective with cultural proximity and emotional attachment. Ruby, an immigrant from Taiwan, discussed how she transitioned from longing to make native friends to feeling more comfortable with coethnics. When she first came to the United States for graduate school, she 'spent more time with American friends' because of wanting to 'be open minded… to learn their culture… to step out of my comfort zone.' Yet, after a few years, she recognised the difficulties in learning all the cultural intricacies and 'just wanted to be comfortable' with her coethnics. The comfort of being with other coethnics was then echoed by Elisa, another young professional working in a major accounting firm. She said,

'I am that type of person who really likes East Asian cultures... I feel very
comfortable, including the connection between East Asian people, the hard
work and kindness. I think actually Chinese people… as long as they open their
mind they are very genuine. This type of thing makes me feel very comfortable. I
think I am this kind of person.'

For Chinese immigrants who identify themselves strongly with Chinese culture and coethnics, their Chinese identity is voluntary with heavy emphasis on cultural connections. However, for those who see China and coethnics with negative feelings, their Chinese identity is forced and involuntary. Despite the strong urge to shed anything Chinese, individuals find themselves unable to learn American cultural intricacies, nor do they feel comfortable interacting with other ethno-racial groups. As a result, they have no other option but accept the 'shameful' Chinese identity.

Residential Assimilation and Coethnic Proximity

How does the place of residence affect one's ethnic attachment? Both classical and neo-classical assimilation theories assume that the more physically distant one is from other coethnics, the more 'assimilated' one would become. Thus, the residentially assimilated—those living in white middle-class suburbs—would be less ethnically attached than those embedded in dense social networks characteristic of the ethnic enclave (Alba and Nee 2005; Gordon 1964).

Our data present an antithesis of residential assimilation. Contrary to assimilation theories, residential assimilation can strengthen ethnic attachment while coethnic proximity can weaken it. As we have observed in the data, those who are residentially assimilated, usually speaking good English, holding high-paying jobs in the mainstream labor market, and living in diverse, or white-dominate, middle-class neighborhoods, tend to be more ethnically attached than their coethnic peers living and working in Chinese ethnoburbs. Cathy, a student migrant working in a major accounting firm in west LA, described the natural connection she felt to other coethnics, and how going to San Gabriel[9] made her feel going 'home.' Such a peculiar pattern emerges where less geographic proximity is associated with stronger ethnic attachment.

In comparison, Chinese immigrants who are surrounded by many other coethnics display weaker ethnic attachment. This is quite unusual as these Chinese immigrants are often

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[9] San Gabriel, located at the heart of the San Gabriel Valley, is one of the largest Chinese ethnoburbs in metropolitan Los Angeles.

beneficiaries of the ethnic community. Chinese ethnoburbs in the San Gabriel Valley have attracted new Chinese immigrants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and places of origin. The ethnoburban development makes it possible for new Chinese immigrants to thrive and achieve economic success without acculturation. Paradoxically, however, ethnoburbs also serve as a natural barrier keeping new immigrants from interacting with other people outside the Chinese world. Those residing in Chinese ethnoburbs find it difficult to work in the mainstream economy due to the lack of either language ability or transferable credentials. They also found it hard to interact anyone but their coethnics, as non-Chinese only frequent Chinese businesses there without developing close interpersonal connections. Faced with these challenges, many Chinese immigrants in ethnoburbs feel 'trapped' with no possibility of escaping, making them believe that integration can never be achieved. Focusing inside the ethnoburbs, they only find out how different they are from each other. Because of increased intragroup heterogeneity and the 'bad culture' that tinted the whole group's reputation, Chinese immigrants who live in ethnoburbs desperately seek to prove they are different from the other bad immigrants and intentionally keep themselves apart from other coethnics.

Hence, if we were to categorise proximity to coethnics on a scale of low, intermediate, to high range across the metropolis, the dispersed Chinese would fall into the low to intermediate range, while the congregated Chinese would be in the high range on the same measure. Such a finding indicates that proximity to coethnics may lead to stronger ethnic attachment only in the low to intermediate ranges. Being embedded within highly concentrated ethnoburbs where the percentage of Chinese is disproportionately high as shown in Table 3, would potentially have a negative effect on the emotional sense of home and belonging.

Intragroup Boundary Making: The Good vs. Bad Immigrant
At the height of heated public debate on immigration, political rhetoric, policy making, and media-dominated information delivery have all created an artificial binary of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' immigrants (Hochschild 2016). The worthy immigrant is the one who is legal, highly-skilled, hardworking, and socioeconomically successful, the unworthy is the one who is undocumented, low-skilled, lazy, criminal, and predominantly people of color. However, few immigrants would consider themselves to be 'unworthy.' Thus, the separation of 'good' immigrants from 'bad' ones is about boundary making (Wimmer 2009). The way immigrants construct good-versus-bad boundaries helps us debunk the 'immigrant for immigrant' myth and understand the subjective interpretations of worthiness.

In an attempt to distinguish themselves from the bad immigrants, Chinese immigrants often turn inwardly within their own ethnic community to draw the line between themselves—'good' immigrants—and other coethnics—'bad' immigrants. All Chinese immigrants in our in-depth interviews agreed that 'cheating the system' was no stranger in their experience with some of their coethnics.

The most striking and rampant form of cheating was welfare abuse. Our interviewees reported knowing coethnics who applied welfare benefits for their elderly parents, even though the elders 'have houses that worth a million dollars and receive pensions averaging 10,000 to 20,000 yuan per month in China.'[10] A common practice for such welfare fraud, according to our interviewees, would be to have their rich parents keep their pensions and savings in Chinese banks without reporting these funds to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service while having their million-dollar houses re-written under their children or even grandchildren's names. Without any

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[10] Interview with Amber.

disposable income and property, these elderly parents would be qualified for welfare assistance, receiving regular checks from the government and living in government-subsidised senior apartments.

Such practice is deemed immoral and unfair in the Chinese community, especially in the eyes of hardworking immigrants struggling at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Anna, a part-time high school cafeteria worker complained about the disparity. She said,

> '*[When they applied for immigrant visas] they had to promise not to receive money from the government for 10 years. But once they got here, they immediately took it. Some U.S. citizens haven't even gotten it. Actually there is a lot of unfairness... like those old people [rich parents migrated under the sponsorship of their citizen children] they got hundreds of bucks every month... but I could only earn $830 from work... a lot of those parents come here when they reach 65, they have never worked in America, but they could get $900 immediately. We work here, we keep working...and I would get only $300 when I retire.*'

Due to the prevailing stigma associated with welfare abuse, even those qualified for welfare refused to utilize it so that they would not be confused with those 'bad bones.' William hurt his back at work and received about $1,000 monthly from workers' compensation benefits to cover his living expenses, but he refused to claim unemployment benefits and collect other welfare benefits like food stamps. He said,

> '*Actually it's okay to take it. But in my mind I would feel, because our company has insurance, now the insurance is giving me money, I don't want to take the government's money. If I ask for more, it's no good. My kids also say no.*'

Another immigrant, Lynn, talked about her family's difficulties when they first arrived in Los Angeles in 1997. Due to the lack of English proficiency, she was unable to get a job. Her family of four had to rely on her husband's income (just a few hundred dollars per month) for survival. To help the family, she and her little daughter went out to collect plastic bottles from public trash cans and recycled them for 5 cents each. Even under such harsh circumstance, Lynn refused to take government aid because 'there were still a lot of people who had even more difficulties than we did.'

Another form of cheating that our Chinese interviewees despised was cheating on the immigration system, either through undocumented migration or fake asylee applications. The latter has become commercialised in the Chinese immigrant community as it provides the undocumented an effective pathway to legal status. Amber stated in her interview that some Chinese lawyers profited from fake asylee applications by making up stories like Falungong and instructing how applicants should perform to convince immigration officers of the validity of their claims. Amber said, 'They [Lawyers] will tell them when to cry, when to cry hard, when to tear up... A whole set, standardised process... I know those people are all fake.'

The shame of being undocumented or fake asylees is so strong that even those who have taken this pathway themselves are subjected to it. Crystal came to the U.S. in 2015 on an F1 student visa but soon decided to apply for asylum and start working. When we met at a public library for the interview, she was speaking English at first, but switched to Chinese and lowered her voice once she was asked about her current legal status. Edwin, a young man who overstayed

his tourist visa and was in the process of applying for asylum as well, confessed in an interview, 'if they ask me to go home, I will. Because I shouldn't be staying, and I understand that. I think it's fair enough.'

Among Chinese immigrants, the attempts to dissociate themselves from the 'bad immigrants,' therefore, become a process of intragroup boundary making, where everyone tries to establish a 'good immigrant' image by advocating for more restrictive immigration policies to negate the 'bad ones,' who ironically are other Chinese. Nichole, a bank teller, categorised the deserving immigrants to be the ones who '[pay] the tax here' so that 'this country is gaining something out of you.' However, the undeserving ones are the 'people who are cheating on the government,' mostly other 'oriental people.' These bad immigrants 'need to be out' in order to deter the possibility of 'taking wrong advantage of the system.' Except one person, all our Chinese interviewees showed little to no interest in public matters outside of the Chinese community and were supportive of President Trump's restrictive immigration policy.

Experienced Discrimination

So far we have seen relatively high coethnic tension among Chinese immigrants, especially those living or working in ethnoburbs. Regarding discrimination, Chinese immigrants tend to deny being racially discriminated against. When they do, they often point to their coethnics as perpetrators. This intragroup focus makes discrimination seem a Chinese-only matter. Our in-depth interview data show that those immigrants who spoke little English, worked in the ethnic economy, and thus had with little chance to interact with non-Chinese, were more likely to turn inwardly to blame other coethnics as possible sources of discrimination. As Joy, a middle-age woman whose entire post-migration career was in the San Gabriel Valley, pointed out,

> *'It's like older immigrants looking down on new immigrants. Like when I was working in the grocery stores, the Mexicans won't look down upon me, but those Chinese will look down upon me. I think Chinese people like from Hong Kong, Taiwan, they look down on those from Mainland China, and old immigrants from the Mainland look down on new immigrants. It's like fighting inside.'*

Only a few of our interviewees reported having experienced discrimination on the basis of race. Among these few, Frank talked about an impatient store keeper at a white grocery store. But Frank thought that it was 'understandable' because he could not speak good English. Gabby mentioned a black girl trying to take advantage of a Chinese cashier, but then she concluded that it was 'probably nothing racial,' adding that 'there are always those who take advantage of others, regardless of race.' Selena also recalled having to go through extra training at her job, because her 'Chinese way of managing the workflow' was different from what her boss expected. However, when incidences of unfair treatment occur, Chinese immigrants tend to approach them with 'a positive and understanding mind' to rationalise 'cultural differences,' or simply a self-dissociation from 'those Chinese [who] deserve it.'[11]

Discussion and Conclusion

Our data show that, while Chinese immigrants metropolitan Los Angeles are hyper-selected and are economically well-integrated in metropolitan Los Angeles, their lived experiences on the ground with respect to integration, identity formation, and coethnic attachment are more

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[11] Interview with Amber.

complex and do not fit neatly into the linear models of assimilation. Rather, they display multivariate patterns that are at times peculiar and even counterintuitive. These patterns emerge from the interactive processes of immigrant selectivity and social transformation in the receiving context at the dual levels of the host society and the ethnic community.

Los Angeles as a context of reception share some characteristics similar to other immigrant gateway cities in the United States. Impacted by international migration, the host society is transformed from white-dominant society to a multiracial society, where non-Hispanic whites no longer comprise the numerical majority. Contact with whites in workplaces, neighborhoods, and public spaces decreases as everyday encounter with coethnics and members of other racial/ethnic minority groups increases. However, whites continue to occupy the dominant position in the host society's social structure, and access to white middle-class networks remains beneficial for integration. Second, the dominant culture to which immigrants are supposed to assimilate has become more diffused and diversified. Yet, cultural barriers remain as immigrants, especially those without English proficiency or cultural familiarities find it difficult to maneuver institutions built on the Anglo-Saxon Protestant foundation. Third, the local labor market has become segmented and globalised simultaneously, offering increasingly diverse opportunities to the more heterogeneous immigrant labor force. As diversification of gateway cities creates opportunities and new challenges to immigrants, particularities of the receiving context further intertwine with immigrant selectivity to give rise to new mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, and discrimination (see also Gao 2021, Yu 2021). As a result, integration into a multicultural host society appears more difficult than into an ideal host society even from the perspective of those seemly structurally assimilation. Boundary-making also becomes more frequent, nuanced, and multi-layered, not only between ethnic groups, but also within the ethnic group, causing not merely citizenship-cultural membership divide but also internal labeling of good or bad immigrants.

Changes in Los Angeles 'ethnic communities are also significant. Historically, Los Angeles 'Chinatown developed a strong infrastructure where social and economic institutions arose to combat harsh legal exclusions like other Chinatowns in other American cities. It has later been expanded into more affluent suburbs by contemporary immigrants from more diverse origins, not only from mainland China, but also from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia, who brought ample human capital and financial resources to boost the ethnic economy and community development. The influx of Chinese immigrants of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds has transformed pre-existing ethnic communities. Hyper-selected immigrants have become part of the typical American middle-class without shedding their ethnic identity and ties to their respective ethnic communities. Such new development has altered the traditional image of the ethnic enclave, from an inner-city overcrowding ghetto of the past to an economically more vibrant and culturally more heterogeneous community, carving out new pathways and developing new mechanisms for integration.

However, the effect of ethnoburban development on integration for the Chinese is paradoxical: Chinese immigrants with low level of education, a lack of English proficiency, and few transferable credentials can now achieve socioeconomic mobility without acculturation in the traditional sense. Yet, the dense ethnic space simultaneously intensifies intragroup tensions that pressurize those embedded in it to desire and embrace aspire to anything 'mainstream' and aspire to become 'white' by shed off anything Chinese. Moreover, those living in or in close proximity to the ethnic community tend to grow certain negative feelings toward and alienation from coethnic members regardless of their socioeconomic standing, while those living farther away from coethnic concentrations tend to develop stronger ties and positive feelings to

coethnicity. Thus, the existence of a strong ethnic community may not have clear-cut positive or negative effects on immigrant integration, even though segmented assimilation, rather than straight-line assimilation, has become a new normal.

Our study suggests that contexts matter for immigrant integration, but that contextual intricacies brought by the ever-changing immigration dynamics and immigrant selectivity give rise to multi-layered structures of opportunities and constraints, causing convergence and divergences that affect individual members of national origin groups both from within and across ethnic boundaries. As contemporary immigrants possess different human, financial, social, and cultural resources and as many emerging immigrant gateway cities witness drastic social transformations, a fuller understanding of the multivariate integration pathways requires that future research extend beyond the presumed ethnic cohesion or ethnic erosion to look into complex dynamics within and beyond an ethnic community. Future research should pay attention to advancing theories of segmented assimilation to account for the intersectionality of immigrant selectivity and the increasing heterogeneity of the receiving contexts.

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Figure 1. Chinese Immigration to the United States: 1960 to 2018
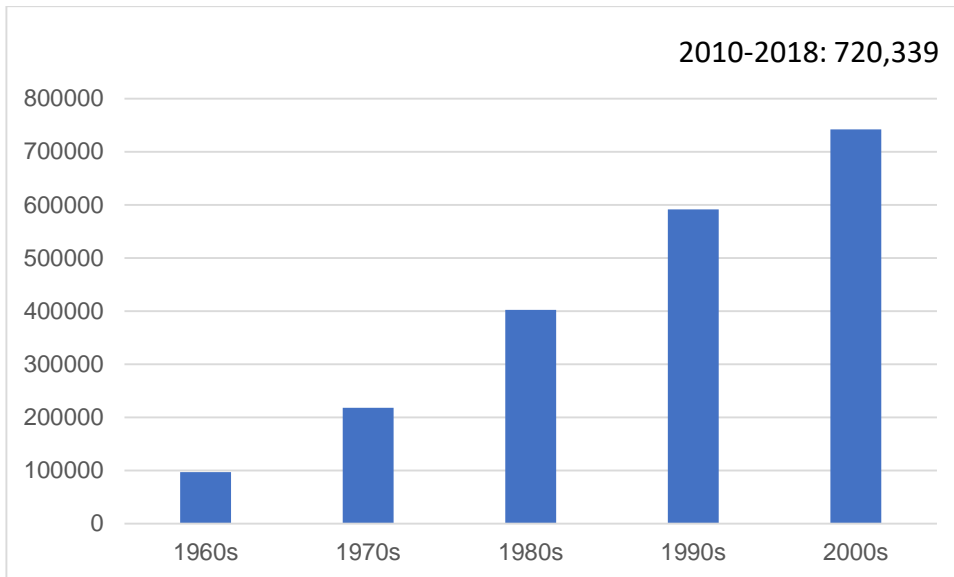
Source: U.S. Homeland Security. *2018 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.* Office of Immigration Statistics, https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2018, accessed on 12 September 2020.
Note: Numbers include mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Ethnic Chinese Population in Los Angeles County

Total N	434,786
% of the total population	4.30
Female (%)	53.80
Married (%)	50.96
Foreign born (%)	71.92
Naturalised US citizen (%)	67.52
English proficiency *% Speaking English 'very well'*	37.64
Education	
% High school or less	40.28
% Some college	19.11
% Bachelor's degree	25.24
% Advanced degree	15.36
Employment	
% Managerial & professional	49.23
% Self-employed	12.94
% Unemployed	.98
Average household income ($)	102,536 (105,717)
Average income to poverty ratio	3.15 (1.74)

Source: *American Community Survey* 2015.

Note: The total population in Los Angeles County was 10,105,722 as of 2015. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

Table 2. Selected Characteristics of Chinese Immigrants in Los Angeles

Selected Characteristics	Percent
Total N (22 years of age or older)	283
Already had family members in Los Angeles prior to arrival	69.26
Primary reason to migrate to Los Angeles	
Family	36.53
Employment/business	41.49
Visa status upon initial arrival	
Immigrant visas	35.69
Nonimmigrant visas for work or study	42.41
Residence in LA for 10 years or more	56.54
Naturalised US citizen	68.90

Source: Zhou et al. 2016 (Los Angeles survey).

Table 3. Ethno-racial Populations in Selected Suburban Cities in Metropolitan Los Angeles

City	Chinese Ethnoburbs			
	% Chinese	% Latino	% White	% Other
Arcadia	45.13	12.34	29.97	12.56
Monterey Park	44.55	30.04	17.07	8.34
Temple City	43.49	19.88	26.37	10.26
San Marino	43.33	<.01%	40.55	16.12
San Gabriel	41.97	26.25	22.48	9.30
Alhambra	36.02	35.70	24.17	4.11
Rosemead	35.64	32.93	20.79	10.64

Source: *American Community Survey* 2015.