Chinese American Women, Identity and Education: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how Chinese American women, as American-born children of new Chinese immigrants, have perceived and interpreted who they are, and how they become who they are while adapting to American society and negotiating with the interplay of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Drawing on in-depth interviews with twenty-seven Chinese American women from two universities located on the East Coast, I argue that their segmented assimilation processes involving ongoing negotiations between maintaining ties with their ethnic and cultural backgrounds and selective integration into the mainstream of the society, which, to some extent, are subject to and predetermined by their parents’ pre- and post-migration conditions. At the same time, my participants also struggled with how their self-defined ethnic identity intertwined with a socially constructed racial identity.

My data show multiple settlement patterns among new Chinese immigrants, including traditional ethnic enclaves, and suburban white areas as well as a diverse class composition of college-educated professionals, small business owners, and working-class laborers. Those professionals from middle-class backgrounds had higher upward mobility and less residential restrictions. Participants who grew up in white neighborhoods and inner-city ethnic enclaves had different ways of understanding what it means to be Chinese American. Their identification is also subject to how they incorporated educational values and resources from their family and formal schooling into their own understandings of the social world they live in, how they negotiated their situatedness between their ethnic culture and the mainstream, and how they were recognized by others while dealing with stereotypes and discrimination. As a consequence, their identities changed over time when they were positioned in different social contexts and locations.
CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN, IDENTITY AND EDUCATION: 
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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DISSERTATION

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Honestly, I wrote this part the last after I finished the rest of this dissertation. Every time I intended to write down something, I was struggling so much with how to word what I felt and thank everyone that I was greatly indebted to.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

WHY CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN IN COLLEGE SETTINGS?

A few years ago, I ran into an “Asian-looking” woman at a Chinese cultural event on campus. In our conversation I got to know that her parents came from southern China, and she was the second generation of her family living in the United States. What surprised me was how little she knew about China. The only Chinese words she could speak were “Nihao (Hello)” and “Xiexie (Thanks).” Looking at this woman, whose black hair and black eyes were just the same as mine, I wondered how speaking English became the only way for us to communicate. Later on, I became more hesitant to say “we” in front of her because I was suddenly aware that, despite some physical similarities, we were so different. I am an international female student from China. She grew up here in the United States, and speaks English as her native language. The difference between us is much more complex than coming from two shores of the Pacific Ocean. The strangeness-blurred-with-familiarity lingered during my interactions with Chinese American friends in different situations afterwards, and triggered in me a strong motivation to explore Chinese American women’s self-identification and the significance of education in their lives. I conducted this ethnographic study on Chinese American women students at two universities on the East Coast: one private and one Ivy League. I did not purposely set up a list of conditions on sampling because I wanted my study to reach as many Chinese Americans of different socioeconomic background, geographic region, sexuality, disability, and religion as it could. At the same time, I did try not to predominantly depend on any particular recruiting channel with a purpose of reducing overlaps in the sample. The goal of the research was not to justify whether my participants were either Chinese or American. Instead, I focused on the process of Chinese American
women’s continuous interacting with the broader social and cultural contexts through which they needed to confront issues like who they are, how they become who they are, and how they make sense of and react to their everyday lives. Chinese American women have been historically and politically represented as a homogeneous ethnic group in a racialized social structure (Hune, 2003). However, more research has shown that there are substantial differences in their identification processes (Hune, 2003; Tong, 2003; Yung, 1999).

I cannot forget how hard it was to find resources both in the library and online when I reviewed the research literature on Chinese American women for a graduate course. Academic scholarship in Asian Studies and Asian/Chinese American Studies has predominantly concentrated on historical, archival research, literature, popular culture studies, and demographic research, where the researchers’ authority and interpretation surpass the actuality of the lived experiences of common people. Chinese American women, however, remained extremely underrepresented in social and cultural studies. It is predominantly because, as some research showed, that immigrants, especially immigrant women of color have suffered the most from “institutionalized economic and cultural racism” (Espiritu, 2008, p. 5) in that gender has always intertwined with class, race, ethnicity, citizenship, and nationality in the U.S. (Lowe, 1996). For the most part, overlooked by current ethnic and immigrant research are matters related to the intersections of race, class, gender, and ethnicity in Chinese American women’s everyday worlds, and the relationship between their individual immigrant experiences and transnational cultural and economic capital flows in the era of globalization. A feminist historian and a Chinese American woman, Judy Yung (1995) criticized such marginalization,

Race theorists tend to explain the Asian American experience in light of race
and class oppression, but overlook gender; feminist scholars tend to examine women’s subordination in terms of gender and, at times, class, but ignore differences among women based on race. The growing scholarship on women of color is beginning to correct these incomplete approaches by looking simultaneously at race, class, and gender in explaining women’s oppression and diverse life histories, but these studies often focus strictly on black-white race relations, ignoring other racial groups such as Asian American women. (p. 5)

Although Yung studied Chinese American women in the first half of the twentieth century, a different historical context from my research, some questions that she raised, especially her focus on an interplay of race, class, and gender and acculturation in the lives of American-born Chinese women, are definitely applicable to explore later generations of Chinese American women, including their lifestyle and cultural identity. The invisibility and underrepresentation of Chinese American women in public discourse that she felt obligated to explore motivates me to delve into how this has happened and what their current lives are.

The lives of Chinese American women have been powerfully shaped by ethnicity and race in relation to notions of groupness and difference. Such representations are usually socially produced in power relations, although the extent to which ethnicity and race influence a person’s life may differ depending on specific contexts in which the person is situated. In order to further understand how those social categories interact, it is necessary to clarify some definitions in the first place. I am arguing that the complexity of Chinese American women’s identity can be dismantled from exploring how “social phenomena such as race, class, and gender mutually construct one another,” since “Groups are constructed within these social
practices, with each group encountering a distinctive constellation of experiences based on its placement in hierarchical power relations” (Collins, 1998, p. 205). In this sense, when scrutinizing how Chinese American women interpret their lives while confronting questions concerning their identities, answers can hardly be generated from a single dimension of either race, ethnicity, class or gender given the existing dominance of white supremacy and various inter- and intra-group diversity and heterogeneity.

Challenging the widely accepted notion of ethnicity and race as distinctions separately “based on national origin, language, food, religion—and other cultural markers” and “drawn from physical appearance” (Mittelberg & Waters, 1992, p. 425), recent theoretical approaches lead towards a recognition of blurring the boundaries between these social categories (Chuang, 2004; Fan, 2003; Kibria, 2002a). Those fixed, neutralized, and biology-based definitions stemmed from old assimilationist school and cultural pluralism have been challenged fundamentally. When considering how Chinese Americans integrate into the American society, their experiences embody those of early European immigrants in some aspects as well as ethnic Americans in other ways. However, when Chinese Americans claim their ethnicity as Chinese, they have to accept the fact that they are actually imposed on by the racial category “Asian American,” and lumped into it with other Asian ethnics. The racialization of ethnicity that Chinese American immigrants confront involves the ethnic identification of later generations intertwining with how they are racially defined, and engenders conflicts and dilemmas between voluntarily chosen and involuntarily imposed identities (Kibria, 2002a; Purkayastha, 2005; Tuan, 1998). Unlike for white ethnics, race and ethnicity can never be an option for Chinese Americans. For racialized ethnics, “racial and ethnic identities cross-cut and compete
with each other for dominance, with race almost always overriding ethnicity” (Tuan, 1998, p. 22). When Chinese Americans are striving to be accepted into American society without loosing ethnic affiliations, it is a process undertaken in a more material than symbolic manner.

Another clarification is about how I refer to education in its more general sense. In my study, I investigate how the educational careers, by which I mean not only formal schooling from kindergarten through higher education but also informal education from family and other educational resources, of Chinese American women who attend college, interplay with their identification as Chinese American women. Since “college is a time when they first come to seriously consider the notion of ‘Asian American’ and its relationship to themselves” (Kibria, 2002a, p. 187), it is a useful time to explore their shifts in understanding their own identity. My study would fill the gap in current discussions about Chinese American women in college with their own voices.

Different from much existing work that is community-based and done about the population of Chinese American women on the West Coast, such as Judy Yung’s, the majority of my participants grew up and received their educations on the East Coast except for three people from California, Kansas, and Hawaii separately. To zoom in further, my interviewees from the state of New York were mostly from New York City. Their total amount is almost equal to the rest from other eight different states.

Choosing an ethnographic approach, I explored the following questions: How do Chinese American women come to identify themselves as Chinese American, and perform this identity in their everyday lives? How does the process of their identification interact with their own interpretations of how they are socially
recognized and represented? How do they negotiate their situatedness as they travel between immigrant ethnic and racial environments and mainstream American values and culture? How do they incorporate educational values and resources from their family and schooling into their own understandings of the social world they live in? How have their understandings of their identity changed when encountering different social contexts and institutions? How do race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality as well as culture and history intersect their educational experiences and social mobility? I explored these issues through life stories of my participants.

In order to address all the questions above, I draw on segmented assimilation theory as a major theoretical tool to look for answers. Segmented assimilation theory focuses on the up-to-date growing up experiences of American-born generations, and illustrates the distinctiveness of children of new immigrants across ethnic groups and over historical times. It argues that they neither conform to the mainstream in all aspects nor stick only to economic, social, and familial connections with their countries of origin. It explains the complexity of my informants’ current lives in the U.S. more effectively than classic assimilation theory, which heavily centers on earlier pre-1924 European immigrants’ experiences, and transnational immigration theory, which focuses more on the back and forth movement of recent immigrants and transnational networks and connections established between sending and receiving countries.

Giving considerable attention to financial, human and social capital that immigrants possess before and after migration, segmented assimilation theory sheds light on the diverse outcomes of new, especially second-generation immigrants. Financial capital includes all monetary resources that immigrant parents possessed before and after migration. Human capital refers to their educational levels, skills, and
language proficiency. Social capital includes all of their social relations and networks within their ethnic community or outside. This theory argues that the assimilation experiences of children of new immigrants after the 1960s were exemplified by upward, downward, and selective acculturation driven by unequal segments of social structures and integration into the receiving country. Contingently and strategically, these women in my study were motivated and strived to construct their own way of assimilation and identification in response to ethnic capital and structural constraints and resources.

The strength of segmented assimilation theory is that it revalidates the roles of ethnic enclaves and culture in shaping and promoting the relationship between new immigrants and the host society. To strengthen my theoretical analysis, I also draw on the idea of racialized ethnicity with a focus on how Chinese Americans deal with the racialization of their ethnic identity concerning what they choose to identify with and what is structurally assigned to them. It is important to understand that, even all coming from middle-class backgrounds, Asian and European immigrants would have very different experiences due to their positioning in the racial hierarchy that American society has built. However, with the theoretical lens of a segmented assimilation argument, my research particularly focuses on children of new Chinese immigrants after the 1960s, and does not make a comparison between new immigrants and their early European counterparts. Segmented assimilation theory was designed around new immigrants and their alternative assimilation patterns (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001; Zhou, 2009). The experiences of my research informants, as children of new Chinese immigrants, help illustrate the diversity of new Chinese American community from a specific position.

The ideas that this study takes up are relevant today and are applicable to a
broader spectrum of issues than the specific question of Chinese-American identity of a group of college women. The issues of assimilation and immigration relate to discussions of whether bilingual education should exist in American schools, of struggles that African American Studies departments have to be considered part of the core college curriculum, and of the Republican presidential hopefuls’ anti-immigration stances. All of these concerns show that the ideology of assimilating into an idealized American norm is powerful today. My study investigates how it works differently in contemporary Chinese American women’s lives.

The Gravitating Force: Chinatown

Challenging traditional assimilation theory, segmented assimilation theory proposes that ethnic communities and enclaves may not by nature hinder immigrants and their children from making it in the dominant society nor trap them at the bottom of social hierarchy. Hence, these ethnic social institutions do not seem to disappear in the long run as some assimilationist theories assume, although how salient they remained in immigrants’ lives varies. How my informants’ lives were influenced by an ethnic community in turn impacted how they made sense of being Chinese American.

For Chinese immigrants who came after the civil rights movement, like most of my informants’ parents did, the 1965 Immigration Act was a piece of vital legislation in that it finally annulled the nation-origin quota system, and abolished some of the legal barriers against Asian immigrants’ entrance and naturalization. As a result, it attracted immigrants from more diverse backgrounds in the sense that the profile of post-1965 Asian immigrants came from not only “low-wage, service-sector workers” but also “‘proletarianized’ white-collar professionals” (Lowe, 1996, p. 15) and business entrepreneurs (Zhou, 2009). Another feature is the increasing number of
women in not only the Chinese but also Asian population, which greatly changed the demographics and social formation of Chinese and Asian American communities. Historically, the lifting of immigration legislation coincided with a rapidly increasing need for low-wage workers for the local garment industry in Chinatowns, which dragged new comers, especially women with limited educations and skills to fill up those much-needed jobs (Zhou, 2009). This act played such an important role in the history of Chinese immigrants and their offspring that Chinese American societies have become more stable, cohesive, and diverse due to a decrease of such discrimination.

Responding to different social, economic, and political contexts in the U.S. and China, Chinese immigrants and Chinese American women today have gained different experiences from their counterparts half a century ago (Louie, 2000; Hune, 2003; Tong, 2003). In my informants’ accounts and in other literature about Chinese immigration history, Chinatowns have earned their prominence in habituating Chinese immigrants and their children. After years, they have become a landmark ethnicity-based institution and shelter smoothing over Chinese immigrants’ adaptation into American society and revitalizing a home culture in a foreign land. It is one of the most discussed topics about Chinese American community that Chinatowns used to accumulate and are now still gathering many Chinese immigrants, especially first-generation and working-class populations.

More than fifty percent of my informants grew up in or lived close to Chinatowns. During my interactions with them, the way they presented their experience of living there always impressed me with a feeling that I would like to call “Chinatown savvy,” an authoritative way of showing their Chinese identity that I hardly observed when I met American-born Chinese from other non-ethnic
environments. On many occasions, my interviewees, who grew up in white or more diverse neighborhoods, shared the same idea. They implicitly or explicitly mentioned an intra-group “gap” distancing them from those Chinatown locals.

Compared to the difficulty that I had digging Chinese American women out of literature, it was easier to access studies particularly of or involving Chinatowns because many studies of Chinese American history incorporated and referred them as an ethnic marker representing Chinese immigrants politically, economically, socially, and culturally. The most well known as well as the biggest and oldest Chinatowns in the U.S are located in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. A new trend is, as Chinese immigrants started spreading out, more Chinatowns and Chinese ethnic enclaves were built in metropolitan areas across the country to meet the needs of local ethnic people, and shelter them as harbors as well. In addition to the three mentioned, there are other cities that fostered Chinatowns’ coming into being and growth, including Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Seattle, and Portland, ranging from the East Coast to the West (Tsui, 2009; Zhou, 2009).

A rich body of research has been done on Chinatowns in those metropolitan gateway cities, for instance, New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Many historians have shown that Chinatowns were the first stop that Chinese immigrants of both old and new generations made when they landed in America, especially those who were manual workers, and would possibly become where they could finally settle down and raise a family afterwards (Tsui, 2009; Wong, 1982; Zhou & Logan, 1991). Since the 1960s, different residential patterns emerged after the influx of new immigrants. Immigrants who had limited social and human capital chose to congregate in ethnic enclaves while new immigrants who had an equivalent to or a higher degree than college education background and good English skills changed
their settlement locations to more suburban areas since they were much less dependent on ethnic supporting networks due to higher social mobility (Espiritu, 2008; Jiobu, 1988; Zhou, 2009).

Even in such a large metropolitan city as New York City, in addition to Manhattan, two new Chinese ethnic population clusters have solidified. One is Flushing in Queens, and the other is Sunset Park (referred to as “8th Avenue” by Chinese immigrants) in Brooklyn. Nearly half of my informants who came from New York City grew up in or lived near those three inner-city enclaves. Directly or indirectly, their lives were closely tied with economic, cultural, and social activities they and their families have engaged in there, including running restaurant businesses, working in factories, going to school or after-school programs, hanging out with friends, eating or shopping. Therefore, it should be helpful to give a glimpse of Chinatowns in New York as examples to illustrate how Chinatowns have mattered in Chinese immigrants’ and their offspring’s lives over time.

The history of Chinatowns can be traced to the late 1840s when Chinese laborers were traded out primarily from Guangdong and Fujian provinces in China to California for the gold rush and later railroad construction. That period of time had witnessed the first wave of Chinese immigrants in American history. Chinese “coolies” took labor jobs that white workers would rarely be willing to endure, and then they stayed afterwards even if they were paid much lower wages than white workers, and worked in terrible conditions. It was also a time when the anti-Chinese emotions and stereotypes, such as “yellow peril,” prevailed. Although Chinatowns emerged in large gateway cities in the late nineteenth century, they were structurally segregated, culturally marginalized, and racially discriminated partly due to the enactment of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which not only deprived Chinese of an
opportunity of applying for American citizenship and largely downsized the Chinese male population, but also completely restricted Chinese women from entering (Kwong, 1996). Given such extreme situations, Chinatowns did not grow at a desirable pace for more than half a century, and became residential ghettos with a majority of male bachelor laborers.

Legislative prohibition was not lifted up until the repeal of the anti-Chinese Act in the 1960s and the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, also called 1965 Hart-Celler Act (Suará ñ-Orozco & Suará ñ-Orozco, 2001; Zhou, 2009). Since then, Chinese Americans, as one of the largest and newest immigrant groups from Asia, came to the United States, and transformed Chinatowns from closed-down societies to “urban commercial and residential districts where Chinese could find employment, housing, and cultural comfort” (Ling, 2009, p. 3). At the same time, connections between Chinatowns and the mainstream society and other ethnic groups have been extensively explored. A growing body of scholarly work sheds light on the development of traditional inner-city Chinese enclaves as well as newly emerging Chinese “cultural communities”¹ and “Ethnoburbs”² that have blurred boundaries with the mainstream society in the suburbs. Ethnic ghettos or enclaves, ethnoburbs, and cultural communities, although coming into being in different historical times and circumstances, all helped interpret and reinvent ethnicity that Chinese immigrants

¹ I quote Huping Ling’s (2009) definition of a cultural community, which says it “does not always have particular physical boundaries, but is socially defined by the common cultural practices and beliefs of its members. A cultural community is constituted by the Chinese-language school, Chinese religious institutions, Chinese American community organizations, Chinese American cultural agencies, Chinese American political coalitions of ad hoc committees, and the wide range of cultural celebrations and activities facilitated by the aforementioned agencies and groups” (p. 130).

² Ethnoburb was first invented by Dr. Wei Li (1997) and annotated as “suburban ethnic clusters of residential areas and business districts in large metropolitan areas. They are multiethnic communities, in which one ethnic minority group has a significant concentration, but does not necessarily comprise a majority. They function as a settlement type that replicates some features of an enclave, and some features of a suburb lacking a specific ethnic identity. Ethnoburbs coexist along with traditional ethnic ghettos/enclaves in inner cities to form multiple clusters of urban ethnic settlement in contemporary American society” (p. 47).
have cultivated through maintaining residential affinity, cultural institutions, and commercial activities.

When my informants and other Chinese Americans I met talk about Chinatown, they usually refer to the one located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City. According to the 2000 census data that I quote from Zhou (2009), “451,000 Chinese Americans lived in New York City, one fifth (91,500) lived in Manhattan, 27 percent (125,000) in Brooklyn, and 33 percent in Queens (147,000)” (p. 55). On the one hand, Chinese ethnic communities and Chinese immigrants have been continually growing. On the other hand, more demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences have come into being between Chinatowns. Based on my observations of and other research on both old and new versions of Chinatowns in New York City (Kwong, 1996; Zhou, 2009), the old Manhattan Chinatown was surpassed by the other two new enclaves in ethnic population and diversity, although it still retains a large population of Chinese immigrants. Nationwide, as one of the oldest in the U.S., Manhattan Chinatown was more likely to attract immigrants with less education, less skills, and more poverty (Kwong, 1996; Zhou, 2001) compared to those in California and Hawaii who retained more “Chinese with professional and technical skills” (Kwong, 1996, p. 40). Unlike the Manhattan’s Chinatown attracting immigrants mainly from Guangdong in China, Flushing in Queens keeps more Chinese immigrants with higher socioeconomic status and educational backgrounds since the 1970s from Taiwan, mainland China, and Hong Kong (Kwong, 1996; Zhou, 2001 & 2009).

The accelerating growth and prosperity of Chinatowns disproves traditional assimilation theory’s point that ethnic communities would decline and disappear so as to melt into the dominant culture. Instead, there was a visible influx of human and
financial capital invested to enlarge them, for example, the old Manhattan Chinatown extended its earlier boundaries into Little Italy and other surrounding blocks (Kwong, 1996; Zhou, 2009). It consequentially stimulated the development of another economic industry, real estate, in addition to its conventional garment factories and restaurant businesses, in which most of my New York City informants’ parents worked or were working. Living in and around a Chinatown’s cultural environment makes their Chinese American identity distinctive but meaningful. When writer Bonnie Tsui reflected upon her moving around Chinatowns in New York City and other large port cities and compared her living experiences in and outside Chinatowns, she said, “For me, Chinatown has been a kind of compass by which to find where I belong in this country. I haven’t always felt at ease in my Chinese skin, and as a young adult it was comforting to know that there was a place I could go in my city where everyone else looked like me” (2009, p. 246). Taking a trip back to China makes her more aware of why Chinatown matters more for American-born Chinese like her,

China was where my family came from, but it wasn’t where I was from. So, when I returned to Manhattan to live, I got to know the Chinatown there as my own. The everyday things I did there…were on my own terms. …

[Chinatown] is heartland Asian America. After a century and a half of Chinese immigration, Chinatown is still the first step for new immigrants into America, and for American-born Chinese into their Chinese heritage. (Tsui, 2009, p. 247)

Tsui’s views are shared by the majority of my informants since they all have to annotate what “Chinese” means when embedded in the phrase “Chinese American,” and acknowledge the significance of Chinatowns helping Chinese immigrants become
Americanized while maintaining Chinese ethnicity, a complicated but more preferred outcome of contemporary immigration (Zhou & Xiong, 2005; Zhou, 2009). Many of my informants thought they had the opportunity to selectively access and absorb the strengths of both cultures, and Chinatowns became not only a place to live and work but more of a space of cultural preservation and ethnic solidarity. However such an identity formation process involves not only self-recognition but also how others view them as Chinese Americans in public and media representations. In this sense, their identification is a negotiating process.

Given the diversity emerging from the current trend of Chinese immigrants’ settlement patterns, ethnic enclaves still play a phenomenal role structurally providing immigrants with economic, social, and cultural resources. As segmented assimilation theory argues, such segregated living environments do not necessarily become a disadvantage but serve as a form of social capital, especially when the successful adaptation of immigrants and their offspring rely to some extent on internal support mechanisms in ethnic communities (Zhou, 2001 & 2009). For example, my Chinatown informants could easily access Chinese languages, cultural activities, media products including newspapers, radio and TV programs, Chinese after-school programs, churches, kinship and lifestyle. Some of those resources were never available to their peers outside of the ethnic community. Those factors in reality shaped my informants’ identification as different forms of ethnic capital.

Race and Racialized Discourses

In spite of the more-than-one-hundred-and-fifty-year history of Chinese Americans in the U.S. and fruits of civil rights movement in affirmative action and consequential anti-racism efforts, discussions about race are still constructed on the basis of a white-black dichotomy (Lee, 1996; Wu, 2002; Zhou, 2009). The very term
“race” has been conceptualized in a way that reinforces the misconception that “‘American’ means ‘white’ and ‘minority’ means ‘black’” (Wu, 2002, p. 20). Such a racialized discourse in which Chinese Americans are always left out and not encouraged to participate with a legitimate status makes them invisible from the core arena of American politics. Chinese Americans are considered neither full American nor minority. Embedded in the labels of “perpetual sojourners” or “forever foreigners” is racial discrimination and an antagonism that treats Asian Americans as unassimilable immigrants from a heretical culture, or “strangers from a different shore” (Takaki, 1998). The persistence of racial prejudice as systematic exclusion affects, in many ways, how descendants of Chinese immigrants have been treated, and alienates them with imposed categories of “foreigner” or “outsider.” In spite of the fact that Chinese Americans have been here for numerous generations, even today, as my informants reported, they are still asked such questions as “Where are you from?” or receive praise from mostly white people for how perfect their English is.

This othering and foreignness can even jeopardize the loyalty of Chinese Americans to America, and their credential of being American in the eyes of other people. Even though Chinese immigrants see important differences between Chinese from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other East Asian or South Asian countries, they associate with one another as “others” as “East is East” (Wu, 2002). For example, the Taiwanese American scientist Wen Ho Lee was accused of spying for the mainland Chinese government in the 1990s. The suspicion and conditional acceptance of Chinese Americans make them constantly need to defend their being American, about which they should not be questioned in the first place.

What complicated the process of Chinese Americans’ adaptation to American society was their unprecedented educational achievement, which has no direct cause-
and-effect relation to how closely they connect to an ethnic community. But, without
doubt, studies show a positive correlation between Chinese students’ high academic
accomplishments and their family and community. For example, in a study of a CILS
(the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, Rumbaut, 2005) California sample
of second generation immigrants in their mid twenties, whose parents emigrated from
Mexico, the Philippines, China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and other countries of
origin, the researcher found sharp ethnic and gender segmentation in these young
adults’ modes of educational achievement, socialization, and adaptation. Among them,
Chinese women have a high percentage of attendance in college and graduate school,
followed by Vietnamese and other Asian groups, while the Mexican, Salvadoran and
Guatemalan had the lowest educational levels (Rumbaut, 2005). Given Chinese
parents’ strong ambitions, and emphasis on education and institutional resources, and
support from local communities, children are more likely to work their way out to
succeed and move upward (Rumbaut, 2005; Zhou 2009).

Because they excelled in academics, the image of Chinese Americans has been
changed from “pariahs to paragons” (Kitano & Daniels, 1995, p. 51), a fundamental
transformation from derogatory portrayals to an overachieving, smart and almost “like
white” collective group. Ironically, this new image, nominally praising Chinese
Americans by juxtaposing them favorably with whites, made it even more difficult to
recognize the discrimination and prejudice that this whole group confronted; or to
reveal intra-group diversity given the rising numbers of juvenile gangs (Tong, 2003).
Constructed within a racialized discourse, the term Chinese American conveys
meanings based on this group’s cultural characteristics, which enable them to practice
their racial and ethnic identities; and these meanings are sometimes even applied to
other groups that share the same pan-ethnic collectivity. For example, the new “model
minority” stereotype not only applies to Chinese Americans, but also extends to other Asian Americans, who are perceived as sharing the same cultural values with Chinese, as if they are all “intelligent, gifted in math and science, polite, hard working, family oriented, law abiding, and successfully entrepreneurial” (Wu, 2002, p. 40)—a way of highly “praising” what Asian Americans have achieved.

Despite its popularity and favor in American mainstream culture and media, this image has not been accepted by the people that it directly affects. Many critiques were engendered from the Chinese American community. One argument points out that it “homogenizes” the diversity of Asian groups, and “completely ignores important historical and socioeconomic realities about Asian Americans” (Fong, 2002, p. 72). It generalizes and essentializes some Chinese Americans’ experience, and overlooks the plurality between different ethnic subgroups and classes.

Moreover, the “model minority” stereotype diverts people’s attention from real and very serious social and economic problems that plague many segments of the Asian American community (Lee, 1996; Zhou, 2009). This myth distracts public attention from the racial discrimination and socio-economic problems that Chinese Americans encounter, glossing over the great diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, subcultural and geographic origins, and residential patterns. It is possible for Asian Americans to develop a sort of “false self-recognition” about themselves. This occurs when members of racial and ethnic minorities may take what has been stereotypically portrayed in the mainstream for granted, and align themselves with those images, or when there are misunderstandings between who they think they are and who other people think they are. Once they accept the successful image constructed by the dominant group, Asian Americans are inclined to reduce their discontentment, and become, perhaps, unable to notice their unequal treatment in
employment and other fields (Espiritu, 2008; Wu, 2002).

My informants are also aware of this image and think it is disturbing since it always gets in the way of their own lives with some prescribed standards that they can hardly live up to. Even though, at first, it may seem complimentary to be included in such an “honored” group, it actually serves to trap Asian Americans within a racialized hierarchy. Asian Americans, on the one hand, are portrayed as “having a strong commitment to family, working hard, and are intellectually gifted, particularly in mathematics, science, and engineering” (Sidel, 1994, p. 113). These “positive” perceptions are assumed to be inherently applicable to every single person who fits into the category of Asian American. However, there are also negative descriptions of Asian Americans as “academically narrow, grade grubbers, clannish, and forever consigned to be foreigners…never fully Americans” (Sidel, 1994, p. 113).

What is missing from the current research and public dialogue is the dynamics between how American-born children of Chinese immigrants would respond to racial discrimination, social inequality, and their family education, and how their Chinese immigrant parents would interpret those racialized images. Not all of my informants appreciate those positive words attached to the “model minority” image. On the one hand, it does not run true for all of them, and on the other hand, their extraordinary performance resulting from extra efforts is always taken for granted. When being attacked with racial slurs and prejudice, my informants can seldom rely on their family for direct guidance. Many of them recall occasions when people of other racial groups imitated “Ching Chong Chink,” made slanted eyes, or shouted “Go back to where you’re from” to their face. Those were tough and confusing situations for my participants. Those imitated sounds were not from the language that they spoke everyday. They did not look like having slanted eyes. They were so confused about
what that was supposed to mean. Born and raised in the U.S., most of them had never
been to China. They could not figure out why other people thought that they came
from another country, or where to go back. Those negative messages, according to my
informants, especially for those who grew up in non-ethnic environments, are the
main reasons why they wanted to deny their Chinese identity or at least to keep a
distance from it: to minimize any personal harm or discrimination that they might
suffer partly because of the way they look.

Interpreting Chinese American Women’s Experience with a Gender Lens

Yung’s (1995) and Hune’s (2003) critique of current academic scholarship in
the studies of race, gender, feminism, and women of color brings to the front the
urgency and necessity of locating Chinese American women as a meaningful research
unit. I am sure that I am not the only person who asks, “Why is it so difficult to locate
Chinese American women in such sociological studies?” The answer cannot be simple.
Given the widespread ignorance, invisibility, and misrepresentation of women of
racial and ethnic minorities, any effort that aims to “make [them] visible, to give them
voice, and to acknowledge their role in community and nation building” (Hune, 2003,
p. 2) should be valued, since even the two presumably most radical fields, Asian
American Studies and Women’s Studies, are not well fulfilling that task.

In Asian American Studies, race is the organizing category and the master
narrative remains male-centered. Hence the historical significance of women
is rendered invisible when their lives, interests, and activities are subsumed
within or considered to be the same as those of men. … Women’s Studies, by
contrast, centers women and features gender as the category of difference.
But as critiques by feminist scholars of color have demonstrated, Women’s
Studies has yet to shift from its dominant paradigm of white leisured middle-
class women’s aspirations, ideologies, and experiences to one that more fully encompasses the complexity and differences that race, class, sexuality, religion, national origins, citizenship status, and other categories bring to women’s everyday lives. Hence, too, Asian/Pacific Islander American women are marginalized. At best their lived realities with their particular power relationships and intersections are hidden or homogenized within the larger category of women generally or women of color specifically. (Hune, 2003, pp. 2-3)

Due to double marginalization in social and racial hierarchy, Chinese American women were deprived of legitimate positions to claim their own experience in knowledge production, unless it fit in the master narrative as a “relevant extra.” To some degree, whether their experience is valid depends on the dominant ideology’s standard of what counts as knowledge. It was hard to apply scholarship in race and ethnic studies, immigration studies, Asian American studies, and women’s studies directly to interpret their lives, because those seem sort of relevant but not exactly pertinent and penetrating enough to catch the point. Without the insiders’ contributions, knowledge generated only by the others can hardly be well-grounded and convincing.

It is only very recently that Chinese American women have been empowered with new forms of emerging subjectivity among historical and sociological studies, but still in limited quantity and scope. A number of scholars from the Chinese American community, such as feminist historians Judy Yung and Huping Ling, became leaders of promoting revolutionary changes in order to break the ice that froze Chinese American women’s voices, given the fact that they “have silently borne the maligned images imposed upon them by the dominant culture—the exotic China Doll,
erotic Suzy Wong, and diabolical Dragon Lady. They have rarely been asked to speak for themselves about their lives, their aspirations, struggles, and accomplishments” (Yung, 1999, p. 511). More researchers now pay attention to Chinese women and argue that how they experience racism, sexism, classism, and immigration may differ from Chinese men, or even vary among themselves depending on particular social, cultural, and historical contexts (Espiritu, 2008; Hune, 2003). For instance, Chinese women living in San Francisco half a century ago, and my informants today, struggled with similar issues: cultural conflicts between parents and daughters; racial discrimination in school and the broader society; equal opportunity in education and employment; political pursuits through forming alliances and organization (Yung, 1995). However, my informants, as native-born Americans, rarely assume the same close ties and strong emotional attachments to China as did those Chinese women during World War II.

It is equally important to examine Chinese American women across different time periods and to explore the differences and variations in how, in the context of global capital and cultural flows, their identity corresponds to the interplays of class, race, gender, and ethnicity in their lives. What should be taken into consideration includes: demographic factors such as age, generation, and the time their family immigrated; social and political circumstances of the host society; and how they as individuals have coped with those conflicts and contradictions when some segments and determinants were more salient than others, in different cases. Listening to the voices and perspectives from more than 120 Asian American women, Chow (1999) realized that her previous assumption about them was wrong, and that not many of her interviewees wanted to be white, an attitude she and her sister shared. Her informants held a variety of views on what it means to be an Asian American woman. Their
narratives make it meaningful to explore the multiplicity of their everyday lives.

Studies show that Chinese American women, as well as other Asian women’s groups, have the standpoint and agency of “transforming knowledge, theory, and practice, and dismantling the notion of a monocultural American experience and a single way of being and doing. Their experiences challenge Eurocentric and male-biased worldviews, as well as universalized white middle-class women’s norms, values, and ideologies. They complicate global, national, and ethnic histories by calling attention to women’s lives as sites of intersection” (Hune, 2003, p. 13). Incorporating a gender lens is to provide empirical details about the complexity of Chinese American women’s daily experience, and uncover how gender inequality together with other forms of oppression systematically affect Chinese immigrants and their offspring’s everyday activities, such as: how to deal with intercultural clashes between generations in terms of passing on cultural heritage, keeping ethnic links, dealing with social norms and expectations, finding a partner and raising children, as well as how they situate themselves on either side or in-between (Espiritu, 2008; Hune, 2003). Compared to the quantity of studies about Chinese immigrants associated with certain forms of ethnic communities and in particular geographic areas, scholarship lacks knowledge about how Chinese American women have been living their lives in racially segregated areas in contrast to ethnic enclaves, and how those who have gone through elite education although coming from a hybrid socioeconomic background would negotiate their identity and adopt segmented acculturation patterns. My research can fill these gaps with a multifaceted depiction of Chinese American women’s lives and their process of coming into their own understandings of becoming Chinese American women in the contemporary United States.
Organization of the Chapters

Following this introduction is Chapter Two, which summarizes the major arguments of segmented assimilation theory, and how it, as an alternative, more deliberate theoretical framework, helps me capture Chinese Americans’ distinctive adaptation processes, and accommodates Chinese Americans and their identity issues macro- and microscopically. I also review current literature on immigration, particularly Asian and Chinese American communities, and education. In the subsequent Methods and Procedures Chapter, I explain my methodological position, which derives from an epistemological claim, and the steps that I went through, from recruiting and interviewing participants, transcribing and coding data, and my own reflexive activities as a researcher who shares the same cultural origin and some social categories with the informants.

The three data chapters are organized by major themes that convey the most weight in my informants’ lives. In Chapter Four, I focus on my informants’ growing up communities, roughly divided into ethnic enclaves and non-ethnic, or predominantly white, neighborhoods, and their family nurturing environments. I argue that how their parents educated them in terms of Chinese language, cultural activities, and emphasis on education, all together affected how my informants started a journey of exploring who they were. Chapter Five is about my informants’ lives after they entered college, a transition period where they participated in diverse on-campus pan-Asian student organizations, equipped themselves with critical knowledge by taking courses in social theory, developed their own political stance, and confronted the intersections of race, ethnicity, class when they negotiated between whom they were expected to date and marry and whom they would want to choose. Chapter Six describes my informants’ continual strivings for self-recognition and self-
identification while negotiating with and resisting Asian-oriented racialized discourses. My informants propose a diversity of categories that they feel better describe how they identify themselves, and how they understand others identify them. Rather than passively accepting the label of Chinese American, my informants choose to associate more with certain segments of identity ranging from being culturally white, or Chinese-born American, even actually born in the U.S., to minority of color and women of color, in order to achieve stronger political alliance. These efforts in turn compose a collage of a hybrid representation of Chinese American women’s identity.

Chapter Seven is the conclusion where I not only summarize what I have done in previous data chapters, and identify the main arguments that I propose, but also reflect on theories that come out of my study, and lessons learned. I expect more research on comparison between Chinese immigrant women and American-born Chinese women, between American-born Chinese women and men, and between American-born Chinese women and other Asian American women groups in that research findings should be more compelling when one adds generation, men’s voices (supposedly the dominant side), and intra-ethnic or intra-racial variances as new analytical perspectives.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Immigration has always been one of the most controversial fields in American political and academic arenas. Historian Oscar Handlin (1951) wrote over half a century ago, “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history” (p. 3). With several large influxes of immigrants within the last one hundred and fifty years, a number of issues have been continually raised and debated in terms of what it means to be an American. Especially since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, this country has witnessed a rapid growth of immigrants with new characteristics, and became a watershed of old and new immigrants. Geographically, old immigrants primarily came from European countries, whereas new immigrants are largely composed of emigrants from Asia and Latin America. In this regard, as immigrants bring different cultures, immigration inevitably leads to new thoughts and actions about identity, by which Bean and Stevens interpret as sociocultural identity involving “language, social relationships, and racial or ethnic identification” (2003, p. 8). To a large extent, it is a complicated question whether the two types of immigrants and their children have identical adaptation patterns in terms of why immigrants come, how the country should deal with immigration, and what immigrants do after coming. A great number of scholarly efforts have been devoted to a hot debate: If the experiences of early European immigrants were considered “successful assimilation,” will those processes also apply to new immigrants and their offspring?

Segmented Assimilation and Immigration

Scholars with different foci may come up with different answers. Some from classical assimilation theory assert that merging into the mainstream is the ultimate destination for all immigrants (Gordon, 1964; Warner & Srole, 1976). Some point out
another possibility, which shows that immigrants who occupy lower levels of the class and racial hierarchy may be blocked from moving upward and therefore retain their ethnic culture (Joel & Waldinger, 1997). Some researchers, especially those who emphasize the distinctiveness of immigrants from non-European countries and their offspring, argue that immigrants’ adaptation is neither a unidirectional evolvement toward the dominant nor as simple as to adopt or resist an “American” identity, partially because there is no consensus in terms of what type of American immigrants should become. Among the existing theories of immigrants’ incorporation processes, segmented assimilation theory provides researchers, including me, a more applicable, insightful instrument though which a kaleidoscope of immigrants’ lives can be represented within a multifaceted framework. This theory is well presented in a series of writings (see, for example, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997a, 1997b, 2001 & 2009). Zhou (2009) elaborates how segmented assimilation theory responds to the diversity of contemporary non-European immigrants and their adaptation trajectories.

The theory emphasizes the interaction between race and class and between ethnic communities and larger social structures that intentionally or unintentionally exclude nonwhites. It attempts to delineate the multiple patterns of adaptation that emerge among contemporary immigrants and their offspring, account for their different destinies of convergence (or divergence) in their new homeland, and address the ways in which particular contexts of exit and reception for national-origin groups affect outcomes. (Zhou, 2009, p. 6)

Here, “contemporary immigrants” refers to new immigrants who came to the United States after the mid-1960s, and their offspring therefore are categorized as “new”
second generation due to some specific characteristics that distinguish them from their European predecessors. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) point out three dimensions to consider when applying this theory: “1) their individual features, including their age, education, occupational skills, wealth, and knowledge of English; 2) the social environment that receives them, including the policies of the host government, the attitudes of the native population, and the presence and size of a co-ethnic community; and 3) their family structure” (p. 433). In this framework, how immigrants undergo acculturation and adaptation relates to what immigrants experience and possess before migration, their class composition, and the conditions of the host society including racial stratification and local ethnic networks, since these dimensions interactively affect how immigrants are received and adapt to the society. The responses of the receiving country, either “exclusion, passive acceptance, or active encouragement” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, p. 46), usually predetermine legal status before immigrants arrive, and legitimize the selectivity of a nation’s immigrant policies. Segmented assimilation theory presents diverse outcomes across generations of immigrant groups and socioeconomic and geographic conditions whereas assimilation, even though controversial, is still a prominent concept in American society.

The term assimilation was early defined as an expected unidirectional process for immigrant groups to gain upward mobility, and join mainstream society (see Alba & Nee, 1997 & 2003; Gordon, 1964; Park, Burgess & McKenzie, 1967; Warner & Srole, 1976). Its most well-known representational exhibits are Warner and Srole’s straight-line assumption and Milton Gordon’s multi-staged model, ranging from cultural assimilation (acculturation) to structural assimilation marked by intermarriage on a large scale. In assimilationist theories, newcomers and their descendants are expected to move from the margins towards the Anglo-Saxon white culture, the “core
Assimilation theory has been criticized for its inability to accommodate immigrants after the 1960s. Portes and Böröcz (1989) point out that an assimilationist framework generally advocates for a linear process of immigrants’ absorption into the mainstream leaving out the experiences of those “abnormal” unassimilable minorities and return flows. Since changes happened both in immigrants themselves and in the U.S. as the receiving country, there is no longer such a unique corresponding relationship between assimilating into the white middle-class and becoming American. To accommodate new changes and emerging diversity, some followers suggest a shift from the centralization of a homogenous, middle-class white culture to a more mixed, expanded conception of a normative American culture (Alba & Nee, 1997; Dewind & Kasinitz, 1997; Esser, 2004). In that way, minority ethnic groups are assumed to influence the mainstream when some cultural traits that do not inherently belong to certain groups, but to be accepted as part of American culture over time (Alba & Nee, 1997 & 2003). Segmented assimilation theory acknowledges the popularity of assimilation as a powerful ideology, but under the condition that it is just one of many existing immigration patterns and is easily accessible only to some immigrants. Many scholars have noted that the diversity of contemporary new immigrants fitting into different “castes” of the social system makes a universal assimilating direction much less convincing than it had been for previous, more homogeneous European groups (Alba & Nee, 1997 & 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996 & 2001; Waldinger & Feliciano, 2004; Zhou, 1997a & 1997b).

Another pattern that segmented assimilation theory touches upon reveals the downward adaptation of some immigrant groups and their offspring, especially of second generation immigrants who come from lower, working class families in inner
cities, a phenomenon known as “second-generation decline” (Gans, 1992) or “second-generation revolt” (Perlmann & Waldinger, 1997). Studies have shown that children of immigrants from poor neighborhoods are vulnerable to getting stuck between the old and the new societies so as to move downwards to join lower-level street culture that already exists among local people while dealing with socioeconomic disadvantages and discrimination. The decline is likely to occur when on the one hand, they cannot find jobs that match their aspirations, and on the other hand, they are not willing to take low-paid jobs with long working hours as their parents did while suffering from the downside of the hourglass economy (Gans, 1992). Zhou (2009) described this pattern as a “pathway of adapting to native subcultures in direct opposition to the WASP core culture or creating hybrid oppositional subcultures associated with native racial minorities trapped on the bottom rungs of the host society’s mobility ladder” (p. 6). This process diverges radically from assimilation theory’s assumption of what ethnic minorities could end up going through. Nonetheless, this model does not counteract the possibility of “upward” assimilation and Americanization. But, on the other hand, it may promote proximity and consolidation among groups and individuals of the underclass due to their similar experiences of being oppressed, and, voluntarily or consciously, resisting the dominant. Thus, to some extent, such a downward pattern or “ethnic disadvantage” model has the potential of paradoxically engendering upward mobility and ethnic advantages as positive results.

In the U.S., ethnicity and race are socially constructed and intertwined so that the integration model of early Irish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants becomes less applicable to answer questions like when and how new immigrants (such as Asian /Americans) will eventually become, voluntarily or compulsorily, part of WASP
culture structurally. One argument is that today’s immigrants do not have white skin to cover them up so that it is impossible for them to become invisible and finally merge into white America. Even though research shows that in some regions Chinese Americans were considered “white” because of their high economic mobility and educational attainment, that quasi-whiteness or what is called “honorary white” status cannot transform their marginality attached to the hyphenated Americanness they undergo as a minority ethnic group. Actually, in U.S. history, racial categories had changed, exemplified by the expansion of whiteness due to the integration of immigrants from Southern, Central, and Eastern European countries. However, the definition of whiteness per se makes it very difficult to imagine how Asian, Latino, and African Americans can be included in Caucasian culture unless a fundamental challenge to current racial hierarchy is brought into play.

Therefore, in addition to moving upward to the mainstream and downward to the subcultures, segmented assimilation points out another horizontal, heterogeneous trajectory “selective acculturation” (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), which “involves socioeconomic integration into mainstream America with lagged or selective acculturation and deliberate preservation of the ethnic community’s values and norms, social ties, and institution” (Zhou, 2009, p. 7). Some scholars described it with specific connotations, such as “upward mobility combined with persistent biculturalism” (Waters, Tran, Kasinitz & Mollenkopf, 2010, p. 1169) or “pluralistic integration combining economic integration into the middle class and a high degree of linear ethnicity marked by a continuation of one’s own culture” (Vermeulen, 2010, p. 1215). The theory emphasizes that there is more than one way of assimilation, and becoming American does not necessarily mean being white for all ethnic groups. In other words, segmented assimilation theory fundamentally challenges, unlike how
early assimilation theory proposes, the dominance of whiteness as the norm as if it is the only or most desirable outcome for all groups of varied background. Immigrants may entirely accept or resist the host society or occupy an “in-between” status, among which selective acculturation is supposed to produce a better and more ideal outcome since immigrants can learn the language and American culture without losing the valuable components of their own ethnic culture.

Meanwhile, segmented assimilation theory classifies pre- and post-immigration dimensions, including the immigrants’ social capital in their homelands, their motivation and ways of migration, and the social, economic and political conditions in the host country. Whether immigrants “assimilate upwardly, downwardly, or horizontally” (Zhou, 2009, p. 7) depends on how these conditions affect their adaptation processes, especially for the second generation from diverse national origins, socioeconomic backgrounds, and settlement patterns. What leads to different incorporation trajectories to a great extent is influenced by the conditions which immigrants are situated in when they first arrive (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). On the one hand, immigrants, who settle in underprivileged inner-city neighborhoods, are exposed to adversarial subcultures, and lack social mobility. They are usually vulnerable to downward assimilation. On the other hand, having access to resources available in ethnic communities, conventional assimilation theory considers barriers, in some cases can help immigrants and their offspring to succeed through ways like education. The second generation can selectively choose what benefits them the most from their ethnic communities and families to avoid being blocked on their way to success because of inequality and discrimination in the U.S. society, neither being trapped by their immigrant parents’ paths nor fully following the native models of downward mobility and oppositional subcultures to WASP (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf,
Waters, & Holdway, 2008; Rumbaut, 2004).

**Chinese Immigrants in the United States: Old and New**

The history of Chinese immigrants in the United States is marked by two prominent time periods. The first immigration wave happened between the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, which is commonly agreed upon among historians and sociologists (Marger, 2008). It was because the devastating economic and social conditions in China and the imagination and propaganda of the United States as “the Golden Mountain,” the first group of Chinese immigrants, mostly from the Pearl River Delta in China (Yung, 1995, p. 16), left their homeland to the American continent, striving for their American dream. About 225,000 Chinese immigrated to the United States during that time (Min, 2002). When the influx of cheap Chinese labor became a threat for white workers, the Chinese encountered not only antagonism and discrimination from local societies, but also restrictions from governmental legislations, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1882 and other consequent laws, which severely precluded Chinese people from entering the United States for decades. It was documented that Chinese population declined from around 125,000 in 1882 to around 70,000 in 1910 (Marger, 2008). Research shows that those early Chinese immigrants were mostly married Chinese male peasants from Guangdong province who intended to return after earning money, and did not bring their wives and families with them when they first came. Due to the extreme unbalanced sex ratio between Chinese women and men, for example, 7 to 4,018 in San Francisco in 1850 (Yung, 1995), the Chinese communities were presented as “bachelor’s society,” and did not grow stably until the abolition of those restrictive legislations in the mid twentieth century.

The 1960s witnessed tremendous changes in American society. The enactment
of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act) abolished the national-origin quotas that had been in place since the Immigration Act of 1924. Since then, the Chinese American population increased from 237,000 in 1960 to 3.6 million in 2006, according to U.S. national census (Zhou, 2009, p. 43). Not only the Chinese community, the population and diversity of Asian ethnic groups as a whole also increased dramatically. Between the mid nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Asian population was mostly Chinese and Japanese immigrants. After World War II and the 1965 immigration law, immigrants from Korean, Philippine, Vietnam and other Asian countries kept growing fast. It is estimated that the Asian American population will reach beyond 34 million by 2050 (Marger, 2008). In 2000, more than 75 percent of immigrants from Asia came to the United States after 1980 (Espiritu, 2008).

Distinguished from those who arrived between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the post-1965 Chinese immigrants exhibited some new characteristics in “socioeconomic background, modes of social mobility, patterns of geographic settlement, and place of origin” (Zhou, 2009). Unlike the large composition of unskilled, low-income manual labors of early immigrants from China, today’s new comers are composed of not only “low-wage service-sector workers but also significant numbers of white-collar professionals and self-employed entrepreneurs” (Espiritu, 2008, p. 72). Zhou (2009) also describes three trajectories of social mobility of Chinese immigrants based on their varied socioeconomic backgrounds, which are low-skilled workers, highly educated professionals and ethnic entrepreneurship. Among them, the professional group is very likely to incorporate into American mainstream society because of their educational achievement and social status. Other than that, the 1965 Immigration Act also produced a rapid growth
of women immigrants partially because of its consequence of promoting family reunification. As a result, the Chinese American population increased from around 237,000 in 1960 to around 3.6 million in 2006. The number almost reached 3.8 million in 2009. Table 2.1 lists male to female ratios of Chinese population from 1860 to 2009. Within a one-hundred-and-fifty-year timeline, Chinese female population increased more than 1117-fold, with an approximate double-fold in every ten years since 1950.

TABLE 2.1 CHINESE POPULATION IN THE U.S. BY SEX, 1860-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Males per 100 Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>34,933</td>
<td>33,149</td>
<td>1,784</td>
<td>1,858.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>63,199</td>
<td>58,633</td>
<td>4,566</td>
<td>1,284.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>105,465</td>
<td>100,686</td>
<td>4,799</td>
<td>2,106.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>107,488</td>
<td>103,620</td>
<td>3,868</td>
<td>2,678.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>89,863</td>
<td>85,341</td>
<td>4,522</td>
<td>1,887.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>71,531</td>
<td>66,856</td>
<td>4,675</td>
<td>2,130.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>61,639</td>
<td>53,891</td>
<td>7,748</td>
<td>695.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>74,954</td>
<td>59,802</td>
<td>15,152</td>
<td>394.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>77,504</td>
<td>57,389</td>
<td>20,115</td>
<td>285.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>117,629</td>
<td>77,008</td>
<td>40,621</td>
<td>189.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>237,292</td>
<td>135,549</td>
<td>101,743</td>
<td>133.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>431,583</td>
<td>226,733</td>
<td>204,850</td>
<td>110.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>806,040</td>
<td>407,544</td>
<td>398,496</td>
<td>102.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,648,696</td>
<td>821,542</td>
<td>827,154</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3,796,796</td>
<td>1,803,478</td>
<td>1,993,318</td>
<td>90.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau publications. From Yung, Unbound Feet, p. 293.

2009 data from 2009 American Community Survey 1-year estimate

The settlement patterns of Chinese immigrants also changed from crowding in gateway cities to “ethnic concentration and dispersion equally significant” (Zhou, 2009). Even though the Chinese population is still highly concentrated in metropolitan cities such as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, other states and urban areas have also witnessed a continuing growth of Chinese American population, as shown

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1 Retrieved December 16, 2011 from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPServelt?_bm=y&-gr_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201&-gr_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201PR&-gr_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201T&-gr_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201TPR&-geo_id=01000US&-geo_id=NBSP&-ds_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00&-reg=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201T:035;ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201TPR:035;ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201T:035;ACS_2009_1YR_G00_S0201TPR:035&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false&-_format=.
Traditional ethnic enclaves are steadily enlarging and accumulating new immigrants, and not totally diminishing or disappearing as classical assimilation theory predicts.

On the other hand, enclaves are not the only available choices, and most of the times serve as settlement or transition locations for new immigrants who are less educated and unskilled, and lack upward social mobility. An expanding distribution trend emerges when immigrants who finish advanced education and master professional skills are less intended to rely on ethnic networks but more capable of relocating in middle class, suburban areas (Fan, 2003; Li, 2006; Ling, 2009; Zhou, 2009). Those who come with a relatively high level of education and professional training may shortly stay in gateways and then move to other inland urban cities or settle down in new suburbs as soon as they arrive. Today’s Chinese Americans are more spread out in new urban regions all over the country other than typical gateway cities, and the whole community “has become more diverse but less geographically bounded and less cohesive” (Zhou, 2009, p. 52). Table 2.2 below indicates the percentage of the Chinese American population in each state in 2000. Although California and New York still ranked the top two in this country, other states had remarkable Chinese populations as well; the numbers in Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington all exceeded 50,000 by then.
### TABLE 2.2 CHINESE AMERICAN POPULATION BY STATE, *2000*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Chinese</th>
<th>% Of Total Population</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Chinese</th>
<th>% Of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>7,358</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>1,204</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>2,459</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>3,774</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>26,419</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>18,950</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>3,816</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>4,774</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>California</strong> 1,114,047</td>
<td><strong>3.29</strong></td>
<td>Hampshire</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>20,204</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td><strong>109,640</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.30</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>21,893</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>5,327</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>4,520</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td><strong>450,910</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.38</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>4,291</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>22,077</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td><strong>59,031</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.37</strong></td>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>31,797</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>756</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td><strong>170,684</strong></td>
<td><strong>14.09</strong></td>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>34,848</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>3,016</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>8,693</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td><strong>85,840</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.69</strong></td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>27,021</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>14,618</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td><strong>56,665</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.46</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>7,256</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>5,730</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>8,977</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>7,094</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>6,259</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>Carolina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>8,895</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>1,034</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>2,452</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>10,951</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td><strong>54,889</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.04</strong></td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td><strong>120,776</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.58</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td><strong>92,123</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.45</strong></td>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>10,691</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>37,966</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>1,631</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>19,309</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>43,320</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>3,713</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td><strong>75,464</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.28</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>15,808</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>2,138</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*States with the largest Chinese populations are shown in boldface type.


Unlike earlier Chinese immigrants mainly from Guangzhou and Fujian province in China, contemporary Chinese Americans are composed of people from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Vietnam and other places across the world. Within the Chinese community, there are various dialects in use, for instance, Mandarin, Cantonese, Toisanese, Fujianese, and Shanghainese. Research has concluded that with more financial and social resources newcomers are less restrained from spatial boundaries and hourglass economy, and much easier to integrate into the structure of American society (Li & Skop, 2007; Ling, 2009; Zhou, 2009). On the flip
side, the local social fabric may also be affected over time by the incorporation of newcomers demographically, economically, and culturally as a result of suburbanization and immigration. For example, Monterey Park in suburban Los Angeles as a newly developed ethnoburb (like an ethnic suburb, first invented by Wei Li, 1997) has witnessed a gradually dramatic transformation from a predominately white community in 1960 to a hybridized, multiethnic city with Chinese population as the majority followed by other Asians, Hispanics, whites and then African Americans in 2000. Chinese immigrants including those from Taiwan were highly educated and affluent, and maintained frequent transnational connections with places where they emigrated (Zhou, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2.3  CHINESE AMERICAN SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN 2006 AND 2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in College or Graduate School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: American Community Survey.

The 2006 American Community Survey reveals that more than fifty percent of Chinese Americans (25 or older) have accomplished four-year college or more advanced education, compared with 28.6 percent of whites and 16.9 percent of African Americans. As Table 2.3 illustrates, in both 2006 and 2009, there were more female Chinese American students enrolled in college or graduate school than males. In 2009, the number of females attaining a bachelor’s or higher degree surpassed that of males within Chinese American community, which shows a decreasing sex ratio since 2006. In addition, socioeconomic background may be crucial but not the only determinant in terms of what kinds of college and university that children of immigrants can possibly enroll. Some research done in New York City about second generation immigrants shows that “… particularly among the Chinese, even those
from working class backgrounds or with poorly educated parents have sometimes achieved stunning upward mobility” (Kasinitz et al., 2008, p. 342). The same research also demonstrates that children of working class Chinese immigrants who live in Chinatowns and go to inner city, urban public schools in poor neighborhoods also graduate from high schools and get enrolled in well-known colleges and universities.

Most Chinese immigrants came to this land with an American dream hoping to be able to support their family in the United States and back in China, and give their children a better life, even if they were treated equally and confronted prejudice and discrimination. Education is an important path for turning that dream into reality and achieving success whereas for more than half of the Chinese American women in my study their parents had not received much formal education and took low-wage jobs with little possibility for promotion. When these women are striving for advanced education and a successful career, it is hard to tell if they are living up to their parents’ expectations or fulfilling their own dreams. Thus, as other second-generation immigrants, these women also encounter questions of identity. This research explored how they as children of immigrants from different “segments” of the society negotiated who they are while crossing the boundaries of two worlds, with respect to education and family culture and values.

The Significance of Identity

The recognition of identity as something fluid but experienced in real lives enables exploration of how immigrants position themselves in relation to everyday activities, and how they construct hybrid or even paradoxical identities at individual and collective levels. Far from being predefined in a one-fits-all process of push and pull, the experiences of immigrants only make sense when the interplay between certain historical, social, and cultural contexts and power structures has been taken
into account. Identities are “names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 1990, p. 225). By this, I mean, in order to make meanings out of my informants’ lives, I would argue that their social identities are mutually constituting each other so that they are not just Chinese, or just American, or just women. Their subjective experience of each identity category always intertwines with others given that their salience varies across time and context. In this sense, identities are relational, and any intention to authenticize or essentialize a core identity should be fundamentally questioned in that identity is historically and conditionally contingent and discursive, and requires scrutinizing the past and the present. However, one question that is not easy to answer, especially when we are in need of initiating political actions and forming alliances, is: If everything is language-mediated through discourses, then how can we rely on people’s experience if it is only constructed based on social positions? There should be something real other than the social positions we occupy. Our experience comes from how those positions have been structured but also from how we as persons act on and respond to them.

Donna Haraway reminds us that experience can be reliable only if we realize that identities are “contradictory, partial, and strategic” (1991, p. 155), and there is no real “human” as well as no real “woman,” which are very problematic categories. She and many other postmodernist feminists argue that when we say “we” by differentiating ourselves from others, we are taking the risk of placing part of a self as the standard of exclusion and inclusion while ignoring the fact that social categories are produced under certain power systems, and are not neutral or come from nowhere. For instance, when we stand up as “women,” such grouping usually ends up with a list of what are on the opposite side of compared to “men.” This to-be-or-not-to-be
game in turn reinforces the dominance of one side over the other. Drawing on feminist critiques, we could be more aware of risks of essentializing and generalizing identity categories. But at the same time, we also need to be aware that it could drive us to an embarrassing dilemma, where we may be too groundless and shifting to reach a “sufficient” point of claiming something.

This predicament can possibly be avoided by resisting the dichotomy between essentialism and postmodernist fragmentation of identity, an insightful attempt exemplified by Paula M. L. Moya’s (2000) realist approach. Moya argues that social locations that we are from and the oppressions we are suffering because of these locations, which she describes as “physical realities of our lives” (p. 80), do speak to our identities. The social locations that people occupy have material effects on how their experiences have been interpreted, which leads to how they identify and are identified. Thus, identities are mediated through discourses to some extent, but also have real consequences. As socially constructed and always fluid, identity intertwines with resistance, struggle, and power structures between individuals and the society. Identification involves individuals’ insights of and resistance to the positions that they are prescribed by the dominant ideology, and their own interpretation in relation to their distinctive experience situated in particular socioeconomic, political, and cultural surroundings.

Along these lines, I argue that how Chinese American women identify themselves is a hybrid, complex process never fixed or predefined, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in given social and cultural circumstances, and shaped by power relations. Their shared history of marginalization and oppression conveys the possibility of producing collective knowledge and developing a political stance to radically challenge those false representations in dominant discourses. It is also worth
mentioning that the way an individual Chinese American woman approaches and performs identity varies. Nonetheless, in their efforts, how race, class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity intersect affecting groups’ or individuals’ experience requires a close, thorough observation because, even when applying the multifaceted framework of intersectionality, it does not mean that “these factors are equally salient in all groups’ experiences or they are defining groups under uniform principles” (Collins, 1998, p. 208). In alignment with Haraway and other feminist theorists’ perspectives on subjectivity and knowledge production, their situated-but-connected-ness makes the study Chinese American women’s identity necessary and epistemologically meaningful.

For Chinese immigrants and their children who are also minorities, “being ethnic” and “being racial” always intertwine in Asian immigrants’ identity since “Asian Americans are both racial minorities and ethnic American” (Kibria, 2002a, p. 3). In this regard, what most sociological scholarship on post-1965 new immigration, including segmented assimilation, theory claims is that theories formed on the basis of European immigrants’ assimilation experiences fail to accommodate the diversity and multiplicity of new Asian immigrants and later generations. To challenge classical assimilation theory, recent studies have argued that growing up in America for immigrant children does not necessarily result in making exclusive choices between the ethnic and the American (Chow, 1999; Kibria, 2002a; Sidel, 1994).

For Asian Americans, race and ethnicity interactively affect immigrants’ identification process because their experiences cannot be sufficiently interpreted within any single assimilation pattern but “merge features of the experiences of European ethnics as well as those of racial minorities” (Kibria, 2002a, p. 3). In this sense, some research targets similarities between Asian and white Americans’
adaptation process, and takes it for granted that ethnicity could become an advantage, either symbolic (e.g. ethnic pride) or material (e.g. middle-class status), equally for these two groups.

However, since Asian Americans are not an accurate replica of white Americans, “become American” is by any means not identical with “being white” per se. As Tuan (2002) observed, second- and later generation Asian immigrants can hardly get away from a “forever foreigner” label or have the freedom to identify themselves along ethnic lines as descendants of early Europeans successfully accomplished after years of struggles. For Asian Americans, how to “make sense of what it means to be racially Asian, ethnically Korean, Vietnamese, and so on, and nationally American in terms of their personal identity and cultural practices and beliefs” (Tuan, 2002, p. 210) is a legitimate question that they have to confront all the time. Their participation in the mainstream lifestyle is also a process of being racialized. Studying American-born Chinese who fit in this racialized ethnic silhouette, requires inquiries of how different segments of society shape their integration and identity, and how they strategically react to those social forces.

An institutionalized racial discourse that Chinese Americans have to confront is the myth of “model minority,” which generalizes Chinese Americans and Asian Americans as a whole homogenous group. Asian students were always represented in media as a group that achieved scholastically higher than average. These portrayals seldom went further to investigate how it really happened and how Asian students reacted to the token of “overachiever.” Compared to the effort devoted to elaborating how Asian students “are all doing well,” less attention has been given to how such oversimplified representations can jeopardize racial relationships between Asians and others, and trap Asian ethnics with falsified racial stereotypes, as it does to other
ethnicities. The myth not only covers up racial discrimination by exaggerating individual accounts but also levels up racial tension between Asians and other minorities, especially African Americans. Scholars remind us that answers to questions “Model of what?” and “Model for whom?” (Wu, 2002, p. 59) imply that Asian Americans, as a “model of minorities,” are exemplary but at a lower standard compared to whites, and an individualist statement that success is achievable regardless of ethnic, cultural, class, gender, generational and other differences. Not only the white majority but also other minorities including Chinese Americans are caught up by this stereotype, which makes it even harder to examine their identity as being Chinese American since “Who am I?” involves both personal choice and how other people recognize him or her.

What is lacking in the body of available literature but which I hope to accomplish in my study is an articulation of the interrelation between segmented immigration patterns and the emergence of new immigrants’ subcultures. Given such efforts, threads to answer the following questions should be expected to come into being: How are Chinese Americans negotiating the process of integration in the United States? How do they deal with their “in-between” situation? How do they understand being Chinese Americans in the United States since they cannot say that their Chineseness and Americanness are just half and half in them? In particular, my research investigates how these second-generation Chinese American women live their lives between their parents’ world and the U.S. society, especially their educational environments including K-12 schooling and higher education, and more generally, how they develop and transform their own sense of self and how they are recognized by the society. Focusing on the multiplicity and contingency of new immigration, segmented assimilation theory sheds light on assimilation as an ongoing
process, where Chinese American identity as a “historically constituted group identity” (Collins, 1998, p. 203) may be taken up and performed by individuals in various forms. In other words, how Chinese Americans construct their identities depends on different social locations they are occupying within power relations. Chinese and other Asian Americans suffer from their marginality because of racial hierarchies just as other minorities like African Americans and Latinos do.

For example, second-generation Chinese and Korean American young professionals in Los Angeles and Boston areas who achieve success in their careers do not turn out to be the same as their white peers. How they understand what it means to become a Chinese American or a Korean American draws on their “neighborhood social landscapes,” their parents’ backgrounds, and the connections they establish with China and Korea. They always find a way to worship their cultural heritage and maintain ethnic appreciation even though they also confront racial discrimination and stereotypes (Kibria, 2002a). Students from Columbia University and Hunter College also articulate how important their ethnic resources are to their Chinese American identity, whether they are from middle-class suburbs or working-class ethnic enclaves (Louie, 2004). These studies have shown that it is not uncommon that second-generation immigrants may adopt white, middle-class values in one way or another, but also become racialized ethnic minorities at the same time.

However, even more applicable to framing Chinese new immigrants’ experience, one factor not sufficiently addressed by segmented assimilation theory is how gender, as socially constructed, mediates the experience of Chinese men and women, because not all Chinese immigrant families in my study conform to gender and education ideologies transplanted from their homeland culture. Traditionally, in Asian families, girls are raised to be submissive and to conform to parental authority
and boys to be progressive and competitive, and such differences in parenting may have gender effects on children’s adaptation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). However, some studies have also shown that female Asians outperform their male counterparts in educational attainment and the job market, especially within Asian ethnic groups. This is due in part to the traditional way children of Asian origins are raised, with the worldviews and values embedded in their home culture (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes, 1996; Zhou & Bankston, 2001).

In a ten-year California study on different educational outcomes of male and female adult children of immigrants—a group sharing the same age range and generation status with my informants—Feliciano and Rumbaut (2005) find that immigrant parents were stricter controlling their daughters’ study hours and leisure activities than native-born parents, and the percentage of girls obtaining an advanced degree was higher than that of boys. Therefore, a positive correlation is presumed between parental control over social and interactive behaviors and daughters’ achievement in K-12 schooling and success in college and future careers. Many of my informants had similar experiences of rigorous parental discipline, and for most of the time, they had to show obedience to their parents regardless of any disagreement they might have. Inasmuch as girls are more likely to translate parents’ high educational expectations into their own aspirations, their educational attainment turns out to be gendered as well (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1997; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). Consequently, their distinctive gendered pattern turns attention from the previous, widely discussed argument that women are underrepresented in higher education, to a new trend featured by the fact that women gradually outperform men in education and professional careers with segmented trajectories along the lines of not only class and ethnicity but also gender.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

I did not originally have a spontaneous instinct to do qualitative research well. I would say it was a long journey from just knowing how to do it as a learner to being capable of conducting research with my own perspectives. If anything really triggered me at any point, I should rewind time to the moment when I was sitting in an empty, shabby lounge room talking to this woman about her experience of leaving her hometown in the countryside and coming to the largest metropolitan city in China to work at this prestigious university as a janitor. I was doing it for a nationwide research project, and wanted to know how women like her understood their lives in the city. At that moment, I was staring at her, but could not stop wondering how unbelievable it was that she sacrificed her valuable break time to talk to me, a person she barely knew. She had no idea of what that meant for me. I brought her food and drinks every time I visited because I occupied her dinner time. But that little material remuneration was far from enough to dispel my deep discomfort, as it was always a pressure to try my best to tell her story. At the same time, I was convinced little by little that “talking”—if used appropriately—somehow has the power to get people from totally different worlds to open themselves up and share something that they might not even tell to important people in their lives. I think at that moment I converted to become a follower of this particular research paradigm. The more I practiced it, the more I was committed to it. That also motivated me eight years ago to cross the ocean, and I am very grateful that I made that decision.

If it was just a process of “learning while doing” as a novice in China, here, in CFE, I would say that I have turned a sketch into an oil painting with what I have learned, internalized, and transformed while getting trained in qualitative
methodology. This process also allowed me to become confident conducting this research on Chinese American women, who were underestimated or even ignored in various studies on gender, immigration, race and education. More important, having a qualitative research mindset also allows me to get away from an arrogant researcher position that might put me in a “superior” status over them all the time. On the contrary, I am very aware of my role as a co-producer in partnership and collaboration with them. In other words, my informants and I are all part of this research, and our inputs should be equally valued.

Qualitative Methodology

Maybe different people interpret qualitative research in different ways; but there is some common ground that most qualitative researchers would agree upon. For example, in-depth interviewing is one of the primary methods that qualitative researchers would use in addition to participant observation, focus group, life history, case study, and autoethnography. The data are, first of all, always collected in a naturalistic manner, which means the researcher engages in natural behavior, such as “talking, visiting, looking, eating, and so on,” and secondly, the data are filled with a “description of people, places, and conversations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). “Naturalistic,” “descriptive,” “process-centered,” and “inductive” are some of the primary characteristics of qualitative research, although researchers with different foci may approach it differently. Here, I would borrow the definition that Lincoln and Denzin (2000) use:

“Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counterdisciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities, the social sciences, and the physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multiparadigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of
the multimethod approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political allegiances.” (p. 1048)

Qualitative research is multidisciplinary, representing multiple voices from various theoretical frameworks, including but not limited to cultural studies, feminism, critical theory, postmodernism, and postpositivism. More importantly, because the subjects are always people of a certain race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or cultural background, it needs to be pointed out that qualitative research is inherently not value-free, but reflects a certain political stance and for certain particular goals and needs. For instance, feminist researchers argue that no knowledge can be absolutely neutral and any knowledge is produced under particular historical, cultural, and local context (Harding, 1998). Given such epistemological claims, feminist research is expected to problematize and examine those male-dominated and taken-for-granted theories and policies to realize social justice for women in specific contexts (Olesen, 2000). In addition, feminist research has transcended the boundaries of various social categories from simply critiquing to reinventing knowledge while making visible its situatedness attached to certain social locations, which is exemplified by the works of Donna Haraway, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, and many others. I would like to go further from their contributions, and “situate” my theoretical framework within the lives of American-born Chinese women who are in a university setting.

Research Design

Since I intended to do ethnographic research on Chinese American women, a group undergoing and resisting multiple oppressions in their silenced mode, I share
many feminist standpoint theorists’ viewpoint that the knowledge of the oppressed is to provide a “less partial, distorted and perverse” account of the reality of their lives (Harding, 2004a & 2004b/1993). As a meaningful collective, Chinese American women’s marginalized location, even though there are variations within this group, gives them the distance to develop a critical stance. Moya argues that “oppositional struggle is fundamental to our ability to understand the world more accurately” (2000, p. 86) so that it is important to bring into the forefront women’s experiences as they constantly construct and reconstruct their identities, and generate alternative accounts of society.

Positioning women as my research subjects and using a feminist theoretical lens requires more attention to interrelations between gender and other social categories. Feminist ethnography aims to develop a close, interactive relationship between the researcher and the field, between theory and data. I would also claim that a theory is better developed from the data with the researcher as a facilitator and creator, which demands a thorough understanding and conceptualization of the connections between data and concepts that are drawn from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In other words, allowing theory to emerge from the data would “offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12) while engaging with relevant literature in early stages will help generate broad theoretical ideas to start, and (re)frame focused questions as research continues.

Through this qualitative research, I explore Chinese American women’s own interpretations of what it means to be a Chinese American in the context of the power relations of regulation and the economy in the U.S. from the actualities of their lives, which are subject to the processes of the regulation of immigration at a nation-state level macroscopically and structurally. Starting with Chinese American women’s own
narratives, I am interested in how they make meaning out of everyday life events including, to name a few: growing up experiences, education, language, dating, cultural heritage and transformation and perceptions of ethnicity, racial stereotypes such as “model minority” or other forms of discrimination, and social mobility. Furthermore, while doing this feminist qualitative research, I always remind myself of being aware of the relationship between individual accounts and discourses, which help to shape those stories rather than coming up with fragmentary narratives. As such, I hope to weave various theoretical perspectives and frameworks concerning interpreting women’s experience into my analytical fabric.

Subjects and the Settings

Chinese American women were my research participants, and by “Chinese American” I particularly refer to American-born Chinese. More specifically, my interviewees were young adult women who had at least one Chinese parent ethnically, and were born and raised in the U.S. It ended up that they were all between the ages of 18 and 30 when they started participating. Technically, a Chinese American woman could become my potential informant if she was in a blood kinship with Chinese heritage, identified as or literally called herself “Chinese American.” Having a sample with multiple identity markers including class, gender, ethnicity, generation and geographic location, I hoped to enrich my theoretical analysis, and provide rich insight into this particular group.

My participants were from two higher education institutions located in two different places in the Northeast, where there were no large immigrant populations. One school is a private research university, called Orange Lake, and the other, Townhill, belongs to the Ivy League. According to demographic information released by the two universities during the school year of 2009-2010, Asian American students
constituted 7.6 percent of the total 19,638 enrolled students at the private university. They comprised the second largest minority student subgroup on campus. At Townhill, as of October 2009, among 13,882 full-time undergraduates, there were 2,317 Asians and Pacific Islanders, nearly 17 percent of the total undergraduate population. Those data were higher than the percentages of Asian Americans of the 1984 and 1995 nationwide undergraduate population, which were 3.2 and 5.6 respectively (Chang & Kiang, 2002, p. 143). It would have been more meaningful if Orange Lake had provided more breakdown data in terms of the population of their undergraduates and graduates from different ethnicities. Website data provided by both universities reveal that Asian American student populations have been growing during last few years. Townhill has twenty-eight different pan-ethnic student organizations under the big umbrella of “Asian American.” In addition to cultural promotion and community services, some of its organizations advocate for Asian American awareness and are committed to social justice as their political agenda. Meanwhile, Townhill has a well-developed Asian American studies program, which provides students with institutional support and resources. By contrast, Orange Lake not only lacks a competitive community of Asian American student organizations, it has no formal Asian American studies program. It was only in the Fall of 2010 that Orange Lake finally established an Asian/Asian American studies minor following thirteen years of such an initiative having been first proposed by student groups. However, an anonymous protest occurred when a faculty member, who had no academic background in Asian American studies, was assigned to teach an Asian American fiction course. Although the largest Asian American student group sent out an announcement email to clarify that such action was not taken by them, they expressed their position of agreement: “…we see nothing wrong with it. We need to have
professors who are able to relate to our history and experiences as Asian Americans. We also need professors who will teach us about the hardships and struggles of our ancestors in the U.S.” Apparently, this course offering was far less than what students were expecting.

I interviewed twenty-seven Chinese American women in total, fifteen from Orange Lake, the private university and twelve from the Ivy League Townhill. Although my informants only represent a small part of the Chinese American population, and geographically, they were from nine different states showed in Figure 3.1 below, I want to provide in-depth rather than broad insights of how their identities have been formulated, to shed light on other Chinese American women who have gone through similar processes. Appendix B shows more details of where my informants grew up, their universities and majors as well as their family backgrounds. In this study, the college setting plays the role of a site of juncture through which their pre-college experiences and future lives intersect and overlap in many ways. There would not be significant difference but enrichment of current data if more universities were included, given multiple dimensions of my research design and analysis.

Figure 3.1 Distributions of Informants by States
Recruitment

I used both snowball sampling, through which I primarily depended on referrals, and purposive sampling since I intentionally increased the differences (e.g., socioeconomic background, connection with Chinese ethnicity and culture, geographic location where they grew up) between participants in order to reduce the possibility of getting too much overlap due to snowballing. I looked for interviewees by asking around, on various occasions, and asked different people, such as friends, classmates, colleagues, teachers, and other acquaintances.

My first interviewee, Lucy, came from a professor’s referral. The woman was a part-time graduate student working at one of the universities where I was conducting research. In our first conversation, she mentioned another Chinese American woman colleague, Sophie, whom I recruited later. She added me to two listservs of her Chinese-mixed-with-American church groups through which I received information about upcoming events that she and other Chinese women in her church organized and participated. I counted on Sophie to a great extent mainly due to her multiple strong ties with local communities, such as different students’ organizations, churches, local people, and university-associated units. In this way, I sought out and recruited individuals who represented a wide breadth and depth of growing up experiences and views on what it means to be a Chinese American woman.

The conversational interviews were another important resource of looking for participants because often my informants, intentionally or unintentionally, ended up having Chinese or Asian American friends on campus, and sometimes mentioned their friends’ names when they were telling me how they got to know each other or the activities they had together. Whenever this occurred, in my interviews, I always explored further and asked my informants to provide details about whomever they
mentioned in our conversations. First, doing so clarified for me their friends’ ethnic background; and second, collecting such details about my respondents’ social relations was an effective way to create a more complete picture of how they interacted with people from same or different ethnic backgrounds. In this sense, my informants’ connection with their ethnic peers was one of the key channels.

Another chain of reference that I pursued was my relationship with some of the Chinese American female students I had gotten to know while working for as a Teaching Assistant from 2004 to 2005. Two of my student interviewees—who were, back then, in their junior and senior years in college—were the first ones who participated. My relationship with them naturally ended after they graduated when I wrote them emails and received no responses.

I also tried to make connections with various on-campus student organizations and university offices that deal with student affairs, as well as academic programs and research centers. In doing so, I hoped to get sufficient information about the student body through multiple channels, and receive timely help when needed. Interestingly, at the private university Orange Lake, the organizations of Chinese international students and Chinese American students (actually it was one inclusively for Asian American students) barely have any interconnections except co-organizing a Chinese New Year celebration party once a year. At the Ivy League Townhill, things were not that different or were even worse in terms of how student organizations interact, because there were far more such Chinese- or Asian-interest student groups existing that were much more autonomous. At Orange Lake, I went to meetings that the largest Asian American student organization conducted, where I was surprised by their seriousness and inclusiveness, found some new informants and reconnected with some previous interviewees as well. I met the Director of an academic program at
Townhill University when he gave a speech at Orange Lake. He helped me disseminate information about my project throughout their listservs and announcements in classes. One of his co-workers also became an informant; she even made their office space available to conduct interviews, and personally introduced me to their Asian/Chinese American students.

Another set of network that I took advantage of was my personal relationship with Chinese international students who worked as Teaching Assistants in the Linguistics departments teaching Chinese at both universities. They all had at least a few Asian students in class. This was not as simple as getting the TAs to recruit informants for me, but was rather arduous and time-consuming. In most cases, I went to their classrooms to introduce myself during their break time, and left my contact information. The TAs also sent out my recruitment advertisement to their students through emails. Even though it took a while to get to know those TAs individually and get their permission to visit their classes, it was worth the effort, since quite a few informants came to me because they got my information this way. Usually, those TAs were very friendly and understanding, and were willing to help. I was never turned down by them.

All in all, by exploring various chains of recruitment, I intended to expand my sample in both quantity and quality while not jeopardizing the multiplicity of the sample due to a possibility of too much overlap resulting from snowballing. I was also aware of balancing width and depth of informants, which means I would just keep those who were more “encultured” and “knowledgeable.” How well they could articulate their culture and life experience was an important criterion of whether to continue engaging them or not. By “well articulate,” I mean they should be able to elaborate their life experiences with detailed examples and stories responding to what
I asked.

In-depth Interviewing

The main method I used is open-ended, in-depth interviewing. I consider the interview as a flexible process where “interviewees have substantial experience and insight,” and me, the interviewer, only needs to “delineate the topics and draft the questions” since more “ideas and issues emerge during the interview for the interviewer to pursue” (Charmaz, 2003, p. 312). I came up with a moderate number of general topics ahead of time, shown in Appendix A, that interested me the most from the literature I had read, and which had emerged in my communications with a wide range of Chinese Americans. These themes were expected to be covered in conversations but not required to be. I used them as threads, and later transformed them into a thematic layout showing those most influential and interconnecting points in my informants’ personal and social lives. Whenever a meaningful point came across during conversations, I was capable of framing follow-up questions that could better fit individual informants’ stories. There was enough flexibility to probe for more details and change questions during the interviews, for the purpose of getting adequate interaction between me and the informants, as well as “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) which requires both thick preparation and thick participation. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) also argue that “Good interviews produce rich data filled with words that reveal the respondents’ perspectives” (p. 95). Concentrating on informants’ narratives and trying to keep their own words involves interactions between researcher’s listening and informant’s telling. But it is not as simple as turning on the recording instrument when the participant talks and turning it off when she finishes. I would also argue that data are not only what have been recorded but also the lived, discursive and mediated knowledge production process. As Holstein and Gubrium
(2003) put it,

Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself ... meaning is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. (p. 4)

Knowledge is always situated, and never was nor will be value-neutral or come-out-of-nowhere. Interview as socially constructed “is a negotiated text, a site where power, gender, race, and class intersect” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 633), while more qualitative researchers are critical of positivist presumptions and “realizing that interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646). Feminist interviewing emerges as an alternative methodology encouraging a long-term trust-building process, with emotions involved, and a more open and equal relationship between the two sides, as well as decentralizing the authority of the researcher.

I prepared an interview guide with broad themes and descriptive questions, shown in Appendix A, and used it cautiously as a tool to help informants construct and interpret their own experience. For example, I organized themes following different turning points in a life course including childhood, K-12 schooling experience, college education, dating and marriage or romantic partnership, and working experiences, hoping to connect individual stories to the larger social context. Along the lines, “a life course consists of individualized social actions, concatenated in one person’s lifetime. Each has a historical dimension” (Handel, 2000, p. 15). At
the same time, I also tried not to manipulate interviewees’ answers but just to follow natural flows of conversations. However, this line was sometimes truncated or cut off when the informant chose not to speak in a chronological way. In those situations, my interview guide was immediately reshuffled depending on how my informants wanted to narrate their stories.

I usually started the first interview with questions like, “Could you tell me a little bit about your background” or “Please tell me a little bit about yourself” in order to ease off and encourage the informants to talk about anything that they felt comfortable to release. I remember one participant gave me a five-minute answer after being asked the opening question when we first met. After the opening, I followed up based on how informants responded to my overall interview guideline, and tried to keep them talking in a conversational format. This means, I started from broad questions, and gradually moved on and narrowed down to more detailed ones. For example, questions that I asked might be as general as about their hometown, their growing up experience, expectations that their parents had for their education and life, their relationship with local Chinese communities, or as specific as what they did with friends, how they celebrated certain Chinese holidays, food that they had at home, and how they responded when confronting racial slurs and discrimination.

During interviews, I seldom took notes in front of my informants because doing that distracted me from following the narrative flow and generating probes and follow-ups. It also interrupted how my informants spoke since they somehow assumed that I was writing down something very important, and would always pause, waiting for me to finish. Upon the completion of each interview, I debriefed the major points narrated by the interviewees, and let them have a chance to check up on my understanding and add or change anything if they wanted to. I showed my
gratefulness to them each time because I really felt every single minute they participated helped with figuring out the jigsaw puzzle of their worlds. After they left the interview site, I quickly wrote down details of what they looked like, the moments when they had strong emotions or silence, their body language and my observer’s comments. These observation notes became part of the data, and helped in getting the most out of interviews when I was transcribing the recorded interviews.

Locations where I conducted interviews usually included a study room in a library, a meeting room or classroom that was vacant, and sometimes in some offices. Those were always quiet places on campus, or somewhere the interviewee preferred. Whenever I traveled to Townhill, I always arrived early to reserve a group study room in one of the social sciences libraries, a place that was recommended by my informants. After finding a space, I sent an email to the interviewee including the location and our scheduled time, and made a phone call as well. On the day before the interview, I would send a nice reminding email to the interviewee to confirm our next day’s meeting, and double check her availability. If an interviewee needed to reschedule in advance or at the last minute, I showed my full understanding and let them choose the next possible time slot. During my field work, taking into consideration my informants’ needs and prioritizing theirs over mine helped develop trust and friendly relationships between us. Mostly based on their availability, I interviewed my informants each from one to five times. When I felt what an interviewee could offer was longer than a one-hour talk could accommodate, I would meet with her more than once for more depth. Each interview usually lasted one to two hours. I conducted all interviews during a time span from 2004 to 2010 with participants joining and quitting each year.
Ethical Consideration and Information Release

Before I formally talked with anyone who might become my interviewee, I usually sent an email to her introducing my background as a doctoral student doing research about Chinese American women in the United States, and asked her if she would like to share her story with me. At the same time, I also mentioned her option of quitting at any time. Right before each interview, I got my interviewee’s permission to turn on the recording instrument. A copy of my IRB-approved consent letter with a brief introduction of my research purpose and procedure was presented to every participant to sign right before our first recorded conversation. This document clearly showed that I should keep all files confidential. The participant had the right to refuse to answer any question that made her uncomfortable, and stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. Whenever the participant required, I gave her a photocopy of the signed consent letter.

Sometimes, my informants asked me questions about the ultimate purpose of this research and how their talk would be used. I explained to them that their interviews were going to be the data for writing my dissertation. I would protect them by making up names for them and institutions they were affiliated with in my future writing. Even though some interviewees were indifferent to whether I would make pseudonyms or not, I chose to do it to protect them from any unnecessary risk.

Participants’ Profiles

Before I get into the analysis of my informants’ accounts, I will broadly sketch each of them to introduce readers to them. I wanted to use these single paragraphs to horizontally show how significantly each of them contributed to my project with their life stories, and how those worked out together to revitalize the meaning of Chinese American women collectively with individual input. The following are my
informants’ profiles with pseudonyms.

1. AC was born in Kansas City, Missouri. Her father was from Cambodia and came to the United States as a refugee. Her mother was from Chengdu, China and was brought over by AC’s father after they got married in China. Her family moved to San Jose, California when AC was very young. A few years later, they moved to Kansas City for a little while. It was when AC was in second grade that she and her immediate family moved back to Marysville in Kansas, where her parents opened up a family restaurant. The town was very white and suburban. AC has a sister who is three years younger than her. They barely speak any Chinese (Mandarin) whereas their parents mostly communicate in Chinese. The older daughter and the first one who can speak fluent English in her family, AC helped out her parents with almost all English documents, including their bank and legal documents or even her own school forms. For a long period of time, she was the only one that answered phone calls at home because her parents’ English was not sufficient enough. AC’s family history was never told explicitly by her parents. It was always changing from one version to another so that she did not know exactly why and how her parents came to the U.S, except that her father had some college education, and her mother graduated high school in China. AC is studying Industrial and Labor Relations at Townhill University.

2. AF is the oldest child in her family, and has one younger sister and one younger brother. Her father is a meat cutter in Chinatown in New York City. Her mother worked in garment factories in Chinatown, but became a stay-at-home mom after her brother was born. Her parents both graduated high school in China. AF studied Cantonese for seven years and Mandarin for
three years. She also speaks Toisanese, another dialect used by people from Guangdong province. She always had to use more than more language when she was conversing with her family. With her parents, she usually used Chinese languages. But with her siblings, she spoke English. They currently live in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which, according to some public information database, had high racial diversity and many crimes in the past. She originally enrolled college as a Premed. One year later, she switched to English and Textual Studies. She is currently majoring in African American Studies at Orange Lake University.

3. Emma was born in New York City in 1988. She was brought back to China and stayed with her extended family in Fuzhou, China, her parents’ hometown. Her parents finished middle school in China. She returned to the United States at six, and reunited with her nuclear family in Manhattan. In the beginning, her father delivered takeout in Chinatown. Years later, her parents intermittently opened four restaurants in New York City and Buffalo. By the time her parents got divorced when she was in college, they split up their assets and business profits. Her mother now operates two Japanese restaurants in New York City and becomes the breadwinner supporting her whole family. Emma has a younger brother and a younger sister. Her brother dropped out of high school and is now working for her mother as an employee. Emma knows some Mandarin, and speaks Fujianese to her parents. She also learned Cantonese from her friends in Chinatown. She traveled back to China several times either with her mother or alone in order to pick up her sister who got sent back to China as well and her grandmother who needed help for her visa application. In addition to taking care of family issues,
Emma made an academic trip to Beijing that Orange Lake organized. She majors in International Relations and Political Science, and minors in Chinese Studies.

4. Helena was born and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina. She has a four years younger brother. Her father and mother went to Canada from Singapore and Malaysia and finished their college education there. Afterwards, they moved to the U.S. for jobs. Helena’s father had worked for a multinational telecommunications company for over thirty years as an Electronic Engineer before he retired. Her mother has a Computer Science degree and works part-time in a library. She learned Chinese (Mandarin) first at home and then English in preschool. With her parents, she interchangeably uses Chinese and English. With her brother, she only speaks English. She has an Italian American fiancé. She is a Chemistry major at Townhill. Her brother majors in the same field in college.

5. Ann was born in Manhattan, New York. When she was two years old, her family moved to Long Island, a very white and wealthy neighborhood in her words. Her father went to Stony Brook for undergraduate and Brooklyn College for a master’s degree. Her mother graduated from Brooklyn College too. Her parents both came from Guangzhou, China. Her father’s side is all in the United States whereas her mother’s side is still in China. Now her mother is an accountant in Manhattan while her father works as a data administrator dealing with computer and financing. Ann majors in Biology and Premed, and minors in Education at Townhill. She has a brother who is six years younger.

6. Ivy was sent back to Hong Kong right after she was born in New York City,
and stayed there with her paternal grandparents until she was five. Her parents’ families moved out from Fujian, China to Hong Kong in their teens. Most relatives on her father’s side are still in China and Hong Kong whereas her mother’s side is all in the United States due to marriage or family petition. She has a younger sister and a younger brother, who were also born in New York. Her parents communicate with her and her sister mostly in Cantonese. Her father used to own an electronics repair store, but now is half unemployed. He works on and off in New York City. Her mother was a seamstress in Chinatown, and is now working for a nutritional group. Her family lived in Chinatown for about three years, and then moved to Marlboro, New Jersey, where she describes as “predominantly white, Jewish and wealthy.” She felt a lot of differences from her neighbors because her family did not really fit in this upper-middle class environment. Because her parents did not speak fluent English, she grew up taking care of all her autistic brother’s doctor visits and school meetings. That also motivated her to choose Premed and Biology as her major at Orange Lake because she wanted to have a degree in the medical field and become a doctor.

7. Lucy was born in 1978 and grew up in the northeastern suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, a very white area in her opinion. Lucy is half white and half Chinese. Her paternal great grandfather’s generation originally emigrated from Guangdong, China to work on the railroad in California. Years later, they started a laundry business in Ohio, and moved from the West Coast to further East. Growing up with mostly white people, she never thoroughly had access to any Chinese culture or tradition in spite of the fact that she moved around a couple of places in New York, Massachusetts, and Ohio. She used to
identify herself only as white. It was not until she met more biracial people in college that she started to recognize her Chinese background, and reconnect with that “lost” side. It was also in college that she began to intentionally ask her relatives in California and other parts in the U.S. for more information about her family history. While participating in my research, she was engaged to and married an Irish Scottish man, and gave birth to a baby boy. She received her master’s degree in Education from Orange Lake University at the time I completed my fieldwork. Now she is working at a gifted youth center affiliated with a university.

8. Cathy was born in Manhattan, and lived in Queens for a few years. Then she moved to Staten Island with her family, and grew up there. Her father was born in Hong Kong, and came to the United States at three. His family first landed in San Francisco, then moved to the suburbs of Boston, and eventually settled down in Chinatown in New York City, where he lived most of his life. After getting his doctorate, Cathy’s father became a pastor. Cathy’s mother was born in Toisan, China, and moved to Hong Kong at six. Seven years later, her mother came to America to reunite with her family in New York City. She works as an elementary school counselor with a bachelor’s degree in Education. Cathy’s paternal grandparents accomplished college education as well. The community that Cathy lived in was very white. However, her family went to a Christian church in Chinatown, where she made mostly Asian friends. She has a younger brother and a younger sister. Her brother went to a public university in New York City on a full scholarship. Her sister went to a state university, and is doing her master’s. Cathy worked for four years as an English teacher in two high schools, and
married a Chinese American she dated in college. Currently Cathy is pursuing her Ph.D. in Education at Townhill.

9. Lynn was born and raised in Brooklyn. Her parents came from Guangzhou, China at their late 20s. Her father came to the U.S. first, and then went back to China to marry her mother, and brought her over. They both finished high school in China. Her father has been a hotel worker for thirteen years after working in restaurants in Chinatown. Her mother worked as a garment worker, sample maker, and domestic worker successively. She even tried real estate for a while. But it did not work out because of her low English proficiency. Now she is unemployed. Lynn has an older brother, who graduated college and worked for three years. Lynn barely talked to her parents because her Cantonese was so limited that she could not have in-depth conversations with them except for food and other superficial topics. She feels regretful for not learning Chinese well. Lynn went to Dyker Heights in Brooklyn for junior high and Stuyvesant1 in Manhattan for high school. Now she is graduating from Townhill as a Premed and Biology and Society major. But she wants to switch from science to non-profits mainly because of her own interest in social justice issues.

10. Grace was born in Long Island, and grew up in the suburbs of Queens in New York City. Her parents picked that area because they felt “comfortable being around enough Asians” since it changed from a white dominant neighborhood to currently Asians as the majority. Her father was born in Hong Kong. Her mother was born in China. They both graduated high school and came to America at their teens. Her father worked a computer consultant.

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1 One of the most prestigious magnet schools across the country, compatible to Lowell in San Francisco.
Her mother basically took care of kids while taking some jobs that could be done in a flexible format. Grace has two older sisters and one older brother. They all can speak Cantonese, but have different proficiency levels. Her parents spoke only Chinese to her and her siblings when they were younger to force them to pick up the language. Even though she made white friends in college, most of her friends back home were Chinese and Asian from schools and a church in Chinatown that her family usually went to. She is a junior Music Education major at Orange Lake University.

11. Penny was born in Santa Clara County and grew up in San Jose, California. Her parents came from Taiwan. Her father went to MIT and Yale to study Chemistry and Math as his undergrad and graduate major. He was an engineer, but now is doing stocks. Her mother studied Music at a college in Oregon but did not graduate. She took some courses at a community college afterwards, and currently is working for an IT company. Penny has an older sister who got relocated to Beijing by her American company. Her family moved to the south of San Francisco, where there were many Asian ethnic groups. But Penny went to Saratoga for elementary school where she thought was more diverse because she made not only Asian but also Caucasian friends. She and her sister both thought that going to college could be a way of keeping a distance from the “Asian bubble.” They felt overprotected when being around only Asian people. Her sister went to an Ivy League school on the East Coast although her father wanted her to go to a university on the West Coast. Penny is an Education major at Orange Lake University.

12. Ada was born in New York City. She has an older brother, who was born in China and moved to America together with her parents. She only knew that
her father was from the countryside and her mother from a city in China, and they probably finished basic elementary education there. But she could not tell the exact locations because she was “not interested in Chinese things.” To my knowledge, since her parents speak Cantonese and Toisanese, it is very likely that they were from Guangdong area. Except for her mother’s brother, her all relatives on both sides are still in China. Ada used to live in Brooklyn, where she thought was very diverse because she saw white people, black people, and other races. When she was a first grader, her family moved to Little Italy, and she went to a school in Chinatown, where 99% of the students were Asians. Later on, she moved to another quieter part in Chinatown and her building is mostly Chinese people. Her brother went to a public university in New York City and studies Economics. She was very athletic and liked to play sports including softball and volleyball in school. She chose to major in Chemical Engineering at Orange Lake and gave up Sports Management because the former has a wide scope and good pay.

13. Emily was born in southern California, the same as her old brother and younger sister. Later, her family moved to Los Angles, and then San Francisco. The place is Daly City, South San Francisco, where the population is predominantly Filipinos and Latinos. All of her education from primary school to college was accomplished on the West Coast. She got her bachelor’s degree in Psychology from a university in California. It was her first time to experience the East Coast when she came to Orange Lake to pursue her master’s in Law. Her father had a master in Electrical Engineering, but switched to stock-breaking and then real estate. His last job was doing stocks and serving as Chinese advisor at an investment services company.
Since he wanted to have a career change, he is now still undecided. Her mother stopped school because Emily’s brother was born. Her brother went to a state university, and studied Psychology too. After working for Sony testing video games and doing electronic arts, Emily’s brother chose the same direction of going to law school as she did. Her uncle, aunt, and cousins all do martial arts, such as Chinese Kung Fu, Karate, and Muay Thai. She learned Karate from them, and got her blue belt.

14. Peggy grew up in Morris County, New Jersey, where there is a big Asian American population. Her father was from Nanjing, China, and her mother came from Greece. They met each other when they both went to a local institute in New Jersey, and studied Engineering. They do not have other relatives in the States. Her father never went back since he left China more than twenty years ago. Her father owns a small construction business that he started in college. So he dropped out of college because he could not afford it, and started focusing on his business that seemed growing at that time. Peggy has three younger sisters. In order to take care of the family, her mother could only take jobs that did not require a fixed schedule. Except the youngest sister who does not care that much, Peggy and the other two sisters are all very into Asian culture. They are interested in Asian popular culture, try to make Asian friends, and go to ethnic enclaves in New York City. She is currently dating an African American man, who studies law at a state university within one-hour driving from her school. Apparently, her parents are not very happy about it. Peggy is studying International Relations, International Security and Diplomacy at Orange Lake. Growing up she met her mother’s side in Greece a few times, and learned Greek. In contrast, she
never got a chance to meet her father’s side although she always wondered about China and her grandparents there. So she wanted to take advantage of Study Abroad program and started learning Chinese in college.

15. Lauren was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her mother was from Singapore, which made her the second generation on this side. Her paternal ancestors were originally from Zhongshan, China. It was her paternal grandparents that started off a family in Hawaii from working in the plantation economy. She has no other knowledge of her family’s early history other than that. She left home to the mainland America for college, and got her dual bachelor’s degree in English Literature and Biology in a small liberal women’s college in Massachusetts. After graduation, she worked at a research institute for three years as a technician, and then decided to go to graduate school. Now she is a third-year graduated student in Plant Breeding and Genetics at Townhill. She has a younger brother, who went to a university in Omaha, Nebraska. She took Mandarin classes for many years, from seventh grade to first year of college so that she has a relatively high level of proficiency. As she describes, in Hawaii, cultural distinctions are not that prominent because mixed is the majority. In mainland America, it is more diverse and not that blurry (in Lauren’s words).

16. Nina was born in Chinatown and moved to Hell’s Kitchen, a neighborhood in the west of Manhattan, when she was about twelve. She has a brother, who is only one year younger than her. Her parents both came from Guangzhou, China in the 1980s. Her mother’s side is mostly in the U.S. whereas her father’s side is all still in China. She roughly knows that her father did not go pass elementary, and her mother might make it up to high school in China.
Her father worked as a waiter in Chinatown, and then as a butcher till now. Her mother is a homecare attendant taking care of the elders, usually Chinese, at their places. Growing up in Chinatown, most of Nina’s friends and schoolmates were Chinese. The situation was totally flipped upside down in her middle school, which was predominantly white. But she still stuck to Asian friends, and only had Asian boyfriends so far. Since her parents speak mostly Cantonese, she had to pick up Chinese even though she did not like it that much. The main reason was because it required a lot of memorization that she was not good at. However, the older she got, the more she noticed the important of Chinese in terms of communicating with her family and as an advantage in the labor market. Now she is learning Mandarin. She came into college as an undecided since she did not think through what she really wanted to study. She applied for a couple of colleges, and chose Orange Lake because it gave her the best financial aid package. At this point she is thinking about Pharmacy since it is regarded as a field with “good pay,” and being a doctor is “going to look good.”

17. Sarah was born in New York City. Her grandparents were from Hong Kong. Her parents were born in Queens, and are both working at Macy’s. She has an older brother who graduated college one year ago. She grew up around Chinese people since she lived in Chinatown and went to school there. Things changed when she went to a middle school in another neighborhood in New York City, where most students were white. She felt it was difficult to fit in as one of the few Asians, and schoolwork was challenging. So she kept a Chinese American friend circle, which made her feel more comfortable. She used to learn Cantonese in Chinese school. But now she is learning
Mandarin. Compared to her friends’ parents, her parents are more laid back. They push and encourage her, but do not force her to do anything. Since she worked as a customer care specialist at a YMCA hotel for two years of her high school years, so she chose to study Hospitality Management at Orange Lake. She only had one Caucasian boyfriend for a very short time in high school. Even though she does not care about race, she admits that dating an Asian guy will make things easier due to their cultural similarities.

18. Sophie was born and grew up in Orange Lake. She has a younger brother and two younger sisters. Her parents came from Hong Kong to the U.S. with the help of a friend, and started off from a restaurant business. She did not like being Chinese American when she was young because people picked on her and it was hard for her to “fit in.” It was not until college that she started to “not mind being different” and appreciating being Chinese. For her, it was a transformation from focusing on “what other people thought of me” to getting “a better sense of who I was.” Her whole family is Christian, and they go to a church constituted by a Chinese segment and an American segment. A translator helped translating from the English service to Chinese after their Chinese pastor moved away. Her parents mostly speak Cantonese, and sometimes mix it together with English. She speaks better Cantonese than her brother and second sister. The youngest sister does not speak it at all. Her father’s side is all in the U.S. because he, as the oldest and the first one that came here, petitioned for his family. Two of her mother’s sisters came here for the same reason. Those relatives used her house as a transitional site, and then either moved to New York City or stayed in Orange Lake. She first went to a state university to study Music Education and Performance, and then
switched to Elementary Education. She took a break from school because she was struggling with her study, and did not know what she really wanted to do. She went back home, and transferred to a local community college. Finally, she got her English degree in Creative Writing after doing a project in Hong Kong about what it means to be Chinese and American at the same time. Later, she started working at Orange Lake University, while taking graduate courses in poetry and Asian American literature. Her parents’ first restaurant was forced to close down due to the city’s construction even though it had a very good reputation. They tried to reopen it at a different location, but eventually did not work it out. Later on, her father found a job at a grocery store, and has been working in there for more than ten years. In addition to this daytime job from 11 a.m. until 9 p.m., he has a second one working from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Her mother became a stay-at-home mom for a few years, and now is working as a staff member at Orange Lake University. In addition, her other siblings all went to college. She moved out of her parents’ house very recently, and had never had any serious relationships when she participated.

19. Kelly was born in Brooklyn, and lived there for a few years with her parents and grandparents. Her grandmother moved from Singapore to Hainan Island in China, where she met her grandfather, who was cook in the Marine. Kelly’s mother is Chinese, and her father is Irish Italian. Her family moved a lot of times. First, they moved to New Jersey. But after her parents got divorced, they moved back to Brooklyn. After that, her family moved to Connecticut, and lived there for eleven years. Her mother remarried, and her stepfather was white. Kelly used to speak Cantonese to her mother and
grandparents when she was younger. But now she lost the language. She has a half brother, who is thirteen years younger than her. Unlike him who never got to live with her Chinese grandparents, Kelly was taken care of by them when her mother was busy working full-time. Her mother’s younger sister and brother both had a very good education. For example, they both went to Stuyvesant High School. Kelly’s aunt went to a well-known private university in New York City, and had two degrees. One in Mathematics, and the other in Computer Science. She works as an executive vice president at a private company, and has lived with the same boyfriend for over ten years. Her uncle followed the same educational path of her aunt’s. Her mother had a degree in Special Education, and became a teacher for a couple of years. But she switched careers, and now is doing something related to computer too. The fact that Kelly’s uncle is gay took her grandparents a long time to accept. Her family knew it, and wanted to hide it. Nobody would publicly talk about it or refer to his boyfriend as boyfriend, but just friend. Now he and his partner live in the same house with her grandparents in Brooklyn. Kelly majors in Inclusive Education and minors in Special Education at Orange Lake.

20. Allison was born in Greenwich, Connecticut. Her father came from China at a young age, and went to the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Now he is the president of his real estate company in New York City. Her mother was from Taipei, Taiwan, and went to the University of Maryland. She works for a company. The city where Allison’s family originally lived is called Stanford. When she was nine, they moved to Greenwich. After a few years, they moved to New York City, and have lived
in West Harlem close to Columbia University since then. Allison went to Horace Mann, a highly selective private school that had a predominantly Jewish white student population. At that time, she did not want to associate with being Chinese because she just wanted to be like her white friends. She said, “…being Asian makes me stand out.” The school was very expensive as well as academically challenging. She was not exposed to Asian culture that much in her life. Compared to her Asian American friends who were considered “Americanized,” she knew much less about Asian/Chinese culture than them. Most of her friends are Jewish. Her boyfriend is from a Sephardic Jewish family that originally came from Israel. She switched majors a few times in college from Science of Earth Systems to English, and then to Animal Science on the Premed track. She has two older brothers. Her eldest brother graduated from a famous university in New York City with a double degree in English and History. After working as an analyst for a few years, he changed to a non-profit company, and has been applying to business school. Her middle brother who graduated from college just came back from a Peace Corps’ trip in Sri Lanka and Malawi and is applying to law school. Both of her brothers played violin, and the eldest even made it to Juilliard although he never loved it. Unlike them, she never had any music talent, and was very into sports instead. Now she regrets that she was not involved with Chinese culture, and wants to identify as “an Asian American or Chinese American,” although she is still finding out something that she can be proud of in her Chinese heritage. She is now a Premed major at Townhill.

21. Jane was born and raised in New York City. Her father was born in America. She only knows that her father’s family was from southern China, but not
sure about the exact region. Based on the fact that they speak Cantonese, I would suppose that his family was from Guangdong. Her mother was from Hong Kong. Jane’s mother majored in Sociology in college, and worked as a paralegal for a few years. After getting married, she became a stay-at-home mom. It was not until Jane was in sixth grade that her mother went back to school to get a master’s degree in teaching. So far, she has been a teacher for six years. Jane’s father started off his profession from working as a home insurance agent. And then, he worked as an optician for a couple of years. Now he is doing both. Jane’s family lives in Long Island, a “quiet,” middle class suburban area. She did not identify with Asian growing up in that white community, even though she knew she was Asian. But she describes her neighborhood changing to be more diverse with more Latinos and Hispanics moving in, and her friend circle also changed from predominantly white in primary school to more Asian Americans after high school. She has an older sister and a younger brother. They all learned musical instruments, and went though six levels of NYSSMa\textsuperscript{1} for piano. She went a couple of levels for violin and cello. Her brother went some levels for trumpet. Her sister is a graduate student studying Geology at a university in Texas. Her brother is a freshman at private research university in Massachusetts. Jane came to Townhill first as a Premed. Then, she wanted to get away from science and changed to Industrial and Labor Relations. After a while, she decided to transfer again. Now she is a Biology and Society major. On the one hand, she started to appreciate her Asian American identity. On the other hand, when she compared herself with friends who grew up in Chinatown, she still felt

\textsuperscript{1} NYSSMa refers to New York State School Music Association.
very different because they were more exposed to Asian culture.

22. Holly was born in Brooklyn in New York City. Before she moved to Berkeley Heights in New Jersey at age six, where she has been living since then, she went to school in Chinatown for three years. Her neighborhood is in the suburbs of New Jersey, where it is mostly Italian and Irish descendants with a very small Asian population. Her father was from Guangzhou, and her mother was American-born Chinese. She thought her parents picked up that place because it was “safe” but not very diverse. Her father graduated from college, and now is a Computer Programmer working for New York City. Her mother used to be a teacher in the city, and now is a receptionist in her town. She has an elder brother, who is a senior studying Civil Engineering at a prestigious college in Manhattan. She is a Biology and Society major at Townhill. Actually she wanted to go to a regional college in New Jersey at the first place. But because her parents really favored Townhill, she changed her decision and gave up a big honor of having an almost free college education at the local school. She came into college as a Premed. But she changed to Biology and Society as she was not that interested in going to medical school or becoming a doctor. She became a member in an Asian-interest sorority, where they do a lot of fundraising, philanthropy, and cultural events. Her father was the first one who came here, and her relatives came to the U.S. afterwards starting their own businesses, such as restaurants and dress-making stores. Her maternal grandma raised four children in Brooklyn, Bronx, and can speak four languages, including French, German, English and Shanghainese. Holly thinks her mother’s side is very Americanized in terms of food and lifestyle. Her family does not even celebrate Chinese New Year.
She identifies herself as a Chinese American, neither a full Chinese nor American. Her father did not want her to date non-Chinese and non-Asian. She dated a white man in college. But that relationship did not work out. Now she is dating a Chinese man, who was born in China and came to the U.S. at a young age and grew up in Oregon.

23. Mary was born in New Jersey, and grew up in a white town called Holmdel, where Asian population is relatively large compared to other minorities. Her parents chose it because they were told that it had a good school district and public education system. Her mother was from Taiwan, and came to the U.S. for graduate school. Her father came from Guangzhou when he was ten years old, and grew up in Boston area. Her mother is now a stay-at-home mom. Her father graduated from a private research university near Boston with an Electrical Engineering degree, and worked at a high position in a large telecommunications company after many years of professional experiences. Her parents also have income from renting out apartments that they own in Hoboken and Jersey City, and from their investment in the stock market. Mary is a sophomore in Premed at Townhill, and plans to major in Chemistry because she wants to go into a medical school. She chose Townhill mostly because her parents thought it was going to “suit” (not too competitive) her better than other options such as Wellesley and Princeton. Mary’s parents thought that enjoying college should be as much important as academic study. She has an elder sister, who is a graduate student in Chemistry. Mary describes her parents as not like “stereotypical Asian parents” because they agreed with her sister on her quitting her doctoral program because her advisor was very hard to work with. Her parents did not always push them
for higher grades. But, she pushed herself a lot. Unlike her sister who was very social and outgoing, Mary never went to parties nor dated someone. Now Mary is taking Chinese lessons in college.

24. Hebe was born and grew up in Chinatown in New York City. Both of her parents were from Enping, a city to the southwest of Guangzhou. Her father had friends in Chinatown so he came to the U.S. first to work. Later, he went back to China to marry Hebe’s mother, and brought her over. Unfortunately, Hebe’s father died a few years ago. Now it is only her mother who supports the family working as a homecare attendant with a higher pay than a seamstress that she used to be. In addition, her mother rent out a whole floor of a house that she owns in Brooklyn. Hebe has a younger brother who is a senior in high school, and applying to a private university in New York City. From elementary to high school, the majority of Hebe’s classmates were Chinese. Orange Lake first was a big cultural shock for her since it was so white compared to where she was from. She made lots of efforts trying to make Asian friends in college, and participated into an on-campus pan-Asian students’ organization, where they cover serious topics like identity, race and class issues. She thinks herself very Chinese/Asian mostly because she had a lot of exposure to Asian and Chinese culture in terms of food, popular culture, friends, language, and values. She speaks Cantonese to her mother, and mixes it with English sometimes. Her Cantonese proficiency was improved by watching Cantonese shows and soap operas. Her family kept Chinese traditions and celebrate holidays like Chinese New Year. It was the biggest event for her community as well. In terms of relationships, Hebe can only accept dating and marrying someone Asian or Chinese. Even though she has
no dating experience, she claims that she feels only attracted by Asian men. Now she is studying Business.

25. Jennifer was born and grew up in suburban Detroit, Michigan. Her mother was born in New York. Her father came from Taiwan at ten. Her mother speaks a little Toisan, but only to her maternal grandmother. Her father can speak very basic Chinese. Jennifer and her younger sister do not speak Chinese at all. Her father’s family was originally from a village in northern China, and came to New York because her paternal grandfather was a diplomat. Jennifer’s hometown is called Southfield, which is a rural area and has very few Asians. She grew up in the 1980s when anti-Asian resentment was going on, particularly anti-Japanese in the car industry. Her father got a degree in Engineering from an “unknown” university. He had been working as a Marketing Executive at a large automobile company until he retired. He always told Jennifer how hard it was to deal with racial discrimination at work. Her mother went to school in Texas, and got her degree in Art Education. She did some secretary work first, and then became a stay-at-home mom after having kids. She was also an artist and did pottery. Jennifer’s sister graduated from college, and became an Interior Designer in New York. Her parents, especially her mother, do not see a need to associate with Chinese people or culture. They moved down to Florida. Her sister does not care that much either. She describes her family as pretty “white-washed” in that sense. She chose the History of Art program, focusing on North Renaissance and Italian Art, primarily because she wanted to go to Italy, and plus her intention of majoring in Anthropology was discouraged by her mother. She also had a minor in Asian American Studies, through which she
identified more with Asian Americans and became more aware of the hybridity of “Asian/Chinese American.” At the time I interview her, she is leaving academia to a culinary school because she wants to become a chef. She has an Irish Italian partner, and they have been living together for ten years. Her sister is now dating a Filipino man.

26. Diana was born in 1989, and grew up in Brooklyn, New York City. She has an older sister, who was born in China and brought over to America when she was one. Her parents were from Guangdong, and finished high school in China. Diana was taken care of by her grandparents when she was a kid so that she spoke better Toisanese back then. The schools she went to in Brooklyn had more Asian students than college. She was aware that she did not belong to the majority anymore. But she also noticed that people were more likely to form cliques based on culture and race when comparing her junior high to grade school. Her sister went to a predominantly white university, but usually hung out with Asian friends. Diana was bothered by how people mistakenly thought she was not Chinese merely because her dark skin was not typical for Chinese people. She identifies more with Chinese American.

27. Sandy was born and grew up in Chinatown, New York City. In the very beginning of our first interview, she described her family as Americanized because they celebrated American holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. She also mentioned that her family was traditional because they celebrated Chinese holidays. Her father was from Hong Kong, and her mother was from Fujian, China. They made it to high school in China and

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1 Later on, I found out that celebrating American holidays was more between her and her siblings. Her parents were not involved that much.
came to the U.S. for better opportunities. Her mother used to work in a factory, and now is a housewife. Her father owned a restaurant, and then withdrew from that business. Now he works in a restaurant in New York City. People she went to school with were mostly Chinese. It was until in high school that she started to interact with other races, like white and black, which was a “big shock” for her. So in high school, she barely made any new close friends, and still hung out with people from her neighborhood. She has an older brother and an older sister. Not like her, they both can speak Fujianese. When she was young, her parents forced her to go to Chinese school, but finally let her drop out because she had no desire to learn. Now she regrets it. Her brother graduated from college, and is working as a Computer Consultant in New York City. Her sister is working in finance although she had a degree in Health Management from a state university. Sandy is a Biology major at Orange Lake. But she is considering switching to Designing or Chemistry.

Data Analysis

All interviews were saved electronically on my laptop, and transcribed by me along the way as I conducted this research. Although time-consuming and tedious, I thought transcribing could re-engage me with data in terms of thinking about what data talked about, what to represent and how. From my point of view, transcripts include not only what informants said during conversations, but also notes that I took during conversations about their appearance, expressions, gestures, dressing style, intonation and emotions, all of which later on became part of my observer’s comments. Since I was the person dealing with all recording files, I listened to each audio file and reviewed my transcript as many times as I needed. As Riessman argues,
“Analysis cannot be easily distinguished from transcription… Close and repeated listening, coupled with methodic transcribing, often leads to insights that in turn shape how we choose represent an interview narrative in our text” (1993, p. 60). I also believe that the accuracy and fullness of transcripts to a large extent set the foundation of good analysis. I did not resort to any native speaker to fully scrutinize my transcripts for two reasons. First, I did not have enough funding to support this initiative. Second, I considered it part of my training process to become a professional researcher in a sense that I wanted to equip myself with first-hand experience going through all stages of a qualitative study, and I was ambitious about getting everything right as much as I could. I carefully used interviewees’ words, and usually ended up incorporating those with more details and elaborations. Even though some participants are more present on these pages, themes and topics raised by all participants are carefully represented in the examples used in three data chapters.

My primary goal was to make sure the transcripts would be “verbatim facsimiles of what was said in interviews” (Poland, 2003, p. 267), which was challenging especially when there were inaudible, slurred fragments. Sometimes, I depended on the debriefing at the end of each interview, or double-checked with informants before the next interview started, or gave interviewees phone calls or sent them emails afterwards. But what I usually did was to highlight those unclear phrases or words with a time label in transcripts, and go through them as many times as needed to try to get everything right (By right I mean conversation fragments should make sense and keep consistency. I wanted to make sure what I wrote down and understood was what they meant.). In addition to transcribing words, I also included the speaker’s nonverbal oral communication, such as laughter and silence, and body language. Verbatim transcripts were the foundation that I worked on to understand
what informants said although these written words were not necessary to guarantee a grounded research. Another effective but simple strategy that I learned was to conduct interviews in a quiet space as much as I could because that helped reduce background noise and avoid unexpected distraction a lot. Using a well-functioning digital recorder freed me from manually handling the instrument, and better captured the natural conversational flow (Fetterman, 2010, p. 70).

Given all of the prerequisites settled in a good shape, I started coding during the latter stage of my project after I believed the data reached saturation and no more surprising and unheard topics popped up. I depended on two kinds of tools. One was this analytical software *Nvivo*, and I mostly used version 8 since the latest version 9 just came out when I almost finished data-coding. The most intriguing feature of this software was its function to help with defining, comparing, and integrating major themes. I input all transcripts in Word Document format, and coded individual meaning group that was associated with interview questions as “free node.” All these free nodes listed together in order automatically showed their connections, which helped me design tree nodes, which are on the next more integrated and inclusive level than free nodes. Moreover, I took advantage of this software to create layouts of vital correlations so that people, locations, relationships, actions, and social structures in the lives of my informants that were decisive in affecting how they understood their identity could be represented on flat intersectional maps.

Another set of tools was my pen and colorful post-its. Although using *Nvivo* could be more efficient given plenty of time and guidance to learn it well, I incorporated my pen as a manual coding weapon because I did not have to constantly check the availability of the only one computer that had installed *Nvivo*, and sit in the middle concave area of a hallway with people walking back and forth behind my back.
To make things easier, I printed out all transcripts and had them coded thematically in the margins and attached with post-its of different colors. With themes generated by Nvivo at hand, working on printed copies was not that clueless or overwhelming. I used the software to double check the ways I used to organize themes in different chapters. I produced detailed themes with Nvivo, grouped them under broader topics that I marked on transcripts while referring back to thematic layouts, one of which shown in Appendix C. Compiling all files together presented certain level of “colorful” density of data on each topic straightforwardly. It became my daily routine that I picked up a whole bunch of data and coded them whenever I got time.

Reflexivity

Being reflexive is one of the strategies that feminist researchers employ to keep a dynamic relationship with data, minimize the researcher’s authority, and reduce bias. I come from mainland China, the informants’ ancestral country where most of them have seldom or never visited in their whole lives. My interviewees are U.S. citizens legally and Chinese Americans culturally. Their life stories are the main part of my study. I will also incorporate my reflexive responses to things that I notice or that bother me, and observations I make while communicating with informants because I do feel we are “different but connected.” There are some aspects we sympathize with each other, such as experiences relevant to gender although the term “woman” conveys different meanings in different contexts, and to ethnicity and race in one way or another because sometimes we are designated by some categories like Chinese women, women of color or some other things that we do not necessarily identify with in most occasions. Nonetheless, all those encounters trigger me to reflect more critically on my own Chineseness, my informants’ Chineseness and Americanness (I list these terms separately just for analytical convenience) whereas I
do not think these “-nesses” are static and fixed, or can be generalized. As Ien Ang (2001) has pointed out, Chineseness is always “renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China” (p. 25). To understand the symbolic and material interactions with the idea of “homeland” and its impact on my respondents’ Chinese American identity is one of the foci of my study.

Since I started this research, I have changed my conceptions of Chineseness in a couple of ways. First of all, I do not identify Chineseness is something that can only be obtained in mainland China, although ethnic Chinese may achieve more confidence of claiming their Chineseness by having connections with mainland China culturally and geographically. What I challenge is to centralize and essentialize identity with a specific geographical continent. Broadly speaking, Chinese culture includes not only China but the whole Confucian Chinese society in East and South-East Asia. I have an informant, for example, who identifies herself as Chinese American although her parents came from Malaysia and Singapore. Second, going back to China and how this transnational behavior relates to my informants’ identity should be decided by them, not me. For some, it is not worth consideration at all. For others, it is part of their way of finding who they are. These contradictions not only challenge my theoretical assumptions but also expand my vision of who can be my potential informants.

For me, coming from inside or outside is not a methodological concern since the boundary is already blurred. Instead, I put more effort in revealing how my informants and I interact with each other given our similarities and differences do matter throughout the whole project. I asked some informants why they did not want to go back to China, even for sightseeing. Their answers were various, differing from “having no time” to “not considering China as a right choice for sightseeing because
of its backward conditions.” I was so surprised that some of them were so indifferent to what happened and was happening in China, because which I thought would consequentially affect their lives in the United States. This was such a disturbing issue that often made me upset in the beginning, because, in my point of view, they abandoned their Chinese cultural heritage to some extent, and should not do that as descendants of Chinese immigrants. After reading through my data later, I realized little by little that those who do not intend to go back to mainland China have their own forms of getting their Chineseness authorized. Their understandings of Chineseness differ from the way I view it. My take on a going-back-to-China path has changed after I noticed that it is just my assumption, not part of their daily lives. I have learned to be aware of not being judgmental, and to hold myself back to understand where my informants come from.

Learning

During the five and a half years of conducting this study, I am sure there are many things that need to improve. Some I noticed and changed as the research continued. Some I may have to leave until I can get a chance to conduct a more comprehensive project. One thought is about the relationship between the researcher and the researched. When I was listening to interviews conducted earlier I felt embarrassed hearing some questions I asked, and wondered how that came out of my mouth that way. It often hit me when the recording was playing something about how my interviewees talked about China or Chinese culture, especially when they did not care, or had wrong information. When such scenes occurred, the earlier me would pose some rhetorical questions that the interviewees might feel being checked up in an uncomfortable way. There were times when an interviewee got into some kind of arguments with me. For example, an informant explained how her not wanting to go
back to China did not affect her Chinese identity when I was questioning her that possibility. I adjusted myself very quickly after doing more literature reading, like Ien Ang’s work, and reflective thinking. I realized that there are multiple ways of interpreting what it means to be a Chinese, and held back myself to really listen to my informants. In the beginning, I positioned myself not so much a researcher but more as a “genuine” Chinese woman who came from China. As my study continued, I focused a lot on reflexivity as part of my methodology. I wish I could have been more conscious and theoretically well-informed five years ago. Then I could have had more fantastic questions and answers than now.

Another limitation is that I relied too much more on in-depth interviews that I conducted, and less on observation. Although I do not see any methodological deficit of primarily using only one method, I wish I could have a multilayered depiction of my informants’ everyday lives. Given more time and funding, I wish I could visit their parents, friends, and communities. If possible, I wish I could incorporate more informants who were married or graduated and started working full-time. In that way, I would be able to capture a fuller picture of my informants’ life trajectories of finding themselves while having more interactions with two worlds, since the themes that emerged from my current data already help me see the possibility of doing so.
CHAPTER FOUR: GROWING UP CHINESE AMERICAN

In this chapter, I discuss the diversity of growing up Chinese American. This issue is important because my informants, categorized as Chinese American women, are daughters of immigrants, women, and racial minorities that have long been marginalized and neglected in male-dominated immigration history and white-and-black-binary-oriented racial discourse. They also suffer from the consequences of stereotypical portrayals of Asian women in the mainstream media. In addition, immigrants with Asian origins are usually lumped together to be treated as if they are a homogenous group. It, to a certain extent, makes it even harder for Chinese American women’s voices to be represented. To challenge the distorted and oversimplified representation of Chinese American women and disclose the diversity and heterogeneity of their adaptation trajectories, I draw on segmented assimilation theory’s argument that “causes and consequences” of immigration can be better explained by examining “the interplay of financial capital, human capital, and social capital within an identifiable ethnic community” and of immigrant individuals (Zhou, 2009). My informants’ growing up stories collectively present a meaningful picture of diverse forms of engagement with ethnic and white communities and cultures, and how they individually make sense of who they are and who they want to be. Three recurring themes emerged from interviews illustrate the diversity of their experiences: the social landscape of local neighborhoods, immigrant family cultural practices and ethnic affiliations, and a general intense emphasis on education.

Specifically, I probed my informants’ varied family immigration history and socioeconomic status because those are determinants of how and where their parents settled down. It also showed how their parents’ financial, human, and social capital came into play. According to my participants, the social demographics of their
neighborhood and schools are significant to their identity formation. For those who grew up in white neighborhoods, it was very likely that they would identify with the white culture, especially when their parents were so caught up with the ideology of fitting in, and tried to make their children assimilated as best as they could.

Another important theme can be approached from understanding whether and how my informants were exposed to Chinese culture including ethnic languages, food, and traditions, how closely they interacted with the rest of their Chinese extended family, whether they had access to ethnic institutions and media, and how they actively engaged with these different aspects. Whether to keep Chinese traits and heritage largely depended on how my informants’ parents understood how likely doing so could facilitate their adaptation into the mainstream.

Last but not least, all immigrant parents emphasized education and considered it the most effective means of possibly competing with the dominant group and overcoming barriers due to their racially and socially disadvantaged and marginalized locations. What also matters is that, historically, education is embedded in Chinese culture and shared by all kinds of Chinese ethnic groups from other Southeast Asia as one of the core Confucian values.

Segmented assimilation theory proposes two sets of factors that determine how immigrant groups adapt to the society of the receiving country. One set examines what immigrants already have when they move out from their homeland to another new country (referred as the context of exit), including “pre-migration resources, such as money, knowledge, and job skills” (Zhou, 2009, p. 7). The other set, the context of reception, considers “the national-origin group’s position in the system of racial stratification, government policies, labor market conditions, and public attitudes, as well as the strength and viability of the ethnic community in the host society” (Zhou,
2009, p. 7). It reveals how Chinese immigrants are positioned by the receiving society while they are continually negotiating with the dominant ideology, social structures, political and economic contexts of the new society as well as existing ethnic institutions. My informants’ parents interacted with different dynamics of situating themselves in the U.S. society. For those people who worked in service economy or manufacturing industries in Chinatown, they usually had only primary or secondary education, mostly in China, and low English proficiency. At the same time, they depended on their ethnic community for jobs, support, and other forms of resources. Whereas, as shown in Appendix B, those informants’ parents who had a career in IT, Engineering, Accounting, or Marketing, had higher educational levels and lived a middle-class life detaching from ethnic enclaves.

By articulating the interaction between the two groups of factors, in addition to two linear patterns (one is traditional upward, consonant acculturation and the other is downward, dissonant acculturation), segmented assimilation theory emphasizes a third eclectic pathway where immigrants choose to integrate into the dominant society while maintaining certain ethnic characteristics rather than being fully assimilated or being trapped at the bottom of the social ranking system in terms of class and race.

Since my informants were all situated in a college setting receiving elite educations when I interviewed them, their accounts can be better interpreted by either the upward mobility (assimilation) pattern or a complex, selective acculturation pattern. It is worth exploring why children of Chinese restaurant workers ended up going to the same prestigious colleges as those whose parents received professional training and lived a middle-class life given their varied immigration processes. What is also significant is how my informants and their immigrant parents had to constantly negotiate between “acting white” and maintaining an ethnically distinctive identity.
They confronted the social landscape of their local communities, attempted to overcome racial discrimination and social barriers, and developed different forms of ethnic affiliation and cultural bonds.

In her study on second-generation Chinese and Korean American’s ethnic and racial identity, Kibria emphasizes how “being ethnic” and “being racial” always intertwines in Asian immigrants’ identity since “Asian Americans are both racial minorities and ethnic American” (2002a, p. 3). For Asian Americans, how to “make sense of what it means to be racially Asian, ethnically Korean, Vietnamese, and so on, and nationally American in terms of their personal identity and cultural practices and beliefs” (Tuan, 2002, p. 210) is a legitimate question that has no universal answer.

Their participation in mainstream life is also a process of being racialized. In many aspects, Asian Americans suffer from their marginality because of racial hierarchies just as other minorities like African Americans and Latinos do. When studying second-generation Chinese Americans who fit this racialized ethnic silhouette, it is challenging to figure out how different segments of the society shape their integration and identity, and how they portray and interpret their experiences as children of Chinese immigrants growing up in the U.S.

Drawing on my informants’ narratives, my data show that the impact of the mainstream social context was complicated in the sense that it was mediated by immigrant parents’ attitudes and practices in terms of how strongly they wanted to pass down and expose my informants to their ethnic culture. I found the issue of parenting affected my informants’ self-recognition at an early stage in their lifecycles in relation to how they initially created and constructed their racial and ethnic identities, which was also subject to challenge, question and reinvention in different social contexts. Some informants’ parents intentionally prevented them from knowing
anything Chinese with a hope that my informants could assimilate and fit in. My data show that some parents were never willing to provide their children with any knowledge about China or Chinese culture, except for some clipped answers only when being continually bothered by questions from my informants. But in some families, parents practiced Chinese traditions and involved children in varied activities, such as celebrating Chinese holidays, cooking Chinese food, learning Chinese languages, and keeping connections with Chinese relatives in the States or in China. In this chapter, I primarily address the dynamics of the relationship between Chinese immigrant parents and their American-born daughter in order to uncover and claim an alternative, contemporary, and gendered perspective of immigrant culture structured around women’s voices. Many informants, for example, remember clearly how their parents disciplined their social behaviors more strictly compared to how their male peers or siblings were treated.

I primarily look at three main components of my informants’ experiences in this chapter. First, it is the geographic locations where my informants grew up. I argue that the social landscape of local neighborhoods exerted an important influence on informants’ self-identification during the K-12 time period. Second, how immigrant parents made efforts to maintain cultural heritage and traditions within family in one way or another helped informants claim their ethnic authenticity. Last but not the least, my informants’ families, from both middle-class and working-class backgrounds, emphasized on education as a primary means to achieve socioeconomic status and overcome barriers embedded in racialized social structures.

Neighborhood Matters

Immigrants’ residential locations matter since “access to institutions and resources that are critical for children” (Alba, 2009, p. 200) exemplified by schools
they go to and different community cultures they associate with. In her research on old (pre-1965) and new second-generation immigrants, Zhou found that an earlier generation of immigrants’ residential locations were largely limited only to ethnic enclaves in gateway cities whereas new generations of immigrants “have more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and has settled in a wider range of neighborhoods” (Zhou, 2009, p. 191). Her research also examines the diversity within second-generation Chinese immigrants, and asserts that “those who reside in inner-city Chinatowns are generally from low-income families” whereas “those who live in suburban white middle-class neighborhoods tend to have parents who have achieved high levels of education, occupation, income, and English proficiency and who are bicultural and highly assimilated” (Zhou, 2009, p. 191). In consistence with Zhou’s findings, my interviewees can be roughly divided into two groups according to the corresponding relationship between their parents’ socioeconomic status and residential pattern.

Take the thirteen informants in my study who came from New York City, for example. Ten of them had at least one parent working in a restaurant or taking other service type of job. For those who were from states other than New York, their parents were mostly working or worked as professionals in fields of computer, automobile industry, marketing, insurance, real estate, and the stock market. My informants’ narratives show that children of middle-class immigrants who lived outside ethnic enclaves had less contact with ethnic communities and social networks while expressing a higher conformity to the mainstream culture and society. Growing up in suburban Cleveland with a population that was 97 percent Caucasian according to the census of 2000, Lucy never associated herself with being Chinese. She just used it as a category to mark her father’s being “different.” After going to college and being
exposed to other biracial people, she started to trace back to her Chinese heritage. When she was a child, a traditional assimilation pattern was highly promoted in her family. Her parents and grandparents tried very hard to protect her from being disturbed by conflicts between being a racial minority and trying to fully assimilate.

It is always my family that sat me down and said, “Look, you have issues in the society. People are going to look at you differently because you are not like everyone else.” So I never expected [I were different], and I think I was very naïve. My immediate grandparents were very much, “You need to fit in. You need to make sure [that you fit in]. You need to assimilate. You need to make sure that nobody ever sees you as different.” I think he [her father] is very immersed in the American culture. But again his parents, my grandparents, were very protective of him, and making sure of that he did not know anything, he didn’t know any word, any Chinese language, any Chinese tradition, nothing. You know, “You are American now.” This is how they protected him. They really think it would hurt him if he knew about Chinese culture, or language, or any Chinese tradition. [Lucy, 9/17/04]

For Lucy’s family, “being different” was a disadvantage that caused troubles because “not like everyone else,” which in other words means “not white,” engendered negative consequences when they were singled out, and associated immigrants like them with vulnerable positions. Exclusively, Lucy was raised to minimize all possible connections with Chinese culture and family history, and only embrace being American, which in her parents’ and grandparents’ perspectives was for her own good. As a result, Lucy took it for granted that she was part of the dominant white culture, and was ignorant of her and her family’s racial minority status.

The place I grew up is a very “white” neighborhood. So anything that I
thought that as minority or as different was someone who was black, or someone who was African American, or who was Indian. I never thought myself as anything different. I never thought of my dad as anything different… it’s very white. I had a hundred kids in my graduating class, just my own year. There was one Asian boy and I. That was it. It was very white. There were a couple of black students that I had… (I use black, [but] don’t mean [to be] offensive. Because I don’t know they were African American or Jamaican or something else. So they were black.) There were a couple of Indian people. I was kind of trying to associate myself as much as possible with the white culture that I was immersed in. So I never thought anything that would be said to me or that would assume about me had anything to do with my race, anything to do with who I was as well as my color of skin. Because it just couldn’t make sense to me because I never identified… I never thought that anyone would treat me any differently. People would say such and such to me. I never associated it with me. I guess it depends on how I negotiated it. [Lucy, 9/17/04]

Being color blind as many of my informants who grew up with very little Chinese cultivation were, Lucy never had a chance to really experience racial and cultural differences when she was younger. She grew up with little direct interaction with other Chinese people or any ethnic community. Her early experience of who she was came from who her family wanted her to become and who were around her.

Similar to Lucy’s trying to identify with whites, Cathy also lived in a white neighborhood, and aspired to become the same as white people around her because she felt pressure to be accepted. Unlike Lucy, Cathy developed an awareness of being different when she compared herself to white people she met from her community and
weekday regular school days, and other people she interacted with through Chinese church’s activities over weekends. Traveling between Staten Island, the whitest borough of New York City, and Chinatown in Manhattan, Cathy had a hard time adjusting to the discrepancies between being white and being Chinese.

I went to school in Staten Island. Staten Island is very white compared to the rest of the City. When I was little, I wanted to be white because that’s who was around me. And my teachers were white. My administrators were white. The students were white. I mean there were no people of color anywhere in school. And even my neighbors, they were all white. So the only time I would interact with anyone who was Chinese, I mean there were no Latinos or African Americans, that was not even in my area of consciousness, in terms of reality. You know, I never really knew anyone who was black until I got to high school. Um, so, the only time interacting with anyone else who was Chinese was with family or with a church on Sunday. We went to a church in Chinatown. So it’s kind of like on Sunday I was surrounded by Chinese people. And then the rest of the week, I wasn’t, at all. So I think it was hard, you know, understanding why it was different. And this wasn’t something that anyone would tell you when I was in elementary school. Why would I want to be like anyone else? [Cathy, 4/16/10]

Grown up, Cathy started reflecting on the time when she was routinely crossing over a boundary between a predominantly white community and an ethnically Chinese church, and how caught up she was with becoming like her white peers. Even though she noticed the differences between those two worlds, she took it for granted that the white society was normal, not the Chinese one that she went to only on weekends. Cathy’s way of internalizing sameness/difference was very similar to Lucy’s although
Cathy had more exposure to Chinese people and culture. Throughout Lucy’s and Cathy’s childhoods, the formal schooling system and its mainstream ideology was overwhelming and powerful in the sense that they were institutionally excluded from resources to develop their ethnic identity and pride. Not only informants from ethnically isolated areas, like Lucy and Cathy, but also those whose parents did not have enough social and human capital encountered such restrictions, although they might live close to Asian or Chinese people. As one of the latter group, Peggy tells about how difficult she felt to relate to two cultures at the same time.

According to the 2000 census, the proportion of Asians in the population reached 6.3 percent in Morris County, New Jersey, where Peggy’s family was situated, second only to Hispanics among non-white racial groups. Peggy’s father came from Nanjing, China. He dropped out of an American college, and became a self-employed construction businessman mainly working for Chinese or Asian clients. However, he never actively offered any information about China to Peggy, or went back to visit his family in China. He married a Greek immigrant woman and raised four biracial daughters including Peggy and her three younger sisters. Peggy said that her father hoped that she could assimilate without any significant impact from either Chinese or Greek culture. The ambiguity and discontinuity of family history and ties made it difficult for Peggy to resort back to their ancestral roots in China based on kinship. For her, what was available from outside home especially in the local Asian American community became more influential in their ethnic identification process.

I grew up with a lot of Asian Americans, like my friendship circle. I have three younger sisters. No immediate family lives here. They are all living either in China, or they are living in Greece. So growing up with two cultures but at the same time mostly with just American culture, but not so much
strictly…it’s very Chinese American like it’s very like Americanized in my family. I guess because we don’t have any relatives that live with us. I really like to be Chinese a lot because it’s how people perceive me, and I am looking more Chinese than they [her physical features] do white. For example, my identity, it comes from my father as well. But mostly it comes from the surroundings. ‘Cause my friends, a lot of them are Asian. And most of the Asians, they are Chinese. So I have more bases from them. It’s kind of … it’s not really like Chinese culture. It’s more like American culture, ‘cause we don’t speak Chinese to each other. I don’t know the language or anything. My dad didn’t really talk about culture and where his family was growing up at all. You have to ask him. You would be like, Dad, where did you grow up? And he would be like, I lived on a farm. Okay, where did you go to school? He’d just tell you as much you asked. And that was it. So it’s kind of like, it’s weird because I feel like a lot of my friends who are Asian American have more ties to that country, that their parents came from whereas I was trying to find it out all the time. Because my dad doesn’t really want …he doesn’t really care. [Peggy, 10/13/09]

In Peggy’s family, there are actually three cultures floating around: Chinese, Greek, and American. The first two are represented by her immigrant parents, and the third one is more about how the American society recognized her ancestors’ history and how that affected her negotiation of her own identity. For many times, Peggy talked about how she had to work hard to know more about her Chinese family’s history and culture. When she compared herself with her other Chinese friends, she lacked confidence and legitimacy of claiming her Chinese identity due to no authentic well-established personal and social connections. Her father took a similar conservative
stance as Lucy’s parents and grandparents did, which means the less the next
generation gets involved with ancestors’ history, the more they could possibly make it
in the U.S. Given what they possessed while emigrating, it was much more difficult
for first generation immigrant parents to give up social and ethnic capital they had and
fully assimilated into the mainstream. On the flip side, because of such reality, they
experienced structural and racial discrimination that their descendant may not
experience, or experience but in different ways. In this aspect, segmented assimilation
theory articulates that how children of immigrants adapt into America is subject to
how their ethnic membership is interpreted as to either promote or withdraw their
upward mobility. When maintaining ethnic features and those negative consequences
were constructed as cause and effect, it makes sense that why some of my informants’
parents wanted to protect them by cutting off such connections. Of course, that was
from the parents’ point of view. My informants may have a different take. For
example, Peggy thought her father’s not telling her about his life in China “weird.”

Unlike Peggy who had to strive for reconnecting with Chinese culture and
depend on particular opportunities such as an internship in Chinatown, Hebe and
some other informants grew up in New York’s Chinatowns have more interactions as
their everyday lives intertwine with it from all aspects. Hebe’s father came to the U.S.
for job opportunities with help from his friends. He worked as a waiter and went back
to China to marry Hebe’s mother and bring her over, a common pattern shared by
many working class immigrant families among my informants. Compared to those
who grew up in a white neighborhood, my informants who lived in Chinatown
benefited from intensive exposure to ethnic languages, food, stores, institutions, and
traditions, and assumed their Chinese identity more naturally based on those daily
activities.
I grew up in Chinatown, in New York. So, I have been pretty much exposed to my culture a lot, you know, since elementary school to high school, the majority of my classmates were Chinese. Like language, just being, living in Chinatown, you hear the language all the time. Various dialects. I think I lived in the area around, and a lot of it was Fujianese people. And if you walk further down, and there are a lot of Cantonese-speaking people. And there are Mandarin-speaking people. So I was just exposed to all of that. And food. Whenever there was a holiday, like Chinese New Year, or a festival, there would be parades on the streets. So you are exposed to all of that. You know, you understand the different holidays of your culture. Basically, you learned a lot about your…self. [Hebe, 10/04/09]

As Hebe said, culture and identity interconnects so that it is almost impossible to ignore the significance of everyday life activities and its relation to my informants’ identification process. Kingston (1975) articulated it this way, “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (p. 6). How my respondents live their daily life should help answer why they understand who they are in particular ways. Hebe further explains,

Well, a lot of things I do, like in terms of the television shows I watch, or the music I listen to, or the food I eat, all that stuff is very like …Chinese. It’s hard to, not to communicate, but sort of like really make friends with someone if they, if I am SO Chinese! Does that make sense? I speak my language a lot, and I eat Chinese food a lot. I actually don’t like eating American food because it is disgusting. It is just like too much steak, with
cheese on it. It is like a lot of food with butter, and mashed potatoes. It is basically the flavor I don’t really like. Basically anything non-Asian, I don’t really like. Unless it is like… fried chicken is ok. Burgers are ok. Steak is disgusting. And I don’t know how anyone can eat a large chunk of meat. It is too much meat. So, I am very … Asian! I think my friends would say that too.

I am very Asian. [Hebe, 10/04/09]

Such statement as Hebe’s demonstrates that ethnic food preference partially embodies what it means to be culturally Chinese whereas she posits Chinese food and American food as two exclusive opposites, and has a tendency of essentializing the latter. In addition to an extreme like Hebe who publicly expressed her dislike of American meaty food, most of my other New York informants elaborate that in their family their parents cook them more Chinese food than other styles of cuisine. In doing so, they sense a kind of authenticity while being practically educated with and informed of their cultural heritage although they all have to make decisions on the relevance of Chinese culture individually.

An important cultural setting, Chinatown does not always convey this same positive meaning for all of my informants. Some lack of in-depth interactions with it could come up with a totally opposite understanding and interpretation, and did not reconcile it with their identity at all. Jane’s father, an American-born Chinese, works in health insurance and optometry while her mother is a teacher holding a master’s degree in Teaching and a bachelor’s in Sociology. Jane grew up in the suburbs of Long Island, where there were predominantly white people. When she described her neighborhood, she used the term “a quiet upbringing” at the beginning of our conversation implying that her community was very middle class, suburban, and extremely different from noisy inner city, like the bizarre Chinatown. When I asked
her how she felt about going to Chinatown in Manhattan, she emphasized an uncomfortable feeling of “being foreign” when she could not understand the language, could not figure out what those “Asian things” were for and make any connections. Even though she lived in New York, and was a full Chinese in terms of her family blood kinship, she still felt different and “less Asian” when comparing herself with people living in Chinatown. Lack of ethnic affinity and authenticity bothered her because Chinatown’s culture to some degree was supposed to represent an authentic Chinese culture although those two are not absolutely identical.

So I remember it was, it still is very dirty, very crowded, and very loud and noisy. I didn’t like actually being in Chinatown. Cause it’s all like this noises and smell. Just so many people around me, I would very like, I don’t know, just a little overwhelming. Just being in Chinatown, it made me feel uncomfortable because there were so many foreign things to me. I knew I was Asian. I knew I was Chinese. But I felt no connection to the people living in Chinatown. ‘Cause I knew a lot of them were not American-born. A lot of them were like immigrants from China or Hong Kong. So I just didn’t feel very connected with them. I think they didn’t have any sort of American culture in them. Cause all the markets were filled with very Asian things. Like, a lot of weird seafood, or weird animal parts, like intestines or something, something that you don’t see in American grocery stores. So that’s why I felt a little uncomfortable around that. Being in Chinatown just made me feel very uncomfortable. So I felt like that I could never really relate to anyone who was living there. [Jane, 4/16/10]

When I heard how Jane described her observations of Chinatown, I understood why she used the word “quiet” when she introduced her community in Long Island. Her
experience of the “noisy” physical conditions, non-American-born immigrants, and “weird” food in Chinatown made her uncomfortable identifying with the Chinese culture represented by Chinatown. Her unpleasant experiences support her conclusion that she was very American. Looking like Chinese does not necessarily guarantee an unconditional embracement of Chinese culture for Jane.

In college, some of my friends are from Chinatown. But a lot of them, I feel like that they are more Asian than me. I know they are Asian Americans. But since they live in Chinatown, they are more exposed to Asian culture. Like everyday they would walk out on the street, go to Asian markets and see many more Asians than I would through their childhood. But for me, I would go out my door, and all my neighbors were white. And I would go to American grocery stores, and see regular ground beef and steak instead of intestines. So I felt different from them. I felt much more American than them. I felt like I can never connect with them. [Jane, 4/16/10]

Jane made it clear that neighborhood could have a strong influence on people’s social positioning involving everyday activities in relation to class, race, and ethnic culture, especially during their early stages of growing up.

Maybe just because I grew up in a very white American suburb. And they would grow up in like Queens, or Flushing. Or they would grow up in Brooklyn, which is kind of near Chinatown. Their way of like, when they grew up, it was very different from me. I guess maybe it was because the things they were exposed to. I mean their parents still speak Chinese to them. So their English grammar is not as good as mine because I grew up speaking English first. So that already kind of sets us apart in that way. [Jane, 4/16/10]

In order to explain her alienation from Chinatown, Jane further exemplified the
distinctiveness of her neighborhood from those ethnic enclaves, and her superior English language ability than that of her Chinatown peers. On the other hand, she also experienced a loss of her ancestral language, an important indicator of cultural transmission and retention. For immigrants who enter middle-class communities like Jane’s family, it is usually more to their advantage to be acculturated in order to avoid moving down to the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy in American society. Such phenomenon reinforces segmented assimilation theory’s argument that it is expected that immigrants selectively assimilate into the dominant culture. If, however, surrounded by different groups of people or due to peer influence, such segmentation may vary according to the extent to which my informants would accept and integrate American norms with their own preferences.

Because her family business got relocated, Emma moved around a few places on the East Coast. After being born in Manhattan, she was sent back to Fuzhou, China, by her mother. When she was six, she came back to America and lived in Manhattan from then on. Frightened by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, her parents decided to move part of their business to Buffalo when she was in eighth grade. This time it was only she and her father moving. Four years later, they closed that restaurant and moved back to Brooklyn in New York City. Among all of my informants, Emma had a less stable growing up condition, which, at the same time, gave her opportunities to experience communities with different racial and ethnic compositions. It was very impressive when she had her first day in a school with a white majority.

Emma: I lived in the suburbs. It was a town. And it was like a really small school. I was not used to it. And the kids, they grew up with each other. They were neighbors and stuff. I was the new kid. And I remember the first day of class, I walked down the hallway. They had probably never really seen an
Asian person in their life before. They kept asking you like, “How do you say this in Chinese?” Or like, “Do you guys really…” I don’t know, I forgot the questions, but I remember they were really stupid. But I felt like I fit in. I was never a popular…

Q: What do you mean when you say you fit in?

Emma: ‘Cause I am a very social person. I get along with people really well. That didn’t hinder my ability. I guess me being Asian does separate me from them. But at the same time, I don’t see it that way anymore. I don’t see the fact that I was Asian. Because you just become you. Like in the beginning, me being Asian was a big part of how I felt. In the beginning, I felt like, “Oh my God, I am so different … [paused for a few seconds] from them, all my friends.” But then as you grew up older with them, as you went through things and you guys got to know each other better, the race was not a big issue anymore. They got used to me. I got used to them. Well, we ended up being the same. So then after a while, in a way you don’t see the color.

[Emma, 10/15/09]

The question of whether they were “the same” as white kids was powerful for my informants as they tried to relate themselves to people from the dominant group. In many situations, “the same” always needed to be further translated into “the same as who,” and that “who” functioned as the standard and the norm. When Emma was so immersed in “becoming the same” as her white peers kind of mentality, she could not accustom herself to the diverse public school located in Manhattan with a majority of black and Hispanic students. Her understanding of who she was through her living experience in Buffalo now resurged as a significant factor for her to recognize and connect to this new context.
It was really weird because when I went back to New York City, I went to a school near East Harlem. It was on 116th street. And what happened was the majority of the kids were Hispanic or black. They were the majority. The white and the Asians were the minority. And it was so weird because before I never saw color. I never thought race was an issue. ‘Cause when I was in Buffalo, I didn’t see it as an issue. It didn’t bother me. I didn’t think of myself as Chinese or whatever. When I went to my school, it’s called MCSM, Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics. When I was there, clearly race was the big part. People made fun of each other, and I was not used to it. I guess when you grew up in a white environment, like a white community, you are not supposed to acknowledge race. You are not supposed to go like, Oh, he is black, and she is white, or she is Hispanic. When I was living in Depew, no one saw it. You are taught not to do that. ‘Cause when you do that, you are a racist. People don’t say those racist things. You don’t get to interact with a lot people of other races. So you don’t see it yourself. Then once I went to MCSM, people made fun of each other, like how black people and Hispanic girls are really easy, you know, like slutty. There would be a lot of stereotypes. How Asians are studious. They are really smart. And then the eye thing, and like this is Japanese, this is Chinese, and this is Korean. So a lot of stereotypes that I learned, when I went to MCSM cause people talked about it, how Indians, they smell like curry, they are stinky. [Emma, 10/15/09]

For Emma, Cathy and many other informants, during their journeys to live their lives through either a suburban, middle-class area or an inner-city ethnic enclave, they had to constantly negotiate with and figure out “being the same” and “Who I am.” However, those questions could not be answered without making reference to who
they do not want to be and who they are not. How they perceive the outside environment influence how they internalize and respond to the ideology of being assimilated. Segmented assimilation theory emphasizes various forms of diversity in terms of whether and how they would and could possibly assimilate. There is still more to explore in terms of the dynamics between the surroundings and its impact on my informants’ continual identifying process. A vital aspect of it, as informants elaborate, is the importance of family education and cultural heritage that their immigrant parents kept across generations, strictly or loosely.

Cultural Practices and Ethnic Affiliation

In addition to examining the relationship between residential pattern and its influence on my informants’ identity, I am also interested in how immigrant parents and children cope with conflicts between cultural maintenance and adaptation. One apparent indicator of whether culture and traditions get kept and transmitted across generations is children’s proficiency in Chinese languages. In other words, language is definitely one of the most important symbols to claim ethnic identity. The majority of my informants learned Chinese languages, or at least some rudiments, in some ways. However, some parents insisted that their children should learn how to speak Chinese while others gave up for different reasons. Some worried that learning Chinese inhibited their children’s ability to be fluent in English while others gave in to their kids’ resistance.

Among all of my research participants, Helena is the only person that claims that she can speak fluent Chinese (Mandarin). She can do that because her parents required her to use Chinese whenever they spoke Chinese to her. She also took Chinese language courses offered by her American high school and Chinese school in school weeks and weekends.
I didn’t go to Chinese school until I was about twelve. Like we always spoke it at home, but I didn’t know how to write or read it. When I was eleven or twelve, I started going until I finished high school. And our high school was actually a magnet school. So they actually offered Chinese there too. So I took Chinese at high school as well, in addition to a Chinese school we went to once a week on Saturdays. We speak Mandarin [at home]. My parents also speak Cantonese and Ke Jia (Hakka, a dialect used in southern China, mainly Guangdong and Fujian). They speak like they also understand some other dialects. We mainly just speak Mandarin. It was just like something that they always said “you know at home you speak Chinese, and at school you speak English,” like from when we were really young. So when we were at home when we were young, we started speaking English, my parents were like “don’t be rude.” 我们跟你说中文的话，你就跟我们说中文 [When we speak Chinese to you, you should speak Chinese back to us]. Like stuff like that. So when they were speaking English to you, you spoke English back. But if they were speaking Chinese, you spoke Chinese with them. [Helena, 3/12/06]

Helena’s parents strictly insisted that she and her brother practiced Chinese when they were younger. Helena’s parents left their own countries more than thirty years ago. They stayed in Canada for ten years to finish their advanced degrees before settling down in the U.S. Helena is very confident speaking Mandarin in front of me, which does not occur very often among other informants who know Chinese especially Mandarin. For most of my informants, Chinese and English language development processes are not so complementary that being fluent in one always means losing the other. In most cases, Chinese was given up because English was the only language
favored by the dominant society.

Nevertheless, the majority of my informants got sent to Chinese school by their parents. But just a few stayed. Since most Chinese schools were in session only over weekends especially in non-ethnic-population-accumulated areas, it required both parents and children to sacrifice their leisure time. Only a few informants actually finished Chinese school. For those who quit, reasons were varied. In some cases, it was because the teaching language that the Chinese school offered was Mandarin. When my informants’ family only spoke Cantonese, it was very difficult to practice a different dialect at home. Some informants did not learn anything meaningful to them. They wanted to enjoy their childhood instead of learning a second language. Some parents insisted my informants go, while others were more lenient to let their children drop out when they rebelled. Now, looking back, some informants regretted that they did not continue because they felt, first, it could have better helped them communicate with their Chinese parents or grandparents; second, it might maintain their ethnicity and not become so assimilated into white culture. Knowing how to speak Chinese justifies their ethnic membership of being Chinese, and embodies something real in their identity that can be literally captured. It is also a tool to learn more about China.

Lynn’s Cantonese was very limited although her parents just spoke Cantonese. Lynn found it hard to communicate with her parents because of this language barrier. It was difficult for my informants to understand the significance of their ethnic language when they were kids.

I speak very bad Cantonese. We talk enough like we talk about food and what do we do for the day. But we don’t talk about philosophy or anything or politics ‘cause I think I just don’t have the vocabulary for it. Yeah, my
parents speak mostly Cantonese. They speak a little bit of English. But it is like very bad English. And my very bad Cantonese is kind of funny. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Given her limited Cantonese, Lynn could only resume very superficial conversations with her parents because their English was very poor. Language incompetence negatively affects parent-child communication whereas Lynn did not know how worse such situation could possibly evolve at a younger age.

I didn’t like going there (Chinese school) on Saturday morning. I think when I was younger, I didn’t feel like it’s so valuable. Now I feel like it is more valuable. It doesn’t matter on Saturday morning or not. But back then I really wanted my Saturday mornings to be free. I just wanted to watch TV. I just wanted to have fun. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Lynn traded off learning her ethnic language with enjoying free time as much as she could. Her parents tried but failed to keep her motivated going to Chinese school for at least two reasons. First, since living in the U.S., they, as well as many other informants’ parents, learned to raise children in a free and democratic rather than an autocratic patriarchal manner. Second, they were not successful making Lynn to believe that it was important to learn Chinese when she was a kid. As children became more Americanized, parents had to accept the fact that their expectation of their children making ties to their culture of origin might confront disagreement and resistance in many forms.

However, even resisting learning Chinese languages at an early age, a couple of informants including Lynn express how they change their mind and realize more of the importance of speaking Chinese when grown up. When I asked Lynn why knowing how to speak Chinese became so important and urgent now, she came up
with a complex answer.

First of all, it is important to communicate with my parents. And I do feel like we have communication gap not only in language but also like in different mindsets, different values. Like I grew up here and they grew up in China. So it’s like pretty different. I just feel like… I don’t want to be too assimilated. Like I want to have some sort of ethnic roots. I didn’t want to just know English and that’s it. I didn’t want to be like any other white American. I didn’t want to, I don’t know, just like cheeseburgers and fries. I want to, I like Chinese food. I like being Chinese. I didn’t want to just take that all away because I feel language is an important part of that. So I want to keep that. And probably if I have children, I will pass it on to my children. If I could learn Chinese, I could read Chinese newspapers. I could listen to Chinese radio. I could talk to others who are Chinese about it. Yeah, I could keep up with Chinese politics and stuff like that. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

For Lynn, learning Chinese is not only to study a second language, but also to master a tool to resist the ideology of “becoming white,” strengthen her ethnic ties with family members, and maintain herself updated with what is happening in China in a general sense. She also made a statement that speaking her ethnic language is an important tool resisting being fully assimilated and Americanized. Lynn is not alone giving up Chinese earlier but regretting later. One of those informants who regretted not speaking Chinese well, Nina initiates a progressive step by taking Chinese language courses in college.

Growing up in Chinatown in New York City, Nina used to consider Chinese her native language because it was the first language she ever learned. Some other informants had the same experience too. When Nina got more exposed to English in
school, she gradually lost her ability to speak Chinese because the environment was not ethnic language friendly. She complained about how difficult Chinese was for her to learn because it was constructed in a completely different system than English. She refused to learn Cantonese when she was younger. Her parents did not push her as well. She now regrets that she cannot communicate in a deep level with her parents in Chinese.

I didn’t feel it [Chinese school] benefited me because I enjoyed American school more than Chinese school. Well, you get a lot of playtime when you’re younger. Well, like… a lot of playtime, and napping. You don’t have to learn as much as you should. Whereas in Chinese schools, all really strict, like you have to learn this, you have to learn that. ‘Cause I think it would’ve been easier if Chinese characters were more of like …what you call it, like the alphabet kind of thing. ‘Cause in English you learn A, B, C, D, you know, all the way to Z, and you put them together, and then you create a word.

Whereas Chinese, it is like complete memorization. [Nina, 3/17/08]

From how Nina described it, Chinese school and American school implement two totally different teaching style and atmosphere. She did not understand the difference between Chinese and English and why learning Chinese involved memorizing characters.

I only went [to Chinese school] for one year though. And then, I quit. But, yeah, I am trying to learn it now. ‘Cause my grandfather, he wants me to learn it. Initially, I was pressured to do it. But then, eventually, I realize, like, it’s like the most spoken language in the world, one of the most spoken languages in the world. Well, my dad doesn’t pressure me at all. My mom and my grandpa, they are very much like, “Oh, you are Chinese. You need to
learn Chinese. You need to learn how to write.” And everything like that. And like, even you grow up in a Chinese community. You are always gonna think “Oh, you know, only Chinese is gonna be useful here.” [Nina, 2/27/08]

Nina resumed learning Chinese after she went to college due to pressure from family to facilitate intergenerational relationships, and strengthen ties with ethnic community. Some informants indicated that their Chinese language proficiency influenced how “Chinese” they could be, especially when they were hanging out with a group or in a community where Chinese languages were the main tools of communication. In those situations, they felt a lack of “Chinese essence” or less Chinese because of not being able to speak the language fluently. Among those who can speak some Chinese, their proficiency mostly was just conversational with basic words and phrases. It also depends on their parents’ English proficiency and their relationship with their Chinese grandparents. Usually, the better their parents’ English was, the less likely they had to practice Chinese. For those who were close to their Chinese grandparents who did not speak English very much, those informants were motivated to learn the language.

Jane’s father was an American-born Chinese and her mother emigrated from Hong Kong. They both worked at professional jobs, where English became their primary language. Even though Jane’s parents tried to speak only Chinese at home, it did not work out because Jane and her brother had too limited a vocabulary to respond. It is always a dilemma for immigrant parents because they have to think thoroughly about whether forcing children to learn Chinese would counteract the development of their English capability. Even though language is an important component of ethnic identity, it conveyed more symbolic meaning, and most of the times conceded to the predominance of English.

Jane: I also went to Chinese school. It was actually located in one of the local
high schools. And it was just rented out as hallway classrooms. It was actually Friday night. And it would be like from 7 to 10 at night or 6 to 9 or something like that. It was only once a week. And then they would have classes, like cultural classes after. I learned Chinese folk dancing. Like Chinese cultural dance, so I felt like I liked the dancing a lot more than actually going to the class. I was learning Mandarin there. The language was really hard for me to learn ‘cause I was so used to hearing Cantonese. And I was like learning Mandarin grammar. And like, it was just very different from…speaking Cantonese. So it was hard for me to pick that up.

Q: Why did your parents take you to the Mandarin class?

Jane: I feel like they just wanted us to be exposed to it, not so much like learn it to be proficient in it, maybe just to learn about Chinese culture. ‘Cause they also taught like beyond writing and speaking. They also gave history lessons and stuff. So, it was good for us to be exposed to that. [Jane, 4/16/10]

Based on what Jane recalled, Chinese schools play a critical role providing a cultural environment where children of immigrants could have more exposure to Chinese cultural traditions and values. They organized “Chinese-language books and Chinese cultural artifacts,” holiday celebrations, and “shows and events” in addition to traditional language and subject teaching classes. How to value the importance of Chinese schools may vary for different people. But as an ethnic cultural institution existing more than a hundred years, all activities that Chinese schools organized “not only exposes children to their cultural heritage, reaffirming their ethnic identity, but also provides opportunities for the children to work closely with their parents and other adults in the community on common projects”(Zhou, 2009, p. 158). If learning Chinese and going to Chinese school were the things that immigrant parents would
encourage their children to do, there were some things that parents would warn and forbid their children from doing.

I would categorize how Chinese parents use their authority to control their daughters’ involvement in social domains as another dimension of cultural practice within the family. My informants highly respected their parental authority when they were turning into teenagers and started internalizing social codes and norms. Like when Nina tells me how traditional she was, she says, “I think I was more of the submissive type. I really listened to what my parents said and stuff like that.” This was true whether they agreed with their parents’ views. It was a routine for Nina to get parents’ permission before she made any decisions.

I made the decisions. But then I would always have to tell my parents to confirm it. Because she [her mother] doesn’t trust me. She is very over-protective. So she wants the best for me, and then you understand that. But then like, I am always like Oh, I have my own life, I have to make the decisions for my own life. So I try to make the decisions, but I also try to get her to confirm it before I actually make it. But that way it sort of feels like she is helping me make the decision. [Nina, 2/27/08]

What is distinctive about parent-child relationship in Chinese families is the position of parents is sacrosanct and needs to be respected whereas children “are allowed some discretion in decision making and may offer their opinions to participate more equally in decisions made about themselves and the family” (Segal, 2002, p. 317). The tensions between Helena and her parents embodied not only intergenerational variances but also intercultural clashes. Helena’s conflicts with her parents were very much shared by many other informants regarding how strict parents could be when they give orders also without also providing any explanation for the commands. It is
no surprise that similar experiences dealing with Chinese parents worked as important referential resources for my informants to develop intra-group affinity and a collective identity, an argument illustrated later in Chapter Six.

We would argue because like sometimes “Oh, it’s not fair!” And blah blah blah. And that was when I was like younger. When I was in high school, and then, there was a lot of...like, if I really wanted to go out and do something, and there was like, “Well, you are living in this house. You can’t do that ‘cause we said so!” And every once in a while. I never understood when she (her mother) brought this up. She was like, “Well, you know, you are living in a Chinese household. We don’t do that. So you can’t!” And I was like, “What does that have anything to do with me? I just wanna go out!” And it was like, “You know, there is something you just can’t do because we say so!” My mother really believes in filial piety. And she was like, “You know, we are your parents. You should always listen to us!” [Helena, 3/12/06]

Helena’s parents like many other informants’ parents made a big difference between academic activities and social ones. When it came to the former ones, they barely turned down my informants, and always let them do whatever they wanted. But when it came to social things, parents had a contrary attitude. For example, Helena’s mother said “Girls don’t do that” to Helena to discipline her from going out on dates in high school. Helena never dated anyone until she got into college. But such rules were also subject to gendered annotations when considering how daughters and sons were treated by parents. Helena’s brother was not restricted from dating that seriously and could go out on a date when he wanted. In response to it, Helena concludes, “that’s because he is a boy.” Helena was not the only one feeling this way.

Nina also reports that her mother set up different standards for her and her
brother. According to Nina, her mother thought that “Girls are supposed to be sort of quiet, reserved. They are not supposed to hang out with guys, whereas the guys are supposed to be the ones who are pursuing girls. They are supposed to ask girls out. So in some ways, it’s sort of like the guy’s obligation to ask, to start the relationship” (Nina, 2/27/08). Either to protect daughters from any harm or to teach them to follow conventional male-initiated mode, my informants were kept reminded by their parents that they were girls so that they were not allowed to do certain things, which does not necessarily quite compatible with how the American society believes that children and parents are expected to be equal and independent individuals. Whereas, for instance, in Chinese families, “dating in high school, especially for girls, is still considered not only a distraction from academic study but also a sign of unhealthy, promiscuous behavior” (Zhou, 2009, p. 196).

One theme that repetitively appeared in a couple of informants’ stories was how their parents did not allow them to sleep over a friend’s house when they were growing up. They figured that the reasons could be their parents worry about safety issues, and their desire to protect them from any harm. Such restraint could also originate from traditional conservative idea of keeping a distance from others to preserve their own privacy favored by Chinese culture. However, it somewhat put family values at a disadvantage as if immigrant parents unreasonably overacted to what was considered normal by the outside society. At the same time, my informants had to confront the pressure of not being able to behave as others around did, and how contradictory their parents’ values and criteria sounded.

In American culture, people sleep over their houses when they are growing up as kids. I don’t know like if…That’s probably very common in a lot of countries, not just the U.S. But like girlfriends, we get together, we would be
like let’s go to watch movies at my house, and then we will stay overnight. We’ll hang out until tomorrow morning, and your parents will come to pick you up and take you home. And my father’s extremely against it, for whatever reason. He was very very suspicious of other families. He didn’t want anything to happen to us. [Peggy, 10/13/09]

I guess they were really strict. I mean there were some things that they just didn’t let us do, like sleep over and that stuff. Like when I was really little, they wouldn’t let me sleep over at, you know, your friends’ houses. Like I can stay and play with them. But I would have to come home after a certain time. Like I don’t think that I went on a sleep over until I was in high school. I could go over my friends’ houses and play. But I couldn’t sleep over there. So they [my parents] were very protective. I can understand how you don’t let your kids going over somewhere strange. But I couldn’t understand it at that time ‘cause everyone else, my other friends, got to go on sleepovers. So there were things like that. And my father was very protective. He was like, “You shouldn’t do that! That is dangerous!” I think … there are some times like, “You shouldn’t do that ‘cause that’s not ladylike!” And there is little of that word, “Oh, you are a girl!” [Helena, 3/12/06]

Peggy and Helena were not given permission to sleep over until their late teenager years. This intergenerational and intercultural clash somehow affected how much they wanted to associate with their parents’ culture when it was represented in such an arbitrary, alienating format. One point not sufficiently addressed by segmented assimilation theory is how gender, as a social construct, structurally regulates the experience of Asian men and women differently, especially considering thousands of years of Confucianism in Asian countries. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) mentioned that
traditionally girls are raised to be submissive and to conform to parental authority and boys to be progressive and competitive, and these differences may have gender effects on their adaptation. However, some studies also showed that females outperform their male counterparts in educational achievement and in the job market, especially in Asian ethnic groups, very likely because of the traditional way they are raised (Portes, 1996; Rumbaut, 1999).

When I asked Ann how differently her parents treated her and her younger brother, she thought she was raised to respect her parents and become more obedient so as to keep working hard and studiously. AF also told me a similar story about how her parents treated her and her siblings. Compared to her brother, she and her sister were much more independent and self-controlled. It cannot be foreseen how relevant their different performance and personality would be years later. Nonetheless, it made a difference at this point when it came to educational achievement and parents’ attention.

I guess they did expect me to become a doctor. That is like the stereotypical kind of Asian parent, every Asian parent’s dream. When I was younger, getting anything lower than 85 was bad. I didn’t get B or anything for… like not having high grades or whatever. But if I got 100, I would be rewarded like a dollar. Um…yeah, and my parents weren’t that… they wanted me to do well. And they stressed education. But I think they know that, because I am self-motivated, that they don’t have to keep pushing me. But whereas my brother, they have to constantly remind him that you need to do well in school. It would be helpful for your future. Like that. With me and my sister, it is not that. We are both like independent. And we would do things on our own. [AF, 4/28/10]
For informants like AF, Ann, and Kelly whose brother was the youngest among their siblings, although their parents emphasized education for all children, there were variations in terms of the subtle and minor ways that their parents would treat daughters and sons differently. Compared to how my informants worked hard to reach their parents’ standards and satisfy their needs, their younger brothers could get away from their parents’ rules more easily. However, on the flip side, as boys, their brothers were assigned with more attention and parental supervision because of the fact that they needed more time to be disciplined with good behaviors and work ethic.

Of course, the effort that my informants’ parents made to educate their children with ethnic culture, codes and values did not only involve public sphere. To a large extent, my informants were instilled with cultural knowledge about their ancestors when they were participating, helping, or even just watching what their parents did on particular culture-related occasions in their house. Independent of residential location and class background, the majority of my informants celebrated some Chinese holidays at home, mostly Chinese New Year or Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. Some participated in their parents’ ancestor worship rituals and holiday dinner preparation activities at home. But most of the time informants just followed along with their parents’ celebration without any further explanation of the history and cultural background attached to each holiday and why they were doing certain things for a particular ritual. Sandy’s family kept a lot of Chinese traditions mostly because of her mother. During holidays, her mother cooked many Chinese dishes for the whole family. She observed,

> It was like fried pork. She would also cook rice cake. She would cover it with some peanut, sugar mixture. And then she would cook tons of fried stuff. She would fry fish. She would cook a lot of different kinds of dishes. She would
fry potato. She would fry shrimp, and eggs. It’s a whole egg. And she first boils it, and takes the shell off, dumps it in hot oil. So the outside is crispy, and the inside is soft. So that’s one of the things my mom does. And for Chinese New Year, every year, my mom brings out the hot pot, an electric pot. And she would have raw dishes on the side. So you could put it in the hot pot. And the thing she did was she would buy fish balls, squid. She’ll get the sausage. She’ll get some rice cake. She’ll get some flat rice noodle. And she also cooks some stir-fried dishes. She stir-fries noodles. She also stir-fries some other rice cake. She also brings out lobster. She cooks that every year.”

[Sandy, 3/20/08]

Other than cooking food in Chinese cuisine and getting Chinese groceries, Sandy’s family practiced the tradition of cleaning up the house and taking a shower before New Year’s Eve. Since they lived in Chinatown, they would also go to the annual parade, and see the dragon dance and fireworks. But when I asked her if she knew the reason why people celebrated Chinese New Year, she gave me a very short answer, “Bring luck.” As a Buddhist, her mother occasionally would pray to a shrine, which was used to venerate their ancestors, and hope they would be blessed.

Once in a while, she would do that. And she would pray. And she would say stuff like, “Oh, make sure that Sandy is doing great in school.” You know, that my brother and sister are doing well. “Make sure they are doing well, and their working…” And blah blah blah. And she would bring paper money. She would get a big bowl, like a big metal bowl. And she would buy paper money. Not the real ones, right? The paper money is sort of yellow, and has gold glitter. It’s like a square. And it has Chinese letters on it. I asked her why she did that once. She told me that, “Oh, it’s to give money to your dead
ancestors, or for their afterlife, for some money.” I was like, “Oh, okay.” I would help her. If I see her doing it, I’ll go and fire. And she would say stuff too. She would say the same thing. “Please make sure…please support, help protect…” I remember when I was really little, we would go to the Buddhist temple. And we would eat all vegetarian food. And that’s where your fortune’s told. Like they would have chopsticks or some sort of stick, and you would shake it around. And they would like fall out on the ground. And then they would tell my mom what’s going to happen that year. But once I grew up, I never went there anymore. But I know she would go with my aunts and my grandma. [Sandy, 3/20/08]

The activities listed above concerning learning language, parenting, regulating social norms, celebrating Chinese holidays in one way or another shaped my respondents’ awareness of where their family came from, and how to identify with their cultural roots. Those are different scenarios where Chinese culture was represented by immigrant parents and passed on across generations. In some cases, parents might encounter stronger resistance from children than in other situations. Nevertheless, there is one domain where disagreements between parents and children would be least likely to happen, and that domain is education.

Education Is Important

A common theme shared by all of my informants is that their parents emphasized education regardless of their family background. During K-12 years, they were always pressured to excel in comparison to their peers with higher achievement and to go to well-known colleges no matter they were from working class or middle class background. Education, according to their parents, would help them overcome barriers embedded in the hierarchy of socioeconomic status. Having a better life in
both the social and financial sense was usually the most prominent determinant for their parents to travel across national boundaries. While paying attention to developing their children’s talent in music, sports and other abilities, most Chinese immigrant parents, in my study, focused more on children’s academic studies. Some parents were very strict with grades and pushed their children very hard. In my informants’ accounts, those parents were usually categorized as “typical Asian parents” who always wanted their children to score higher and study harder. Some informants mentioned that their parents only cared about their academic achievement, and did not support or even opposed their participation in extracurricular activities. Some parents, on the contrary, encouraged my informants to learn musical instruments and play sports. Another group of parents took a moderate attitude towards the role of institutionalized formal education, and tried to instill in my informants a more pragmatic viewpoint of balancing academics and social reality. For those parents who were businesspersons, educational training in college cannot guarantee a successful life because more and more people with a bachelor’s degree remain unemployed. In order to “make it” in this society, they insisted that my informants should be more conscious of their social capital and interpersonal networks. Education, especially higher education, is considered the most effective route to success for Chinese immigrant families, and therefore is highly stressed.

While Chinese immigrants extremely emphasize school achievement and grades, which reinforces the stereotypical images of “model minority” and Asian parents, it is important to clarify that post-1965 new immigrants that my informants’ parents belong to, were composed of not only manual workers but also highly educated professionals. Hence it is not surprising that they would expect the same out of their children. Helena’s parents received their undergraduate and graduate degrees
in Canada respectively. One tenet embraced by them is “As long as you work hard, you are definitely going to college.” When informants told me how strict their parents were, I sometimes asked them what would be considered “good” based on their parents’ standard. The answers I got most of the time were like very high grades, preferably straight As, no tolerance of anything lower than A minus.

As far as being capable of doing things with education or achieving what we wanted to, they were very objective as far as you know “You are my kids. If you wanna do it, and if you work hard, you can do it.” When I was at home over Christmas time, and I was going through all papers and stuff, and there was a report card from my Social Studies class from seventh grade. And my average for that semester, ‘because we did quarters, so it was a second quarter average, and the average was 93. And the first quarter was 97. My father had written a note that said, “Helena’s grades do not seem to be improving. She is not doing well. And I would like to set up a conference.” And it was a 93! And they wanted to set up a conference cause that wasn’t good enough! Compared to the last quarter, there was something wrong. I wasn’t doing well enough. I just think of something like that, like they expected a lot of good work. Yeah, I guess they were really strict. [Helena, 3/12/06]

Helena’s words highlight how strict her middle-class Chinese parents were by the example that they expected Helena to keep achieving higher grades. Once she was not improving by their standards, even thought the grades were still extremely high, they would worry that she was doing something wrong. Even though my informants joked about how extreme their parents’ behaviors could ever be, they also shared with their parents that education is important and they should do well in school. None of them
ever mentioned the term “model minority.” However, they all understood how Chinese, more generally, Asian students were portrayed in American mainstream media as studious, nerdy, good at math and science, and play violin and piano. Yet, regardless of how they responded to those stereotypes, my informants thought their Chinese upbringing valuing education was part of the reason why they could identify racially and ethnically as Chinese American. Even in Lucy’s extremely Americanized family, education was still so highly prioritized that there could never be a second choice. As Lucy recalled, appreciation of education became not only a motivation for her upward mobility but also something inherent within the family ethnic ethos that needs to pass down from one generation to another.

I have a very strong work ethic, and I have to get perfect scores on everything. And I would do my homework for four or five hours at night even though we did not have that much homework to do. I would do it over and over and over again. So I had to memorize it so that I almost knew it, the spelling, or math. I knew how strict my parents were about school, and how my grandparents were strict about school. I got a lot of praise from my grandparents and parents on what I did really well. And I like that. I think any kid likes that. I had been working hard. If I got anything lower than an A, my parents would deny it. They were strict with my grades. They wanted me to do well, and get all As. I appreciate what my parents did for me because they gave me a good work ethic. And I do understand things very well. And I did do well in high school and in college. I am fine on my own. I have a good ethic in order to get my work done. My other friends whose parents didn’t care much about their education were struggling in college and high school, and had to ask me for help, or had to ask someone else. They didn’t do as
well. I appreciate it. I know there is a big difference, and how much my parents, my mom and my dad, put into my education. Even when I told my dad that maybe I would go to college, or maybe I would do something else, or sell something in the stores, he was like, “No, you are going.” There was no question you were going to go. And that was never an issue. They were just telling me, “You are going to college.” That was what you were gonna do. You had no choice for going. I still had high expectations of myself. I will probably tell the same thing to my kids. If there is something passed on, I guess it’s culture. Yes, I just really had to work very hard. I’ll probably do the same thing to my kids. [Lucy, 9/17/04]

Lucy’s parents identified only one goal for her to pursue: going to college. The message sent out here was obvious: education was crucial to avoid structural obstacles and lead to a better life. The same argument also applied to Nina’s family. Her father, physically disabled, worked as a waiter in Chinatown. When she was young, her parents always told her the hardship and difficulties that they encountered after coming to the U.S. In their opinion, because they did not get the chance themselves and knew how hard life was for working class manual labors, they were very concerned about their children’s education because it could be a powerful tool to overcome class disadvantages and racial marginalization.

First of all, because they never had the opportunity to really finish their education because of like financial matters and then also because education wasn’t …like structured or, do you know what I am saying by “structured?” I mean it’s not as good as it’s here. And we have it a lot better than they do. And then since they are working hard, they do manual labor, and then one of the reasons for education itself is like you can get an easier job that you don’t
have to do… you know what other people have to. So then like my parents always emphasize how they are trying to find money so that we can go to college and stuff like that. And that was really embedded into my childhood.

So I grew up really really wanting to work hard. [Nina, 3/17/08]

Nina recalled that her parents, who started off from a lower level and suffered a lot due to structural restrictions, considered education as the only means for her to transform her life. Embedded in her family education was parental expectation of her going to college and making more money. Nina’s parents made it very clear that educational success was a paramount prerequisite to have a promising career in the future.

I guess every parent wants their kids to be successful. And usually the most successful jobs were like lawyer, doctor, something like that, something along those lines. When we were younger, they were like, “Oh, you know, you are gonna grow up to be like somebody really successful. Maybe a doctor.” And my dad has a bad leg. So then he was always like, “Oh, Nina’ll grow up, and she’ll be my leg.” Or something like that. So like, in some ways, it’s sort of like inspiration. [Nina, 2/27/08]

From Nina’s parents’ point of view, being a doctor is an example of success. It was very common for Chinese parents like Nina’s to suggest that their children to choose particular well-paid and decent occupations. Interestingly, most informants would comply with their parents’ advice although they also notice that advice may be somewhat of stereotypical and just based on what they were good at but not what they were really interested in.

[I did] really well in school, a lot better than what I am doing now. Like 90, 93, or 94. I wasn’t like, sort of, not in an honors program kind of thing. It’s
called SP, Special Program. And I think there were only four out of the twelve classes were like part of that program. And then, sort of like competing against each other. I wouldn’t say I was top. But then, I tried hard, I worked hard. So, I think that’s the only reason why I got my grades. Well, back then, I was very, very into… you know how Asian parents strict and always want you to do better kind of thing. So even I get like 95, I was very unsatisfied and stuff like that. [Nina, 3/17/08]

Challenging the popularity of the “model minority” myth, Nina showed that her good grades did not have that much to do with her being Chinese but came from her hard working. On the other hand, she also acknowledged and took it for granted that her parents as typical Asian parents were supposed to expect children to have higher level of educational accomplishment.

In addition to outstanding scores, Lynn’s parents pushed her and her brother to learn music instruments, martial arts, and go to SAT tutoring classes. All of this, in their mind, should better help children with college applications. Asian parents like hers stress so much about higher education because it was so accessible that all efforts would be paid off as long as their children work hard enough.

They [her parents] pressured me to learn violin. When I was in junior high school, I learned it for about a year and a half. And I think they mostly wanted me to learn just for me to get into a better college. They wanted me to put something on my resume or on my application. So for them, it seemed more of a value of career building. And also when my parents could afford it, we would take SAT classes and stuff like that. So there was like a lot of extra learning in addition to school. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

And my parents, the way they taught me, in the beginning it was the very
traditional … I guess why I consider it traditional by bringing up a kid in a Chinese family is like grades, and you need to get the good education, and they really push for reading and math, and everything like that. Actually, both of my grandparents’ sides are very Chinese. So they would really push for good grades. [AC, 11/24/09]

Although coming from different family background, Lynn and AC shared with each other that their family both committed a lot to their education by encourage them to learn musical instruments, participate in various extracurricular activities, and do extra academic work. Not them but also a couple of my other informants also engaged with such endeavors with a purpose of getting into a good college. For example, the extracurricular activities that Helena and her brother participated in covered a lot of aspects ranging from music, sports to even martial arts. Even though her parents’ philosophy was more laid back without targeting towards competition or college preparation, it still exemplified this socially constructed notion of “Asian American” success, which highly exerted pressure on children.

We did a lot of other things. Like, I remember like a child I did gymnastics, ballet, and dance, and piano. My brother took up violin for little bit. So there were a lot of extracurricular activities set up at the same time. They wanted us to be well-grounded so we would be able to play piano or … cause I played piano for like ten years, and like my brother plays piano as well. So we did extracurricular activities. My brother does Kung Fu and Tai Chi and stuff. And he plays soccer and basketball and some other things. [Helena, 3/12/06]

If extracurricular activities did not particularly serve the purpose to academically excel, workbooks that Helena’s mother required her to go through month after month
and year after year absolutely functioned strategically to nurture children with a strong commitment to education. At that time, Helena’s parents, especially her mother spent a lot of time urging her to finish those different subject workbooks. There was no space for any argument or compromise.

I think my mom loved workbooks. Like there were always workbooks for something. When I was really young, my first workbook was like, how to write your name, know your address, not to talk to strangers. From that like huge math workbooks, and SAT workbooks, and GRE workbooks. There were always workbooks involved. Yeah, like education was always a big thing. I mean a lot of kids do workbooks. I think the way that was presented to us as children is you have to do it, like you are not gonna do well if you don’t do it. We had to do it at least once a week, on top of regular schoolwork. I remember when we were in forth, fifth and sixth grade, a lot more children were home schooling. So my parents, my mom was so good at finding these workbooks. She would go to teacher’s stores and find workbooks there. But they started to come out as those home workbooks, like this big [a gesture showing how thick they were] and there were like multi-subject workbooks, like reading, like math problem, like everything was on the workbook because it was a home school workbook, and on different subjects. And it was like you were expected to do these pages of it. And sometimes, it didn’t get done. And we would get in trouble for not doing it. ‘Cause we were like, “I have school work. I don’t wanna do a workbook.” But it was like you have to do it. So in order to catch up the standard, you needed to do thirty pages of the workbook. I didn’t want my parents yelling at me. Sometimes, I was like, “Oh, I don’t care.” But then they would scream at you, then you cried. And
you felt bad about everything, and they screamed at you. So you ended up
doing your workbook. [Helena, 3/12/06]

Many studies investigate correlations between high educational achievement of
Chinese and Asian students and the length of residence of immigrant generations in
America, local ethnic and cultural environment, and family social and economic
background since those influence the adaptation of children of immigrants to school
and the society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 2004). Although many informants’
parents brought into their child rearing with high educational aspirations for their
children, only a few like Helena’s mother could translate those aspirations into real
actions in combination of their own intellectual ability and resources. My informants’
exceptional performance in school was largely due to the centrality of education
recognized by both parents and children. As one of many parenting strategies,
workbook employed by Helena’s mother represents parents’ intensive involvement
with and seriousness and strictness about children’s schooling.

Stereotypical representations of Asian American students often only focused
on how well they performed in school and many exams, competitions, and tests, but
rarely touched upon how much extra effort they and their family invested in their
education. What made it even worse was that it concealed the fact that not only were
they not equally benefiting from affirmative action, they also had to compensate for
their disadvantaged position in the mainstream society by exhausting resources in
their ethnic community. Asian American students were always doing well was not a
universal truth. Helena’s and many other informants’ parents all behaved similar to
this highly disputed image of “Tiger Mother” (Chua, 2011). However, it finally rested
with my informants in terms of how they would want to inherit what their parents
tried to instill or they were more anxious to transform the “original” culture
represented within their family to invent a more heterogeneous one. When Helena reflects on her upbringing, she shows thankfulness to her parents and ascribes her academic success to their strict cultivation. But she says that she still prefers a lenient upbringing style with more choices and freedom.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I mainly discuss three aspects of my informants’ lives: how they were educated to become Chinese American racially, ethnically, and culturally; local social landscape in their residential areas, cultural practices and ethnic affiliations; and the importance of school achievement and education. Participants from white suburban areas and inner-city ethnic enclaves had different ways of associating with ethnic culture and to what segments of the mainstream they would adapt to. How my informants identified themselves during periods of childhood and early adolescence was largely subject to social and peer influence, and interactions with cultural information and knowledge from their immigrant families. The reciprocal and interlocking process of accumulation of ethnic capital and academic success in school proves that my informants, fully accepting (or rejecting) neither American nor Chinese cultural values and norms, right fall into the middle, where they learned to strategically cope with their Chinese\(^1\) upbringing and socialization in American society. But it does not mean that they all have the same level of acceptance and engagement with both worlds, and the segmentation of their adaptation process is due to not just culture but also class and race (Tong, 2003; Zhou, 2009). In my research, those who grew up in an all-white environment may not value a “Chinese” look that much since they may be singled out as being “different.” Whereas, being knowledgeable of Chinese language and cultural practices and keeping ethnic social

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\(^1\) I use Chinese mostly because that is how it could usually be viewed in others’ eyes, no matter how they themselves would define it.
networks promotes developing ethnic pride and solidarity, and a sense of authenticity, although they may conditionally invoke their ethnicity and identify with some aspects of what was passed down from their parents’ generation. Regardless of their class diversity, all participants and their parents share a standpoint that education is the most effective way to succeed. Some participants even feel obliged to protect their family’s “face” and honor by having high academic attainment. My informants also had to deal with the racialized “model minority” myth, which has been imposed on other Asian ethnic groups as well. In next chapter, I will investigate how they transform to be more self-motivated and conscious of their own identity when they start exploring college during this transitional time from late adolescence to early adulthood in their life course, and have exposed themselves more to the broader society.
CHAPTER FIVE: NAVIGATING IDENTITY THROUGH COLLEGE

The half century since the civil rights movement in the 1960s witnessed a great increase of minority students in colleges across the country. It was reported that “between 1984 and 1995, the numbers of Asian Pacific Americans enrolled in higher education institutions rose 104.5 percent, with comparable figures of 37 percent for African Americans, and 104.4 percent for Hispanics” (Sidel, 1994, p. 42). The social and political movements of the mid-60s also brought to the front the politics of “Asian American consciousness,” and nurtured Asian American studies programs in colleges nationwide. Research shows that, in more than 150 universities, Asian American students made up more than 10% of their whole student population (Kwong & Miščević, 2005, p. 364). However, these figures did not transform the overall racial composition of higher education institutions. In reality, Asian American students encountered institutional barriers ranging from restrictions of their admission to top universities to racial stereotypes limiting them with a glass ceiling. Nowadays, campuses are still controversial places where issues of race, class, ethnicity and culture intersect, and “larger societal debates on questions of racial equity and integration” (Kibria, 2002b, p. 184) are brought up often.

In my study, during college years, children of immigrants who are coming of age like my informants expose themselves to people from different backgrounds, previously untouched ideas, organizations representing various interests, and have the opportunity to explore themselves while engaging with difference and group membership. I would like to extend the scope of community from ethnic residential and cultural communities, which are fully discussed by segmented assimilation theory, to college ethnic organizations. My informants rely on those organizations for (re)inventing their own ethnic and racial identity. In addition to financial and human
capital, social capital, including social networks and contexts, internally and external, affects which segments of the American society that immigrants and their offspring would be driven to adapt to in the long run. The accounts of my informants in this chapter also show that choosing a college major always involves negotiations between personal interests which may frustrate their parents and what is labeled as a stepping stone leading to a promising and successful life. For those whose parents did not have a college experience, they went through a more difficult time because, as the first one in their family to go to college, there was a lack of resources and family support when they were in trouble and needed help. Some of them switched majors several times in order to find the best matched one, and some even decided to go into a new field after graduation. Not all of my informants agreed with the way that the myth of “model minority” was imposed on them, especially when their hard work ethic and extra effort were not appreciated or were devalued by their peers and teachers. Those common negative experiences, on the other hand, of dealing with stereotypes actually become a source of sharing, identifying, and differentiating. During their college years, my informants gradually developed a more sophisticated and mature attitude towards what they already achieved and what they still struggled with academically and socially. At the same time, direct parental involvement and influence reduced rapidly during my informants’ decision-making process in college, and as a consequence, many of them learned to make their own life decisions independently.

For my informants, another valuable feature of their college experience is that they got the opportunity to (re)identify who they are, and to develop a sense of belongingness and a new social circle. During the process, they followed different patterns of acculturation and achieving upward mobility. My participants described it as such an enlightening and eye-opening process that enabled them to discover what
was missing from their previous growing up environment. Many of them embraced the idea of being Chinese American through stronger inter- and intra-ethnic connections at their universities. Some informants actively took advantage of pan-ethnic organizations on campus to politically justify and maintain the authenticity of their Chinese American identity and pan-Asianness while constructing an awareness of intra-group differences existing between people who are supposed to share an ethnic identity.

In this chapter, I propose that there are three domains where informants actively engaged with class, race, ethnicity and other social categories during their college years. From the perspective of segmented assimilation theory, these are also the dimensions of adaptation outcomes that Chinese American women in my study showed, and explain why they generally worked their way out and excelled, not like some ethnic groups that were trapped down at the bottom. First, I examine the dynamics of the process of their choosing their academic major, and how they internalized values and messages from their family and the broader society about defining success. Taking courses in, for example, sociological theories, empowered informants to talk about social inequality and racism with a more critical lens, and provided them opportunities to become politically active. Second, I discuss how informants passionately associated with a pan-Asianness by joining different student groups with varied stances of political objectives and agendas. Third, since my informants are approaching marriageable ages, they have already experienced or at least generated ideas about intimate relationships with men.¹ I argue that, in college, my informants seriously develop different takes on dating and marriage, and interactively work their way through negotiations between their parents’ “guiding

¹ I did not intentionally select people based on their sexual orientation. When I asked informants about their past dating experiences or expectation, their answers directly or indirectly showed that they all turned out to be heterosexual at the time of being interviewed.
rules” and their own cultural, ethnic, and racial identities. They have to deal with different segments of the society that they associate with and the racialization of ethnicity.

Basically, I roughly assign my informants’ parents into three groups according to how they rank races when considering whom their daughters should date or marry: (1) only or preferably Chinese/Asian American; (2) prioritizing other social domains such as religion over ethnicity or race; (3) no explicit preference. At the end of this chapter, I hope to defend my arguments that, firstly, my informants, starting from their racialized and marginalized status as Chinese Americans and women, have exhibited their potential of becoming politically active in American racial politics and developing critical thinking of what becoming Chinese American means for individual identity and community collectiveness. Second, in addition to public involvement, I also explore the multidimensional segmentation of “constructing a self” that my informants engage with when they disturb the boundaries of race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and locality. My data show that they immerse themselves into continual negotiations with discursive narratives about how they perceive what segments of the society they are adapting into.

College Majors and Courses

For my informants, the college major decision-making process involved not only an evaluation of their academic merits and advantages. Informants’ narratives suggest that it was a compromise between their own interests and what they were expected to do for the benefit of their future due to pressure from family. Keeping consistent with some studies on children of Asian immigrants in college (see, Louie, 2004), my informants had a trend of congregating in particular fields. Nearly half of them majored in Premed, Pharmacy, Chemistry, Engineering, and Biology, which are
stereotypically marked as “Asian fields.” I argue that they finally ended up majoring in these fields not simply because they were academically competitive. Another theme emerging from my informants’ experiences but not well discussed in literature was how their racial and political consciousness derived from taking particular courses in college, and how that affected their identification and interaction with the local community.

Nina was raised in a tradition of asking for her parents’ approval before she was going to make any decision. When it came to the issue of a college major, it is not surprising that she followed her mother’s strong advice to choose Pharmacy in spite of the fact that none of her parents had even had access to higher education. According to Nina, her mother recommended Pharmacy for reasons that mostly had something to do with their own or their family’s “face.” A complicated but subtle concept in Chinese culture, face can be tentatively translated as “honor” or “good reputation,” and “the children’s success in school is tied to face-saving for the family” (Zhou, 2009, p. 195). Since Nina’s maternal grandparents ranked their children by their wealth, Nina’s parents were given much less attention and care than Nina’s aunts and uncles because they worked as a restaurant waiter and a home care attendant, and had a lower income than her other aunts and uncles. She described her family’s economic situation by using “really, really poor” several times, and pointed out that her parents were “looked down upon” by relatives. As the oldest daughter, Nina felt pressure from her mother to strive for outstanding academic performance in school and surpass her cousins in order to save and retrieve face.

My grandpa liked my mom least. And my step-grandma thinks the same way. That’s one of the reasons why my mom pushes me to work harder. ‘Cause her generation is passed. Now it’s on to me and my cousins. So right now my
eldest cousin on my mom’s side is sort of looked down upon because she has a bachelor’s degree in Asian Studies. But then, she can’t really do much with that. I am not really sure what she does. I think it’s clerical. Like a receptionist. And the money is mediocre. My second oldest cousin on my mom’s side is doing something with airplanes. I am not really sure which department, not the flying part though. And he is making around I think thirteen or fifteen dollars an hour. So then, in some ways, my mom expects me to surpass him. It sort of feels like…you know, if my mom is looked down upon, she sort of expects the children to seek a pride. So I want a great job, and I also want a great job that pays well. So it sort of like brings that family pride and honor thing. My mom, when I was younger, she always emphasized that Pharmacy was a good pay. “If you are gonna be a doctor, it is gonna look better. And you are gonna have an easier life because you are gonna make more money.” [Nina, 3/17/08]

Nina’s parents and her extended family members instilled her generation with the social and class stratification valuing professions that can guarantee a middle-class life and steady financial condition. Studying Pharmacy, going to medical school and becoming a doctor in sequence composed an ideal life blueprint drafted by Nina’s mother for her to achieve in order to gain her family economic profits and good reputation. Embedded in it is also an American-dream-come-true kind of aspiration as Nina was expected to go further than being just “mediocre” like her cousins. Another reason that made Nina want to comply with her mother’s expectations was because her father had a bad leg, and she felt obligated to be able to take care of him as he was getting older. The oldest child and the only daughter in a Chinese family, she is expected to devote more time and energy to her family than her brother after she
grows up, which also adds another strain to her major-choosing process. All in all, her final college major decision was a tradeoff between her mother’s “over-protective” style of parenting, a desire to defend her family’s “face” among Chinese relatives, her father’s physical condition, her own positive internalization of being successful and a cultural sense of obligation to her family.

Another informant, AC, also confronted the same pressure in terms of the superiority of math and science advocated by her extended family over other majors such as arts. Her grandparents would make career suggestions to all grandchildren, emphasizing certain professions like accounting, law and medicine. It needs to be noticed that after entering their early adulthood, mostly in college, the younger generation of new immigrants, which my all informants are part of, distinctly started exploring their personal interests to pursue, and became more aware of their racial and ethnic identity as well as their political positions (Espiritu, 2008; Kibria, 2002a; Thai, 2002). College is an institutionalized space that reflects what is happening in the larger society. Most informants noted that, for the first time, they thought thoroughly about and related to being “Chinese/Asian American” while having more understanding of the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism only after getting into college.

AF’s parents came to the United States in the late 1980s and settled down in Chinatown where they have lived ever since. It was difficult for them to live elsewhere outside of that particular ethnic community without fluent English and a professional education background. AF’s life before college was full of working hard to achieve good grades in school, learning Chinese as an extracurricular activity, helping her parents with all situations that required English to be used, and taking care of her younger brother who had autism by going to all his doctor visits. AF was
admitted as a Premed major. After studying in that program for one year, she decided to switch to African American Studies, which was not a typical choice that Chinese American students would make. When I followed up, she listed a couple of reasons. First, she talked about the competitiveness of Premed, the difficulty of the materials, and her discomfort with the large-scale lecture format.

…freshman year, the classes were okay. They were fairly easy because I took AP courses in high school. But then sophomore year, I started taking Organic Chemistry. Like Cell Bio. And Organic Chemistry, Man, that class’s just… It’s terrible. It’s hard. And I just don’t think that students can learn really well if you are placed in a lecture class. Like lecture style is the worst way for persons to learn. And for classes like that, you need to really…interact with the teacher somehow ‘cause, one thing, it is really hard to stay awake in the class, and learn. And like all the material, they kind of like lecture into you, and you memorize it. It’s hard to apply to your life. And I find that, it is really important to apply Organic Chemistry to your life if you are gonna be like doing research, being a doctor, or like this is what you are gonna be doing. If I can’t relate to the material in the textbook, then it is like really hard for me to learn the information. [AF, 4/28/10]

While she may have had some academic difficulties in the program, what was most difficult for AF was to get really motivated and passionate about the content of Premed courses. In addition, she also had a critical standpoint about the program’s structure and teacher-student relationships.

These people in Premed programs are very competitive. So everything is like, “I need to get certain scores,” “certain grades.” “I need to go to the office hours, and kiss ass to get a good recommendation.” You know, stuff like that.
I prefer small classes where you can talk to the teacher, and there is an exchange of information that you can talk about the material you just learn. And if you have questions, it is easier to ask. Whereas in science classes, it is like the big lecture hall. And you just face the crowd. The professor doesn’t know you unless you go to the office hours. It is like a spectator, audience type of thing. I don’t like that. That is why I fall asleep. So I was like, Okay, this is not what I want to do. [AF, 4/28/10]

AF described how she rejected the pedagogy and culture of science and premed classes. Afraid of getting in trouble, AF did not tell her parents when she wanted to retreat from the hard sciences. Inspired by a black teacher in high school, she tried to take more courses in African American and Native American history. She learned to critically examine the dominance of European history, and gradually developed an interest in ethnic and racial identities. These courses offered her a powerful lens through which she could make connections between African Americans and Asian Americans based on their shared experience of being racially marginalized and struggling for more political rights and equality.

I think all of elementary school, we just learned about European history, and that was not relatable other than learning that Marco Polo stole noodles and made it spaghetti. Learning history from the black perspective is really really enlightening. It’s like turning history upside down. This whole nation was founded on slavery and stuff. And up till last year I was interested learning African American history. But that also motivated me to learn about Asian American history. Because like the 1960s, the black power movement really inspired Asian Americans to become involved in this struggle too. It’s just not as boring. Before, I really didn’t like history because it was all European.
And everything on the pages was about white people, and I am like, ugh, not interested going to history class. But right now, I can see the gaps that my teachers didn’t fill in, and before I came into college. And I think that is why I really like it now. [AF, 4/28/10]

AF reminded us that even history is about representing the past, and what gets to be represented is selective and not value-free. Not many informants explicitly articulated knowledge of civil rights movement and white supremacy with a critical perspective as AF did. She also criticized how Asian immigrants were “fooled” by the bubble of America as a land of opportunity in that there were all kinds of economic and social hardships that Asian Americans had to confront. What was more meaningful in her enlightening journey was her getting in touch with Fred Ho, a Chinese American social activist and jazz artist from New York City who is passionately devoted to Asian American rights and empowerment movement initiatives through integrating African American music with Asian music.

This was through the African American Studies program. Like they had this Jazz festival. Recently, they brought Fred Ho. He is Chinese. He is a Chinese musician. But he plays Afro-Asian jazz. And up till then, before I met him, I was really thinking about doing something for Asia. But I didn’t know what. So, because I saw the connections, like the black power movement, and Asian American movement, the connections were there. But I was like, I need to relate it back to today and make something that relevant. And, when I met him, I was like, “Oh, Man, I know I am gonna be …” He is very like…He considers himself like a matriarchal socialist Luddite. When he was giving his performance, I knew right away that I needed to write about him because he connects ideologies from the 60s together, and he still is in that
kind of state of mind. He is really radical. I think we need more people like
that, especially like today. So I meet with him every once in a while. And, we
just talk about my school, and he helps me with school work, and… When I
told him that I wanted to write about him in a thesis, he was like, “Oh, just let
me know if you need any help.” [AF, 4/28/10]

AF attributed her political standpoint to her connection with Chinese activist Fred Ho,
who in his own work expresses his identity as a “revolutionary matriarchal socialist”
against the oppositional “white supremacist, Eurocentric, patriarchal capitalism” since
class intertwines with gender (Ho, 1999, p. 49). He challenges the tendency of
generalizing the political notion of Asian American identity without scrutinizing its
cultural content and historical roots. When he talks about cultural production, he
implies that a revolutionary work can only be accomplished when it is produced by
means under control to favor a real synthesis, not just a “pastiche or juxtaposition of
contrasting cultures” (Ho, 1999, p. 47) His argument was shared by not only AF but
also other informants when they composed their identity on being Chinese and
American at the same time, and affiliate more with certain segments of American
political life.

Compared to outside influential forces, what I want to mention is that my
informants’ parents usually had much less direct intervention in their daughters’ lives
during their college years. When AF informed her parents of her major switch, they
were both highly against her decision as expected. Her mother was more tolerant, but
still questioning, “I don’t really get why you are studying African American Studies.
You are not black.” Her father worried about her future a lot. As she recalled, “My
father, he is still worried like, how I am gonna find a job after college. He is like, start
listing all these jobs that Asians usually have, Oh, you know, Asians usually, they are
going to law, medical fields, accounting. And I am like, Dad, I will be fine.” Even though AF tried to explain to them why she wanted to transfer and what African American Studies was about, her father still could not understand why she traded off her “promising” future with what he considered a financially unstable failing path. The underlying assumption attached to this prevailing “model minority” myth prescribes an anticipated destination for Asian-origin students in so-called “typical Asian” fields, like Premed, to work hard enough and overcome all barriers. Otherwise, the person should be blamed for not being able to make it. What was interesting was, one of her friends made a completely opposite but widely accepted decision by abandoning her second major, Graphic Arts, and only focusing on Biochemistry. AF felt “weird” when she heard of her friend’s decision because “she told me she took on science just because her mom said so.” She figured out that her friend wanted to stay with Biochemistry because “it’s better to get a job in science ‘cause it is more stable. Whereas with arts, it is not so much.”

Unlike AF and her friend’s changing programs during college, a couple of informants chose to give up their major and tried to explore new possibilities when they were graduating. Growing up in a similar family circumstance as AF, Lynn’s father worked at a hotel in Manhattan, New York for thirteen years. Her mother worked on and off as temporary labor worker in clothing and electronic factories. They expected her to only major in certain fields. As she recalled,

I think part of it was parental pressure. They did want me to be a doctor, like someone who is professional. They said they really wanted me to be a doctor, ‘cause they figured it is more stable, and has good reputation. They seemed like it a lot. So I figured it [her parents’ anticipation] out and gave it a shot. It wasn’t that interesting to begin with. But I figured I haven’t tried it. So I’ll do
it. But I tried it and I didn’t like it. So that’s why I have to change my mind.

So I want to do something else, probably non-profit work. I care more about social justice issues. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

After staying in Premed for one year, Lynn chose to major in Biology and Society, which is an interdisciplinary program that weaves social studies perspectives into science research. Beside pure science courses, the program also covers different sociological frameworks and interpretations of the relationships between nature, human and society. Concentrating on its social components, Lynn did not follow what she was expected to do after graduation, and developed her own political standpoint for social justice as a way against dominant discourses in which Asian women are silent and in the shadow. For a handful of informants like her, college is a site for not only getting trained academically but also exploring subjectivity and raising consciousness across race and gender lines. She was in her last semester when I interviewed her. After almost four years of studying premed and biology, she finally came to a conclusion that she had no more interest in it and wanted to consider something else that she was really passionate about by taking advantage of a transition from college to work field.

Class was one of the most significant issues that parents were concerned about. Many of them urged my informants to look for jobs that should be “more stable,” “known for Asians,” or “respectable.” As a parent who believed the same thing, Jennifer’s mother pulled Jennifer back from majoring in Anthropology using the example of her friend’s son who graduated from the same program but became homeless afterwards. As a result, Jennifer ended up choosing Art History, which kind of followed the steps of her mother who had a B.A. in Art Education. But it did not work out the way that she expected because Jennifer found out later on that “it was
even harder to find a job in Art History than it was in Anthropology unless you go to graduate school.” At the time I was interviewing her, Jennifer figured it out that she wanted to go to the Culinary Institute of America and get her associate’s degree. That was a tough switch since, on the one hand, cooking is usually considered a job taken by working-class people, and on the other hand, she chose a downward path and threw away what she had achieved so far. Compared to what she could have made out of her Ivy League background, becoming a cook may hinder her from moving up along the social ladder. Although her immediate family supported her, she still worried about how her extended family would respond given her family history. Jennifer’s paternal grandfather came to the United States as a diplomat. But the fact that her father’s siblings all worked in restaurants disappointed him. He emphasized the importance of going to college to all of his grandchildren, and considered it the only means of upward mobility. Jennifer was one of his favorite granddaughters because Townhill, the Ivy League university that she went to, was very well-known in Taiwan, where her ancestors originally came from. Going “downward” from the Ivory Tower to working in a kitchen does not simply mean changing careers for a Chinese family like hers. “I was worried that they [her nuclear and extend family] were gonna be really upset. You know, me coming back again. And they worked so hard to get you out of that situation, right? You kind of go right back in. So I think it is a negative thing, at least for certain generation” (Jennifer, 5/20/10). Going to work in a kitchen could be interpreted by her extended relatives as retrogression in her family’s history rather than a Chinese American young woman trying to find her self. Jennifer’s parents supported her decision of becoming a chef and working for some non-profit organizations helping homeless people, which was out of her expectation. She decided to stick to her dream by making a statement, “I am gonna do it anyway cause
that is just what I like to do.” For Jennifer, self-realization conveys more weight than following a typical direction towards achieving certain social status and upward mobility. Moreover, becoming a chef, according to her, does not necessarily contradict with achieving success. Coming from a middle-class family and a white-dominant suburban area, Jennifer, compared to other informants, showed a higher level of social and human capital and upward mobility that eased her assimilation into the mainstream while maintaining loose ethnic ties and affiliation.

In addition to fulfilling the tasks of defending the family’s reputation while pursuing personal interests, my informants also took advantage of varied resources, including peers of similar interests and certain courses, to explore their own identity. When I asked Lynn about her friendship circle in college, she responded with why her decision of making friends was based more on whether she and her friends had the same political agenda than their ethnicity or spatial and social proximity.

I like more to hang out with LGBT friends. ‘Cause I feel like, they care less about being proper and …it’s hard to say. I hate how people are so uptight about what’s proper, what’s not. So I feel a lot of LGBT friends kind of mess around with that. And I thought that was pretty cool. So I have LGBT friends as well. I guess ‘cause most of my friends I chose are more socially conscious. So if I have racist friends, I would probably do not want to talk to them. So the friends I care about are the ones who care about social justice, like being feminist, and being anti-racist. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

For Lynn, what is “proper” (in her definition, “proper” refers to whatever is socially constructed as the norms) was actually what is problematic and should be challenged, and people who cared about social justice and equality were usually those who were not afraid of being labeled as “improper” and against institutions of dominance.
People that she would like to hang out are usually from marginalized locations and political conscious.

In addition to a supporting cohort, the humanities elements of her program offered her multiple social theoretical lenses through which she developed a critical understanding of how racism works in this society institutionally and individually, and interpreted the reality with an academically revised language. However, not different from her fellow informants, Lynn also encountered a barrier having conversations on serious topics and making herself understood by her working-class parents. They spent most of their lives in ethnic economic enclaves, and had never touched upon ideas about how American society is organized by racial hierarchy, let alone how they themselves could be both victims of racism and acting out racism towards other racial minorities.

They [her parents] are also racist towards other races, like blacks and Latinos. So it is really annoying. Once you talk about racism, it kind of uploads different kinds of racism in their own minds. And I don’t like that. Yeah, I would like to address issues where blacks and Latinos are racists towards us. But I feel that is not the dominant issue. The dominant issue is still the institutional racism where you can’t talk about hate crimes to the police ‘cause they maybe don’t believe you. Or they might believe you. But they won’t follow up. I feel that is more important than just racial slurs. Racial slurs are hurtful definitely. But what is more important is that how come there is no accountability after the slurs happen. And I feel that is the majority white issue. And I feel like I try to distinguish that stuff with my parents. But they just don’t get it. They just feel racism is just interpersonal and I feel like it is also institutional. So, and I also feel racism is like that
they stereotype blacks and Latinos. Like they are lazy, and they are all criminals, and stuff like that. I try to address to them, like, “Some Chinese people are lazy too. Some might be criminals. Why are you saying that like the whole race is like that? Everybody in different races could be like that.”

They still refuse to acknowledge it. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Talking about the dilemma of communicating with her parents on racism, Lynn touched upon an important point that the intersection of racism with other forms of oppression makes it hard to “dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1983). Without academic training in social theories, Lynn would never know racism is not just about how people hate or curse each other, but more about an interlocking network of institutions in the sense that racism involves more than just skin colors. Hopefully, when more Chinese and Asian American students are as conscious as Lynn, a new political force is coming into being. How to organize college programs and courses to serve this goal has attracted many scholars’ attention, and a couple of studies have been conducted on Asian American students’ experiences with relevant curricula.

Thai (2002) refers to the same phenomenon in his study of second-generation Vietnamese Americans that “college provided coursework where they could talk openly about issues of race and ethnicity; they noted that courses in such departments as Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies were crucial in helping them see who they were relative to the larger dominant society” (p. 67). Consciousness-raising involves institutionalized effort to promote exchanges between social science scholarship woven together by scholars in the Ivory Tower and everyday practices. Some informants benefited from such knowledge so that they can employ more powerful vocabularies to describe their experiences within a variety of life contexts and situations. For example, it was not until taking a college course that AC began to
reflect on ideas of inequality and power structures and how that related to the way she was treated as being a Chinese American. A feeling of becoming more sophisticated and enlightened further motivated her to examine the question, “Who am I?”

I just took this class. And I never really had a political stance before. But after taking that class, I have noticed the economy, the way society works, how race plays into it, and it’s just this, race is always an issue. Gender is always an issue. Any difference from the central, white, straight male makes you feel inferior. It’s just this centralized idea. And that really captured my attention of how this world kind of functioned. Say, if you are a black woman, you are two degrees from this white straight male. And if you are a black gay woman, you are even further from the center. And that makes that person feel a lot, a lot less than the person in the center. ‘Cause in fact the person in the center of everything controls everything makes it difficult to break out this mentality…the society needs to change. I remember the words “All men are created equal.” Everyone deserves the same rights and equality for all. And in California I really believed that because everyone was equal, and the only thing that makes you different was maybe your personality, you know? But then, in Marysville [her hometown], my very first day of school I felt the huge lack of equality. And from 2nd on to freshman year, it in fact took me a lot… ‘Cause I was like, “Why don’t I deserve these rights? Why don’t I get treated the same as everyone else?” And the fact that I was questioning that, it made me a better person. But I still feel people shouldn’t go through that. And this kind of goes back to the centralized idea of white male, or white straight male, because that’s the people who are making those comments and stuff, and because they have more people … in the United States that makes
it difficult for minorities, and in fact minorities are even a negative term almost, sometimes. It’s another category. I don’t know. And I guess definitely from that class, I realize that my beliefs are very different from all of my friends, my parents, my sister. And it’s…it’s kind of like self-enlightenment almost. [AC, 5/20/10]

In this excerpt, AC pointed out the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality, and reflected on the dominance of whiteness and heterosexuality, the center of power as she understood. She learned how American women had been stereotypically represented by the media as a group reluctant to engage with any political activities, and started developing a political awareness in college. To challenge this twisted image, some recent research sheds light on how Asian American women have changed, and some do “feel empowered and energized by their participation in activities that have value for improving the status of oppressed and disenfranchised groups” (Louie, 2000, p. 22). The more they are conscious of the realities, the more informed Chinese American women, including my informants, could be in terms of whether and how they choose to adapt into which part(s) of the American society/culture. AF’s following words show how she had changed in terms of whom she would like to be friends with, and other aspects of her personal life.

A lot of the people that I have met are very into politics, like even African American history, they know a lot about it, and Asian American history. And I think I can really draw from that. Recently like, they were playing some music. And I am also undergoing a musical change because of this like political transformation. I usually don’t listen to hip hop. But I am like really open to anything right now. All their [people she met in different occasions doing music from an activist perspective] hip hop music is very political.
And I like that. They always, when we talk, it is like hardly any of the usual conversation that people would have and complain. And we talk about how to improve programs in our schools. It is so hard to put it into words. It is just a totally different way. You just have to be there. Sometimes, I find it very hard to relate to my friends because most of them are in pre-med. And they are really thinking about MCATs, and just getting into medical schools. So that is what they talk about all the time. And they are really not paying attention to news, or politics. And when I am trying to talk about them, we end up getting into these arguments. Because we just disagree. And I think that is a result of either ignorance or their lack of, like, political education.

[AF, 4/28/10]

Being exposed to theoretical scholarship in critical social theories, inspired by her personal relationship with a Chinese American activist musician, and supported by a group of people with same political interests, AF even initiated her first activist project in helping build community gardens for events in Harlem, NY. She said, “I didn’t really get politically involvement with anything until I changed my major. That’s what I start doing. And hopefully, I will become a scholarly activist ‘cause I am really interested in activism.” It was a small attempt but conveys large significance for her. When she reflected on her newly developed social relations, she pointed out that these connections influenced her personal political stance. Her interest in different topics than her previous premed friends, who, in her opinion, were unconscious of politics and social reality separated her from them. For those who are concerned about Asian American women’s limited participation in the American political arena, AF’s activist efforts and political transformation may bring some hope for cultivating “future generations of Asian American women to commit to social justice and
change” (Louie, 2000, p. 23).

Pan-ethnic Student Organizations

Participating in on-campus pan-Asian student organizations is a big part of my informants’ college life. Such organizations play an important role inspiring Asian-origin students to group together as a specific collective to initiate political actions, cultural events, and community services. At Townhill, there are twenty-eight Asian- or Asian-American-interest organizations and groups operating under the leadership of a larger alliance called Pan-Asian Students Association (PASA). The association’s goal is community-based to “bring undergraduate organizations representing students of Asian descent together to facilitate networking among the members of the community.”¹ My Townhill informants were members of two general pan-Asian student organizations, one Asian American bible study group, one Chinese cultural dance troupe and two Asian-interest sororities. In contrast, the other white-dominant private school, Orange Lake, did not have a comparable counterpart in terms of diversity and numbers. All informants reported participating in a pan-Asian group were all from the Asian American Students Forum (AASF), as part of the East Coast Asian American Student Union (ECAASU).² AASF’s goals are to “experience, examine, and increase awareness of the Asian American identity by hosting social, educational, cultural, and community service events. Through these interactions, we will lead and promote deep conversations that further the Asian American student body as a lobbying voice on issues of concern to the Asian community and to all other communities.” This statement explicitly points out the importance of Asian American identity and Asian Americans as one entity in order to support itself and reach out, and

¹ From the website of Townhill University, retrieved February 20, 2011.
² Retrieved May 10, 2011 from http://www.ecaasu.org/site/. ECAASU is an intercollegiate Asian-Pacific American advocacy organization and is the largest and oldest conference in the country for Asian American students. I used its real name here.
is very compelling for those informants who wanted to contribute as part of Asian American community.

**Advocacy of Joining**

My informants had different attitudes towards participating on-campus ethnic organizations. Their reasons for taking a side vary as well. Some relied on such group-based connections to reinforce their ethnic identity. Serving in the role of treasurer for AASF, Hebe joined this organization to associate with her ethnic fellows, an aim shared by many of its members.

I did join AASF because I wanted to. Basically, the majority of the school is white. I wanted to be able to meet people that are also Asian. That’s why I joined, basically. And the only way for me to meet people of the same ethnicity or race would be through that club. [Hebe, 10/04/09]

Actually, Hebe was not that interested in coming to Orange Lake because she did not like the fact that the majority of students were white. However, due to financial constraints, she could not go to her dream school that had a much larger Asian student population and felt homey for her. If given the same financial aid package, she should have chosen that school over Orange Lake. Not surprisingly, she was freaked out when she found out that it was hard to meet people of the same ethnic background on the street. What saved her were the resources she got from AASF, including friends she made and cultural activities conducted there. AASF in her opinion was a very inclusive and serious student organization. People were from diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Its “Asian” part includes people born in Asia as well as people born in the U.S. having Asian ancestors. I went to their meetings several times. There were not only Asian faces but also African American and white students. Her description was consistent with my observation.
Mostly Chinese, there’re some Taiwanese, and Korean, Japanese… black people, there are Caucasians that show up. One of our E-board members is half black half white. Our last year’s president, her social circle was very diverse. She met people from different ethnicities, different races. She was involved within a lot of organizations. The people that she introduced to AASF, they weren’t Asian. She would bring African Americans or Hispanics to our meetings, and just to bring them out here, and see if they like it here and stuff. In the meetings we don’t speak Asian languages, we just speak English. We can really communicate and get along with these people. [Hebe, 10/04/09]

Hebe described how this organization was run by an open-minded leader, who embraced a diversity of race and ethnicity among students. According to their agenda, a pan-Asian organization does not have to be restricted to only Asians. When I asked her what their meetings were about, she accentuated how serious their talks were along the lines of identity issues.

Our general interest is talking about issues that are going on in our community. I think our upcoming topic is identity. It is about, like when someone asks you “Who are you,” I would say I am an Asian American female. And depending on what order you put it in, like you put Asian American first, before female, I guess it tells something about you. You know you find something that is important, the way you identify yourself is depending on what order you put in shows a lot about you. We are just going to talk about that, the identifications of yourself. I guess for some members, they come out to have fun, to communicate, not to communicate, but to have a fun time. They really think of games and stuff, sometimes, AASF can get
really serious. And they can really talk about topics. It can start sounding like a class. Some people, they just want to relax, and talk to their friends. But that’s only for our first and last meetings. We actually get really relaxed. But throughout the semester, we talk about very important issues, I guess, or interesting issues. I think one time we talked about how males and females, like if you were a white female, and the white male, and how much money would he have to make in order for you to date him? And then, what about a black male? How much more would he have to make in order for you to date him? And an Asian male. And it’s just so happened that an Asian male has to make a lot more than a white male for a white female to date you. So we talked about dating, and salary, and race, and how it’s all mixed all together.

Yeah, that was one of our topics. [Hebe, 10/04/09]

In Hebe’s eyes, their meeting topics covered a wide range of themes, some of which seriously centered on class, race, and gender. I observed a meeting on identity two weeks after this interview. From eyeballing, more than seventy students showed up, and most of them had an Asian face. Before the meeting officially started, Korean pop music videos were playing on the TV screen in the room. The president, a female Chinese American student, explained how they were going to discuss the topic starting from an exercise. A couple of identity categories were listed on the blackboard, such as age, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation. Every person was asked to rank the first three categories she or he would pick to describe herself or himself and explain why. All participants were divided into small discussion groups and assigned a facilitator from the organization’s committee. The exercise generated a lively discussion with high engagement. Groups shared their own experiences and interpretations of how they understand their own identity, and why they would
emphasize certain aspects more. When I was interviewing some informants who came to me afterwards respectively, without exception, they all showed that this organization helped reinforce their connection with Asian culture by establishing a stronger membership of an Asian clique and more cultural resources than they could possibly access before joining.

Lynn joined Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Alliance (AAPIA), a grassroots political organization at Townhill. Members were all encouraged to contribute to generating topics to discuss with regard to social activism. They not only organized on-campus cultural events but also kept close connections with various ethnic social resources in New York City, which, according to segmented assimilation theory, is a positive factor facilitating immigrant’s acculturation.

It depends on the members’ interests. For example, like I know a hip hop artist from New York City. And I figure it would be good to include him. And my other friend met a community organizer through ECAASU, East Coast Asian American Students Union Conference. And we put those two together. So we talked about hip hop and immigration. Or like hip hop and activism. Stuff like that. There is another event I started in 2007 and we made it an annual event, called the Asian and Asian American Women. Basically we talked about Asian American women issues, like how they are both important in our lives. And we would bring speakers are also Asian American women. They talked about their work, or how they felt about their work related to their identity. Things like that. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Given much emphasis on student organizations and clubs, one aspect about college life that has been apparently left out from contemporary literature is the role of pan-Asian fraternities and sororities in Asian American students’ identification. Different
from student organizations and clubs which are usually campus-based, fraternities and sororities are more of a culture-based national system across campuses marked by Greek letters. They allocate different chapters along the lines of region and school across the country. Although only a very small percentage of my informants were sorority members, their involvement reinforced their connections with the American society by conducting culture-related and general community services. Ann was a member of a national Asian-interest sorority, called Zeta Xi Chi.

We do a lot of community services, and we do a lot of giving money to philanthropy, like raising awareness. And just a lot of Asian awareness programming, just like, you know, to show the student body the different aspects of Asian culture. Sometimes it is like food, dancing. We have another one coming up, and it is about Asian weddings. I guess it is kind of traditions.

[Ann, 11/24/09]

Appreciating an Asian environment, like Ann, Ivy also became a member affiliating with another Asian-interest sorority called Delta Rho Pi Sigma. Joining a couple of “Asian-oriented” organizations on campus including this one, in Ivy’s point of view, effectively retained her Asian identity. She even contributed to the founding of an organization aimed at encouraging Asian American students to express concerns and enjoy rapport among other ethnic members.

That definitely makes me more Asian, I guess, throughout my college career. And I am in triple A [Asian and Asian-American Forum], which is an Asian and Asian American Forum. And I am like the first president of it. Basically it is an ordinary way to focus on mental health and social well-being. It is for everybody in the community. But it is geared towards Asians because, like I said before, Asians go through different levels of stress than other people,
they may experience different things. So I feel a lot of Asians on campus, they don’t show their feelings. Or a lot of people don’t understand like, “Oh my parents stress me out.” But when an Asian parent stresses you out, it is different. So it is a good place we can talk about it, and people understand. And people won’t be like, “Oh why, why your parents are like that?” But instead, it is kind of like, “Yeah, my parents were like that too.” [Ivy, 9/29/10]

This particular Forum was established to improve Asian American students’ mental health as well as raising cultural and racial awareness. According to Ivy, there were many growing up and life experiences that would only make sense to people who grew up in similar cultural, ethnic, class, and racial backgrounds. On their website, they updated upcoming events which were planned according to their levels of attracting people. When I accessed it on February 21, 2011, there were five sequential events in spring covering various topics. For example, there was one titled “Is Tiger Mom Right?” designed to respond to a newly published and hotly debated book called “Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother.” The author, a second-generation Filipino American woman with Chinese ancestors wrote about how she behaved as an extremely strict “Asian parent” in terms of the ways that she educated her two daughters and reflected on her mother-daughter, intercultural, intergenerational relationships. For Asian American students whose parents did the same things, their exchanges of similar growing up stories would strengthen their inter-ethnic ties and help build up collective alliance and identity. Ivy thought it was important to “program” events to “de-stress” by talking about “Asian issues,” which people were not used to do in the past. I was so interested in how she used the phrase “Asian issues,” and figured that it related to the stereotypes associated with how Asian people in general were portrayed in the mass media and how those were internalized by the
public. The following is her illustration using examples of topics they covered in the previous semester.

Last semester, we had a whole series of forums. And one of them was, we talked about how Asian parents think. We invited Asian parents to come in, and gave their viewpoints on things. Another one was, we talked about Asian identity, actually. And another one was Asian fever. We talked about this thing called Yellow Fever, where that came from, that kind of stuff. A lot of it was Asian-oriented, or Asian myths or just things that people talked about, that you wanted to know. [Ivy, 9/29/10]

Ivy’s organization not only involved students but also reached out to parents, and other people who became critically conscious of those issues and actively participated. For her, “Asian issues” or “myths,” even stigmatized, reflected the reality of Asian Americans’ everyday lives. Sharing with other Chinese and Asian American friends the same experiences of being discriminated against, Ivy felt that her ethnic pride was not vanished but became stronger.

I don’t know how to word that. I guess it makes me more aware of that I am proud to be Asian, and there are all these things, these stigmas, that fall under being Asian, and like, it is true. A lot of it is true. You know it is true. But then you can help other people. It is just, you are just kind of there, and tell people that it is okay. Because I’ve gone through so much that I feel like that I can show other people that I have been through it too. So it is okay like that. It is not just you. You know, there are a lot of other people that go through the same thing. I don’t know. A lot of it is just being able to relate to them better. [Ivy, 9/29/10]

Acknowledging the tough reality that Asian Americans were facing and being able to
share common experiences even negative strategically propelled Ivy’s ethnic pride. She realized that getting involved with these sharing activities worked positively as a foundation of making sense of her own identity and associating it with other ethnic fellows’ similar stories.

*Alternative Reactions*

Although some informants who joined pan-Asian student organizations did report a positive influence, Jane experienced it differently. She kept track of the growth of different pan-Asian organizations on campus, but became too skeptical to join any of them. She severely doubted how well the events and activities that those organizations held could represent Chinese culture because, in her opinion, those organizations were “Americanized” rather than authentically Chinese. Another drawback, according to her, was those confusing titles of student groups in the names of Chinese, mainland Chinese, Asian American, Asian Pacific American, and Hong Kong. It only represented a dispersal of an “Asian unity,” which harmed the integrity of Asian-ness. She felt very disappointed about controversies among those groups deriving from this separation of a unique Asian collectivity because she thought there should a unified representing body for Asian groups.

In college, I would try to go to the Chinese Students Organization (CSO) events. But I feel like even those are very Americanized. They even don’t really capture the essence of Chinese New Year anymore. Like, I remember going to Chinese school, they would have the Lion dances. They would have the drumming and fireworks. And it would just be like a very big party. But here, I mean now, they just started having a Lion dance club. So I don’t know. Here, the Chinese culture clubs, I feel like they are… it is very different from what I am used to. So I would like to be a member of the Chinese Students’
Association. But I know the president. She doesn’t know any Chinese. She doesn’t know how to speak any Chinese. They are all “Asian American.” They are all Chinese American. They don’t really know Chinese at all, or they have very limited Chinese. So English was their first language. And I don’t know. We are just not so used to having this traditional kind of celebrations. I don’t know. I feel like everything here is probably watered down, in terms of like Chinese culture. [Jane, 4/16/10]

As Jane suggested, compared with what she experienced in Chinese school, which, to her, embodied the “essence” of Chinese culture, the Chinese Students’ Association was disqualified for its claim to represent Chinese authenticity as a cultural organization. Lack of typical celebrating activities and the leader and most of its members not being able to speak the language contradicted what was supposed to be “Chinese.” That was why Jane thought that that organization was so “Americanized” that made a distinction between being Chinese and being Chinese/Asian American. I would assume that a question lingering around in Jane’s mind could be: How can an Americanized organization help me know more about Chinese culture if it itself does not really have that component?

These ethnicity-based student organizations competed with each other for political representation and identity authority. Their different agenda was drafted based on what parts of a pan-identity they wanted to highlight and can stand for their distinctiveness. Another Chinese students’ organization called Mainland Chinese Scholars and Students Organization (MCSSO) was separated from CSO and formed independently. This one word “mainland” makes a big difference because MCSSO is composed of mostly international students from mainland China, and Chinese languages were widely used. However, it still caused problems for Jane.
But that Mainland Chinese Scholars and Students Organization, they are very… they did all their cultural shows in Chinese. And it’s just so different. I could not even go to those shows ‘cause I couldn’t understand Mandarin that they speak there. And they would have like a Hong Kong Students Organization. I don’t know. They are all just like so broken off. There is no unified Asian American body here. So that’s how I feel like, I don’t know. It’s a little unhealthy, I think. [Jane, 4/16/10]

Jane disagreed with the conflicts between different representing bodies of Chinese/Chinese American students, which, for the most part, originated from different understandings of “Chineseness” and who would be “authentic” to represent it. She expected a unified, inclusive entity that can foster a collectivity among those Chinese and Asian students’ groups.

Because we are all Asian Americans in some sense. But we don’t have any unity. Like the fact that, I think just two years ago, the Mainland Chinese Scholars and Students Organization (MCSSO) was formed because they couldn’t put up with the Americanized Chinese Students Association. Like they didn’t like how Chinese Students Organization was…not …really…Chinese. You know, they would do very Americanized things. It would more be like a Chinese American Students Organization. So instead of CSO, it would like CASO. So since there was a lack of Chinese things in that, the Mainland Chinese Scholars and Students Organization was formed just two years ago. So I feel like it is very unhealthy. Cause it doesn’t show any unity in an Asian American community. So I know a lot of people in MCSSO, the Mainland Chinese Scholars and Students Organization, I know they were born in China. But the fact that they go to an American school that also
makes them American in a sense that they are exposed to American culture. So I feel there should be some sort of compromise between them. Like even though you were born in China, you should still appreciate and respect American culture. And even though you were born in America, you should show appreciation for Chinese culture, especially since you are Chinese. So I just feel like there is no unity in any of the student groups. So I don’t know. I don’t know if any other people share that kind of opinion. But I think it is unhealthy, the fact that like Asians are all splitting up. [Jane, 4/16/10]

The disagreement between CSO and MCSSO, to some extent, projected the struggles between my informants (second generation) and their parents (first generation) in terms of how “being Chinese” could be interpreted differently. Because ethnicity is racialized, the term “Chinese American” is often used to include both first generation Chinese immigrants who were born in China and migrated as adults, and their offspring who were born in the U.S., although social scientists suggest that their assimilation experience should be framed differently. Jane was more looking for a unity as a kind of “compromise” between the two distinct but related groups since she herself got confused about “What our people are?” as Chinese Americans or Asian Americans. But maybe the question was not so much about unification versus separation as to recognize the complexity of “performing Chinese” in American society because it always involves how this ethnic identity is racialized and defined individually and socially.

AC spoke of how she participated in and then withdrew from a Chinese cultural dance troupe. Growing up in a mid-west suburban town in Kansas, AC constantly got comments from her relatives and friends about how she was whiter than Chinese, which were not made in a complimentary tone. Since she liked dancing
and movement, she considered joining this dance group a good opportunity to “hook up with” her ancestors’ culture as well as enjoy something fun. Throwing herself into a group of Chinese Americans did not help with her Chinese-roots-finding process, but, on the contrary, made her more aware of her not being Chinese enough. In other words, her discomfort came from how she felt different from and excluded by other Chinese Americans in the same dance group. If there was a scale to evaluate the “thickness” of her Chineseness, she might score low.

When I was in Chinese Dance Performance, which was a Chinese cultural dance here, I wanted to be more connected with my Chinese cultural side. And being in that group really showed me how different I was. But it’s just that group itself, just being in that environment… Well, they were all ABCs (American-born Chinese). And I thought I was ABC too. But I guess not as … I don’t know I guess I am more American than you know… it was just difficult to categorize myself, especially being in a group with other ABCs. And it was just an eye opening. That’s why I dropped out. ‘Cause I didn’t feel comfortable. I had learning dances, and like you know learning Chinese culture. But the people I couldn’t get along with. And it’s not that I didn’t try. I communicated with them. But it was just… I didn’t… I wasn’t having fun.

You know the reason why I joined Chinese Dance Performance was to gain back my Chinese culture. And just that lack, you know, that lost feeling that I don’t have everything that I need to be Chinese or be a person, you know, that…really kind of influences my confidence as well. Like I don’t belong anywhere, you know? These ABCs, they are just like me. They grew up in the U.S. But I am not like them. So what group am I? You know? [AC, 5/20/10]
Even being grouped into the same box of “American-born Chinese,” AC highlighted how different growing up experiences influenced informants’ self-identity, especially their Chineseness. In some circumstances, pan-Asian student organizations not only failed to achieve solidarity among students of Asian origin, but complicated identity claiming processes. As a consequence of their oversimplifying “Chineseness” or “Asianness,” some people may be singled out as “incompetent” or “unqualified” ethnic members based on their definitions.

**Dating¹ and Marriage**

Another theme that my informants started to seriously consider during their college years is their personal relationship with men, and their expectation of dates and marriage. A young group coming of age, whom my informants chose to partner with demonstrates how they drew the boundary between self and the other while dealing with contradictions between what their parents believed and how they negotiated it and developed their own opinions and attitudes accordingly. In her research on how Korean Americans in New York City chose partners, Lee (2004) reminds us of the importance of examining those second-generation immigrants’ marriage preferences in terms of “providing insight into the collective and personal identities of Asian Americans, as well as the impact the identities have on the way they navigate their social world” (p. 285). How my informants decided to choose their dates or someone to marry was simultaneously mediated by how ethnicity, race, class and gender intersectionally worked in their lives. In this section, I explore parents’ restrictions on informants’ dating and different styles that Chinese immigrant parents showed with regard to how strictly they would insist that their daughters should date.

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¹ The theme of dating became prominent because my informants had relationships or thinking about a future partner, but not so much of being involved in a marriage yet. Upon the completion of my fieldwork, only two informants were married. One was already in a marriage with a Chinese American man when she was recruited. The other married a white man four years after she participated.
only Chinese or Asian men, their ranking along the race line, and my informants’ own attitudes and decisions. Thus, examining the segmentation of my informants’ identification and assimilation requires a close look at how parents got involved in children’s intimate relationship with their preference expressed along the lines of race, ethnicity, class or other dimensions.

*No Dating Until…*

Among the twenty-seven informants, ten of them had never had any formal dating experience at the time when I was interviewing them. The reasons were varied. Some informants recalled how strict their parents were about dating, and they were forbidden from starting it until certain age. Research showed that Chinese parents “are concerned about the risk of premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy—and fear that these will interfere with their daughters’ educational progress” (Zhou, 2009, p. 196). My informants often talked about some restrictions and rigid principles that their parents stick to. Candace said her parents gave her permission when she was turning seventeen, which was confusing. As she complained, “They told me that I could never date anyone until I was 17. I don’t know how they decided on 17. It’s like an arbitrary age” (Cathy, 4/16/10). Ivy’s parents gave her permission when she got into college.

My parents would always argue about the fact of having a boyfriend. And again, that is also a big issue in my family. So I was not allowed to date. Now my mom told me that they are okay with me dating now. But high school, not allowed to, period. But I did it anyway. I would just say to her like, “Oh, we are just friends.” You know, just to make her feel better. [Ivy, 9/29/10]

Ivy got pressure from her parents due to her being the oldest child and a daughter. Compared with how her younger sister was treated, she felt that her parents always imposed strict orders on her in terms of whether she could go out after school, or
asking for permission to go to proms, and of course the right time she could start
dating. In spite of their rules, she started dating earlier in high school and considered
it as a way to rebel against her parents’ unequal treatment. Parents’ arbitrary attitude
easily leads to children’s confusion and rebellion, which runs true not only for Ivy but
also for a couple of other informants too.

Some parents were even more reserved about letting informants date in
college. Emma’s mother said, “You are a student right now. So it would be better if
you won’t date. Focus on your study” (Emma, 10/15/09). In some families, dating and
relationships could never be brought up and discussed between parents and children.
When my informants were physically mature, they still did not know how to approach
it. Sophie had a younger brother and two young sisters. Even though she and her
siblings were already in college pursuing their undergraduate and graduate degrees,
none of them ever had a formal date. She said that they were very “uneducated” in
this aspect.

So it’s kind of hard, sometimes ‘cause my parents never really talked to us
about dating. Like my sisters have no idea what to do if they want to go out
on a date, or what it is supposed to be like. They have no experience at all.
Like all of us actually never really had…even in junior high or high school,
actually I never had real boyfriends or anything like that. I never really dated.
That was back when my parents were a little more strict. And they said, “No
dating until you graduate from college and you get a job.” You know. I went
out on a couple of dates here and there in college. And it was all right. But I
never really dated. My brother has also never had a girlfriend either. So I
think all of us are a little bit … maybe not necessarily uneducated about it,
but just unfamiliar with that kind of situation. [Sophie, 2/21/08]
Talkative, easy-going, and charming are some of the words I would use to describe Sophie. It was surprising for me to know that she had never had a formal boyfriend by her mid 20s. Being raised to always respect parental authority, she and her siblings rarely went against their parents’ will. But when she graduated from college without a boyfriend, her mother started to get worried and pushed her to go out and find a man. The situation flipped.

My informants’ parents can be roughly divided into three groups with regard to their different opinions on whom they thought their daughter should date or marry: (1) only preferring Chinese or Asians; (2) valuing other non-ethnicity qualities; (3) no specific requirements. Even though my sample was small compared to the whole Chinese immigrant population, it reflects some trends along the line of class and residential patterns. Working-class parents from Chinatown mostly held the first position, whereas middle-class parents and those who did not live in Chinese enclaves usually fell into the other two categories. My research shows an opposite outcome to what Lee (2004) concluded from her observation on Korean parents in terms of the relation between parents and their social status.

For most of my informants, their own dating options were much less restrictive compared to what their parents and grandparents had in mind. The majority mentioned a similar hierarchical preference list shared by their parents, whereas the level of rigidity of their opinion may vary based on their class background, and the length of their stay in the United States. At the same time, for some informants and their parents, having a common religious belief had the same weight with or even overrode race and ethnicity background. Most informants treated dating less seriously than marriage. Their dating choices changed during their ongoing identification process. Quite a few informants mentioned how they switched from dating white guys
at a younger age to going out only with Asians because later they were more aware of their ethnic identity and found out there were more commonalities that they had with other Chinese and Asians than with whites.

The majority of my informants’ parents had a strong opinion. They hinted or claimed that Asians or Chinese should be on the top of their list. Secondary to it could be white. The rest part became very ambiguous. Parents who lived in or close to inner-city ethnic enclaves were more likely to be demanding. Their list usually ended with “no black” at the bottom. However, not all of their children agreed with this ending comment as informants either thought their parents were racist towards black or they were more open-minded than their parents. Some informants explained that their parents’ hostility towards black people resulted from their personal unpleasant experiences with black people, like being robbed by them, or from those malicious media representations. Whether their boyfriend could communicate with their immigrant parents would be so crucial for some of my informants. In addition to facilitating daily communication, my informants and their parents preferred intra-ethnic dating due to other considerations, such as keeping ethnic authenticity and cultural heritage across generations, resisting a trend of being “white-washed,” and maintaining shared cultural heritage, which they can hardly expect out of intermarriage. How my informants and their parents approached issues of dating and marriage can be understood along the lines of what segments of the society they would want to be incorporated into, how they interpreted their racialized ethnic boundary, and whether it is fixed and stable, or fluid and negotiable for them.

Only Chinese/Asian

Some informants reported that their parents clearly expressed a preference for Chinese. Grace’s mother, a professional in real estate and life insurance, always
reminded Grace and her siblings of considering dating and marrying Chinese only.

When we were talking about boyfriends and girlfriends, or wives and husbands, she [her mother] was like, “Make sure that you marry a nice Chinese boy, ok? Only marry a Chinese boy.” She was always mentioning that all the time. But it is not like… I guess we didn’t take it as a pressing situation. But because we knew that I only had Asian friends. So it just made it to all of us. ‘Cause all of us, we all grew up only among Asian people, among Chinese people. It’s [marrying someone not Chinese] always just been taken not a great deal. If I came home with someone that was not Chinese, I am sure they wouldn’t mind. I am sure they wouldn’t be racist against someone. And they would be happier if I came with a Chinese boy.

[Grace, 11/01/04]

According to Grace, even though her parents might compromise if she chose someone non-Chinese, they would prefer her choosing a Chinese for sure. Grace did not take it as a request because dating a Chinese was exactly what she expected for herself as coming from Queens and growing up around mostly Asians. Queens is such an immigrant-populated area that Asian Americans represented 22.9 percent of the population according to the 2010 American Community Survey.\(^1\) As the census of 2010 showed, Chinese population continued to grow to nearly 200,000, and “the Chinese community makes up 47 percent of the Asian community in the city and for the first time ever the Chinese community in Flushing exceeds that of Chinatown in Manhattan.”\(^2\) In addition, on her mother’s side, all Grace’s older cousins were all biracial, which made her and her siblings the first “full” Chinese grandchildren in her extended family. Such “blood purity” is highly expected by her family whereas she

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\(^1\) Retrieved February 15, 2011 from [http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36081.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36081.html)

did not think excluding other races (certain races, not all non-Asians) would put a racist hat on her family. For informants like Grace who stayed close to other Chinese/Asian people, they were more likely to reach an agreement with their parents to look for partners with the same ethnicity. Some parents expressed their opinions very indirectly. Ann’s parents offered their suggestion in a loose manner, although they still explicitly referred to a ranking list based on race.

They always like joked around. They were always like, “You know, the top of it would be you got another Chinese guy; second white; and don’t, never bring back someone black.” So I think it was like half meaningful, half a joke.

That really is their preference. [Ann, 11/24/09]

According to Ann, the way that her parents brought up the topic pressured her although they did not exert parental authority in a patriarchal or authoritarian manner.

In my study, many parents chose to give their children a list of options instead of limiting to only Chinese or Asian. Such a preference list shared by many informants’ parents reveals two issues. First, these Chinese parents educated their children that they can hardly enjoy their ethnicity as free as the whites do, due to its racialization in American society. In other words, their choices of whom to date and marry are limited in accordance with their racialized ethnicity as being Chinese American. Second, these parents instilled my informants with a hierarchy in conformity with institutionalized racism, especially when they discriminatively emphasized that blacks were not worth consideration. One phenomenon that Kibria (2002a) discovered and I share from my observation is that middle-class parents were less likely to “exercise direct authority over their children’s marital choices” (p. 173). Therefore, their expectations were subject to revision and negotiation. Ann said in another interview that she thought her parents would be okay with her dating a black guy if she really
liked him. But it was still in question how her parents would react if she did bring home a black man. Many parents like Ann’s were not informed of race and different forms of racism, and never questioned the dominance of whiteness.

Not surprisingly, Lynn’s parents took the non-Asian part away from their preference list to make it only Asian with more concrete conditions. Lynn was struggling between the pressure from her parents to date only Asians and her own will of choosing whomever she wanted.

But relationships they think, actually they prefer someone who is Asian. And even then, they might judge like what kind of Asian, what class, and stuff like that, occupation. So they will probably want me to date Chinese and probably someone of a similar class, and good occupation according to them. So I don’t know. But it just bothers because I wouldn’t mind dating people who are other races. I’m just worried if I never find somebody of our race, my parents are just gonna nag me and it’s gonna be really annoying. And also I mean I don’t want to hurt them. But at the same time it is like my life. I don’t know. I have to work it out. Like what if I find someone who is Korean, or someone who is black or whoever? It just feels like I might get a lot of pressure to break up. And I wouldn’t like that. I think they are more strict in terms of they wouldn’t want me to date white, or black or Latino. But Asian maybe is a little more flexible. I have never showed anybody to my parents or anything like that. I mean they want me to date somebody soon. But at the same time, it is my life. So I am gonna take my time. It’s up to me. I don’t want their pressure to bother me that much. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Lynn struggled with her parents’ somewhat negotiable restrictions because she was worried about conflicts between her own decision and whom she was expected to be
with, and pressure from not listening to her parents. Her parents narrowed down her choice to only Chinese of certain socioeconomic class. Although she disagreed with them, it is risky for her to test out their bottom line. She had so much uncertainty. Although she did not want to follow her parents’ advice, she was not sure what consequences that could engender if she chose not to. Unlike Lynn, some of my informants wanted to date a Chinese not only because of their parents and elder Chinese relatives, but also because of their own aspiration of protecting a cultural identity. For instance, exogamy never happened in Hebe’s family or among her Chinese relatives. All the weddings she went to were all held in Chinatown and only for Chinese couples. She knew it clearly that her family expected her to marry Chinese. Her parents’ list was very identical with that of Ann’s parents’ in that Chinese was preferred the most, and a black partner was a no. Such a discriminating message is usually what my informants disagreed with their parents upon.

I think, my mom and my family, we probably would prefer that we all marry Chinese people. I think my aunt said it before. She was like, “Oh, you know, you should definitely marry someone who is Asian. And white if you can’t get anyone [Asian]… but do not marry black people.” That was she said.

[Hebe, 10/04/09]

I mean like at first, of course, your parents would be like, “Ugh, you know, we wish you would marry a Chinese guy.” Right? You know, at least some Asian guy. But you can’t help it. There is a ranking. First, you have to get a Chinese boy. [If] you can’t get a Chinese boy, you have to get an Asian guy. [If] you can’t get an Asian guy, let’s say at least east Asian, you know, or maybe south Asian or something. And then a white. And [if] you can’t get a
white, and then you know, maybe Hispanic or black. But that’s like all the way to the bottom. So Chinese parents rank it like that. [Hebe, 11/19/09]

With the ranking in mind, Hebe legitimated her preference by emphasizing the importance of her future partner’s ability of communicating with her parents in Chinese. She said, “I mean you definitely want your boyfriend or your girlfriend to communicate with your parents, and you know the only way is Chinese. So you definitely need someone who can speak Chinese.” Language became a critical determinant not just a tool of communication or cultural symbol. Instead, it should be someone that knows Chinese culture and speaks the language at the same time. Ivy recalled how her mother pretended to be open-minded but actually was very demanding. “My mom says that I can date whomever I want. But of course, she would rather me marry an Asian. Like specifically oriental. Like Chinese, like someone who speaks Chinese. She tells me that I can date whoever I want, and marry whoever I want. But he needs to speak Chinese.” Language as an important ethnic feature for a future partner is demanded here. Her parents were not very happy with her dating a Filipino boyfriend before just because he did not know any Chinese. I also asked Hebe whether a white or a black person who can speak Chinese would be “qualified.” She was very hesitant to answer me because none of those situations would not be the same as a Chinese who speaks Chinese.

Personally, I want to marry an Asian person, Chinese, ‘cause I want my mom to be able to talk to my future boyfriend. They go like Yum Cha [Yin Cha, means having Dim Sum], and you don’t want her to be saying stuff like….so I want them to be able to communicate of course. I want someone who is at least Chinese. And if not, then Asian. Black for me is “No.” [Hebe, 10/04/09] It doesn’t really matter if your race has certain stereotypes, like if your race is
known for being… violent. It doesn’t really matter to me. Like people from all different types of races and ethnicities, you know, there is at least someone who is violent. But just I am not attracted…to that. That’s all. Just not attracted. Just white guy, black guy, Hispanic guy, I am not attracted. Just not attracted. Yeah. And I think it is just a cultural thing, like I want a guy who understands Asian culture. You know, even if they are not Chinese. You know, Asian cultures are very similar. [Hebe, 11/19/09]

Hebe did not differentiate between dating/marrying a Chinese and an Asian. For her and her family, it does not matter if the person is Chinese or from other Asian ethnic groups as long as he can speak Chinese and has a similar cultural background. What she worried the most is whether her future partner would be able to communicate with her parents. However, in addition to the language issue, she also mentioned that she was “not attracted” to non-Asians many times. But “non-Asians,” she actually meant anyone that is not oriental. Her attraction to men closely relates to a high degree of ethnic and cultural affinity. She believed getting a partner from the same ethnic or racial group would make things much easier for her family than choosing a non-Asian. However, I want to address two points about her and other informants who share the same opinion. First, her attraction to Chinese and Asian guys shows that how she drew a boundary between “us” and “them” based on racial and cultural features. Second, her understanding of Asian is exclusive since she only considered East Asia in particular.

I think my mom would kill me if I actually came home with a non-Asian boyfriend. Even my aunt told me, she was like, “You know, that is okay, you can come home with a white guy. But no black guys.” I mean I never really asked my mom. But you know, I think she knows that I like Asians only,
really, like for dating purposes. So she is not worried about that. She’s never really had to tell me, “Don’t date this. Don’t date that.” But my aunts, they are like, “Oh, yeah, make sure you find an Asian boy.” My mom would…not kill me, but you know, it’s like you do something that you know you mom doesn’t like, and you start to realize people talk behind your back. You know how Chinese families are, right? Everyone knows everybody’s business. So you know, if what you do is like, if you are dating a foreign guy, everyone knows. All your relatives, all your relatives’ friends know, like family’s friends, they all know. So I am not about to do that. Or maybe it’s just my family community. ‘Cause I realize that it’s close-minded maybe? But I mean if you grew up in a town where it’s mostly Asians, you grew up in the school that’s mostly Asians, it’s not hard to like Asians, and date Asians. So it’s like what happens. I think that is my personal preference. I don’t know. I just don’t find them attractive, white, black, Hispanic, I just don’t find them attractive. [Hebe, 11/19/09]

From the way Hebe described it, her mother and aunts were restrictive and so caught up with racial stereotypes so that only Asians and whites can be options. Her personal relationship is also a social matter. In Chinese communities, people gossip about other families, a social practice she assumed I should be informed of, and having children dating someone black is definitely not something that parents could brag about. Feeling pressure from her family and living community, it is reasonable that Hebe would rather choose a safe and comfortable relationship with someone that qualifies the standards of her mother’s and the community’s. Studies show that Chinatown, as a historically self-sustaining community, has expanded it boundary and interacted more with the outside American society economically and culturally in recent years (Zhou,
However, families settling down there over generations may still live a sheltered live, like Hebe’s family, with access to mostly intra-ethnic network and resources. For people living in Chinatown, non-Chinese was considered “foreign,” a label conveying more of a cultural connotation that somehow marginalized Chinese communities by making a difference between “foreign” and “native.” Hebe thought, as a “Chinatown native” and being immersed in Chinese and Asian culture, it was very reasonable to stick to how she was raised, and not to ruin her reputation dating someone that was not acceptable for her community.

**Loosening Up**

Unlike those who strictly prioritized ethnicity, some informants’ parents placed equal emphasis on other aspects of identity although they indicated that it would be nice if my informants chose a partner of the same ethnic background. Sophie’s parents did not impose a list on her. But they did care about other factors, such as class background, educational level and financial stability. When she reached certain age having no boyfriend, her mother started intervening and giving her some general guidance.

Relationships, she’s been very general about it. Like she’ll say something about like there are certain points that a guy can have in terms of how he looks, his looks, he’s smart, you know, if he’s got a good family, and if he of course loves God because that’s something very important to me…if he has a good job and makes good money. She said that’s important to you. He’s well-educated. Those kinds of things. Although there have been some times where she would say Okay, such such a guy will be a great fit for me if I liked him. But I don’t like them in that way. So I am like, Mom, I don’t like them in that way. But she would pick out different kind of guys for me. Her thought of
what… or what she thinks I would like, or she thinks would be good for me is different than what I would pick. [Sophie, 3/18/08]

Sophie, as a Christian, had her own thoughts about her future partner, which is different from what her mother told her. But, apparently, they both did not focus that much on ethnicity but more on personality, family, and religion. As Sophie recalled, her parents became more open-minded after the whole family was baptized so that religion could not be detached from how she identify herself.

Nowadays, I would think my parents are more … my mom has been more understanding. She believes that if you are in love, and then that’s ok. “Make sure he is a good guy. He is not only good-looking, but also has good background, and smart.” But now my parents really have come to the point that as long as you really love each other, the most important thing is that he loves God. Of course they say they would prefer if he’s a Chinese. But if not, it’s okay too. They are pretty open now. [Sophie, 11/09/04]

As time passes, I got to know myself a little better too. Ideally, what’s most important to me is that he is somebody who loves God a lot. You know, he has to be a Christian. And my dream and my vision or my hope is that in the future me and my husband would be involved in the same kind of ministry. So for me, I am really involved in music. So I hope that he would also be either musical, or creative, or artistic, or something like that so we can do the same kind of things when we are together in that way. And then, funny is important you know. Really be a family person. Then they are sort of general, but they are sort of specific too. And there are still things I would like to… at least to my height, en, maybe about my age or a little older. [Sophie, 2/21/08]

In her description, Sophie came up with detailed characteristics of a future partner,
including believing in God, loving music, having a sense of humor, and being family-oriented, characteristics which in her situation are no less significant than ethnicity for her given the fact that she grew up in a medium-sized urban city in upstate New York, where there was no well-developed Chinese ethnic community and culture. For informants like Sophie and Jane who had no in-depth relationship with an ethnic enclave or “ethnoburb,” their parents were more likely to tolerate my informants’ inter-ethnic or interracial dates regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Jane’s family lived in suburban Long Island, which was full of white people. Her father was an American-born Chinese growing up in Chinatown, and worked as an insurance agent. Jane’s mother came from Hong Kong and finished her high school and college in the U.S. As Jane mentioned, her parents kept some Chinese traditions but also were very “Americanized” when compared with those who immigrated to America as adults or had no educational experiences in this country. She thought, they wanted to maintain some Chinese culture but also were flexible to making changes or adjusting in order to accommodate their children’s opinions or actions.

At first, they wanted…they wanted all of us, like me, my brother and my sister, to all date an Asian. They said that they prefer us to date Asian especially Chinese. But then, like increasingly, when we would bring home more like other friends of different ethnicities, like some of my friends are girls, like they would come over, and they are not Chinese. Like white, or Korean. My parents, like saw that, it’s okay for us to hang out with different races. And it’s good that we get along with different people. So then, they became more open to us, like seeing other races. Like now, I am dating a Korean boy. So I mean my parents get that he is Asian. But the fact that he is not Chinese, I just feel like they are okay with it. But they just feel like it’ll
be nice if he could understand Chinese culture too. But, they like the fact that he is at least some sort of Asian. But my sister is dating a white guy now, an American. I think he is German or something, I am not sure. But I remember when she first started dating him, my parents were like, they didn’t like the fact that he was not Asian. But when they saw that she’s happy with him, and he’s treating her well, then they are okay with it. Then like, you know, even though he is not Asian, as long as their daughter is happy, and the same for me, as long as I am happy, even though he is not Chinese. And I am sure it’ll be the same for my brother when he starts dating. [Jane, 4/16/10]

Apparently, according to Jane, her parents were not that strict with her dating Chinese and other Asian groups. Even though Jane’s parents favored Chinese, they still allowed Jane’s sister to date white men because whether their daughter was happy was more important than whether her boyfriend was Chinese. Actually, white outranks all other races except for Chinese/Asian on their preference list.

I never consider it [dating a black guy] maybe because I never felt like emotional attachment to them. But I feel like if I were to, my parent, and my grandparents especially, they would think it is very weird. Because, you know, it is such a different race. Not just the way they look, but because also their culture. They had no connection to Asian culture at all. So I feel like if I were to date an African American, they would think it’d be very weird. It would take them very long to adjust to it. So, I don’t know. I don’t need…cause right now my relationship with this Korean boy is pretty strong, so I don’t know, like in the future if I will be dating another person, or an African American or a white person. I myself prefer to date an Asian person just because of the cultural similarities. [Jane, 4/16/10]
Even growing up in a totally different social environment than Hebe, Jane shared her feeling of no “emotional attachment” or “attraction” towards black people. Her explanation was that she could not figure out any commonality between Asian culture and black culture so that dating a black felt very “weird” and hard to be accepted by her family. How Jane kept a distance between herself and black people culturally and emotionally would be considered a taken-for-granted way of dealing interracial group relations between Asians and blacks as the former is “honorary white” and “model minority” whereas the latter just from the inner-city underclass only good at sports and hip hop. Jane’s rejection of black people might send out a different message to my informant AF, an African American Studies major.

I know that my parents would prefer that I date Asians. Because they always say that like Asians tend to be more family-oriented whereas white people aren’t, or other people aren’t really that, like have that strong family bond. But I think she would prefer me to date, if I didn’t date Asian, to date like a white person, not a black person. This is like internal racism and stuff. They see black people as dirty, and just not…it is like all this stuff on TV. And people in the neighborhood, they see like violent, and not good parents, stuff like that. They usually don’t have good jobs. That’s what they think. But I think it is also mostly with skin color. ‘Cause I asked my mom a joke one time, “So what if I brought home a black boyfriend?” And she’s like, “Don’t you dare come back with a mud color kind of person?” I was just like, “Okay, that is really…racist.” [AF, 4/28/10]

AF read her parents as racist judging black people merely by those mediated representations and twisted images showed on TV. Her own dating preference completely changed from being attracted by white to only Asian. Her first boyfriend
was a Polish boy in junior high.

I think I was really into white people, I don’t know why. When I think back, I think I was just… but I didn’t like him. It is so weird. Maybe… just because I wasn’t proud of being Asian, I don’t know what it was. I had crushes on white guys. I think it just looked like being white had more privileges. I don’t know. You know, you didn’t get made fun of. In school no one calls you Chink or… you are just white. I mean. [AF, 4/28/10]

Her reason for dating white people was to protect herself from being picked on by racial slurs. She assumed being together with whites would equal being white in the sense that the privileges that white people enjoyed could also apply to her. As she became more politically conscious and thought more about her own identity in college, she noticed that there were more common understandings and shared values between her and other Asians. Her two boyfriends after that were Korean American and Chinese American separately.

I think I knew Asian guys. But I won’t mind other people. [I want] someone who is very smart. [He] cannot be ugly. You got to look at that person. [I want] someone who likes to exercise. I think that is important because you have to maintain your body and mind health. [I want] someone who is also politically aligned with my views because if it is really different, that would be hard to talk to… it would make talking to the other person very hard. [I want] someone who is funny. Yeah, that is pretty much it. [AF, 4/28/10]

AF took into consideration of ethnicity, personality, political stance, and physical conditions all together when she was thinking about choosing a boyfriend. It is not evident that she would listen to her parents to date only Asian. Dating is not a simple decision. For her, it may not be a choice between Asian and black, but could be one
between Asian and white.

**No Preference**

Another group of my participants’ parents had no specific opinions. They did not talk much about whom they expected their daughter to date or marry, and proposed almost no limitations. However, their reasons for behaving this way varied. Kelly’s blood father was an Irish Italian. When Kelly’s mother married him, Kelly’s grandparents did not approve it. After Kelly’s parents got divorced, Kelly’s mother married another white man, and gave birth to Kelly’s brother. According to Kelly, she had no pressure from her mother to date only Chinese because her mother did not follow the same path herself.

My mother never said anything to me. I think maybe because obviously she didn’t marry a Chinese man. So she should be supercritical if she throws that out there. But she never says anything to me about that. So I just wonder what she thinks. I don’t know. But if I marry someone who is Caucasian, and then… this is weird. I don’t know why this pops up in my head. If I have children, they are only going to be a quarter Chinese. So they would be like not really …I don’t know. That is maybe why my grandparents aren’t so happy ‘cause they want their blood bond to continue. [Do you want to date Chinese?] I don’t know. It doesn’t matter to me. It is not just that I am going to date someone who is Chinese and who is not. That doesn’t come in to me. I haven’t thought of it because I think I don’t purposely want to date someone who is [Chinese]. It just has lots to do with their background. [Kelly, 4/16/06]

Kelly’s mother finished college in the United States, and had a stable career working for a company. The longer Kelly’s grandparents had been living in the U.S., the more
open-minded they became over time. They changed from being really upset when they got to know that their son, Kelly’s uncle, was gay to accepting his partner to live with them in the same house.¹ In addition to Kelly’s mother and uncle, her aunt, a vice president of a business in New York City, was an upper middle-class professional woman who had a long-term interracial relationship. Kelly’s grandparents had no choice but to accept the fact that their “blood bond” may unfortunately just stop here. They were very disappointed at their three children since none of them seemed able to give them a one hundred percent Chinese grandchild in blood. Even though Kelly had no preference in terms of race and ethnicity, she still worried about how to keep her limited Chinese heritage and pass it on. Kelly was taken care of by her grandparents when she was young and her parents were divorcing. She used to accompany them to do many activities, such as watching Chinese TV programs that she did not even understand, planting a backyard garden, and going out for dinner at Chinese restaurants. Her close connections with her Chinese grandparents influenced her in a way that she refused the idea of having “more white” children or “marrying Caucasian” in her later talk.

Helena’s parents took a laid-back attitude and gave her freedom. Even though they insisted Helena learning Chinese language and culture, they did not push her that much. Instead, they put pressure on her brother because men are always supposed to carry on a family’s name in Chinese culture. Her mother reminded him of not dating non-Asian because she was worried that he might not be able to “handle” it, and intermarriage would mess things around in her family.

By the time I started dating, my parents were like “We really don’t care who you date because you’re probably gonna end up with someone who is not

¹ This was the first and only time throughout my research when the topic of homosexuality was raised.
Chinese. We are okay with that.” With my brother, they were really expecting him to date someone who is Asian. My dad was like “I really don’t care.” My mom was like “You wouldn’t be able to handle someone who is not Asian.” That doesn’t make any sense at all. I think they meant Chinese. What my mom said was, “I don’t want him dating anyone who is white.” I was like “Okay…It doesn’t make any sense.” She was like, “It gets too complicated.” Ok, so it’s complicated for him, but not for me. I don’t know. I think she is very much protective of him. But I wonder if it is because you know, my brother is gonna carry on the family name and stuff. She doesn’t want things to be more complicated for her grandchildren who are carrying on the name.

I don’t really know. [Helena, 3/12/06]

Her mother’s expectation of her brother to date Asians was interpreted by her as a way of protecting him. More specifically, it was to keep a “pure” Chinese kinship and protect it from any consequences of intermarriage and grandchildren of mixed racial background. Her being a girl limits her in an inferior position when gender plays a role. But, at the same time, it frees her from being restricted to making choices based only on ethnicity or race.

**Interracial Dating and Intermarriage**

In contrast with the intra-ethnic preference held by both many parents and some children, an alternative pattern is to establish an interracial relationship with non-Asians. Compared to their parents, most of my informants showed a more flexible attitude towards dating other races, which, according to their narratives, was much less serious than marriage so that there would be more possibilities to explore. Even though my sample is small and not representative, among these college-aged young women who participated, almost half of them had no serious dating experience.
It, in a general sense, shows that Chinese American women are a conservative group in sexual relationships. Among the rest of seventeen informants who had dating experience, six went out with white guys, including Irish Scottish, Italian, Italian Irish and Jewish. Eight had only Chinese/Asian boyfriend(s). Two had dated and were dating black guys, and two had both white and Asian boyfriends.¹ Since there was no updated interracial dating data from literature, it may be helpful to look at intermarriage rates between the Chinese population and other races, which kept increasing over the years. Based on a comparative analysis between 1990 census data with research results generated by another group of scholars using 1980 census data, Lee and Fernandez (1998) reported an increase of the outmarriage levels among native-born Asian Americans during the 1980s, with an example of native-born Chinese Americans’ outmarriage rate increased from 37 percent to 46 percent in ten years. They also observed that “Asian American women are more likely to be outmarried” with Japanese women exhibiting the highest percentage.

Interradness is important for understanding the meaning and significance of assimilation for immigrants. A number of studies show that intermarriage rates between different racial and ethnic groups varies with a relatively high percentage among U.S.-born Asian Americans, especially Asian women due to the “desirability of the exotic” (Alba, 2009) and a higher tolerance that Asian Americans have toward intermarriage (Segal, 2002). According to the 2000 census, there were “more than 1.6 million persons of mixing Asian and other race(s)” (Segal, 2002, p. 333). Studies (Segal, 2002; Zhou, 2009) also show a trend of intermarriage between highly educated Asians and whites and its significance in affecting the whole group’s proximity to the white mainstream and socioeconomic status and mobility (Alba,

¹ Here, I group Chinese and Asian together as one referential category because my informants usually interchangeably used them implying some racial and ethnic affinity between those two.
Some of my informants, like Peggy, made a similar observation of how intermarriage got more accepted in the U.S. after they became more knowledgeable of American history and politics.

You know, … the United States has been involved in wars overseas in Asia, like there’s like World War II and Vietnam War. And a lot of military people came back with Asian wives. So I guess that made it okay ‘cause if like the soldiers are coming back, these are the soldiers, and you respect soldiers, you know what I mean? Because they give you their lives, and they give you things like that. So you can’t really say anything, like you can’t say, your having an Asian wife is bad. It’s like this guy’s almost died for his country, so you can’t… so that becomes acceptable cause it’s like, this respected person gets this kind of wife, you can’t really say anything. So there is a culture of half Asian half white people with Asian mothers and white fathers. And that’s existed for a while. So I think that’s why it’s more acceptable. [Peggy, 11/17/09]

To explain how intermarriage emerged, Peggy traced back to the history of American soldiers bringing back war brides from Asia after their military trips, although the way she thought of it sounds like it only happened only between white soldiers and Asian women. Researchers also provide evidence that, historically, “the first wave of interracial couples was mostly American soldiers and their Japanese wives during World War II” (Segal, 2002, p. 334). Since then, due to great achievements against racial and gender discrimination, those antimiscegenation laws no longer exist preventing marriages between races. Nowadays, such changes also left new generations of post-1965 immigrants a much more diverse society with a higher acceptance of intermarriage and less structural obstacles.
Those informants who spent their childhood in white communities and mostly made friends with white peers had a higher tendency of dating whites. AC is a good example of only having experience of dating white people in spite of the fact that her family is one hundred percent Chinese. The small city she grew up in is called Marysville in Kansas. The racial breakdown of the total population was 96.69% White, 0.3% African American, 0.6% Asian, and 0.8% from other races as of 2010 census, compared to 2.38% Asian of the state’s population.\(^1\) AC only dated white guys mainly because she identified herself more as white in spite of how Chinese/Asian she looks like from her appearance. Her ethnicity was never something that would rank the top of her list.

The funny thing is like when I …so far all the guys I have dated were all white. There hasn’t been that much very Asian. It’s all been very white. Not even black or Indian or any other race. It’s just white. And it might be a variation of white, like Italian white, or German. I prefer a white guy’s personality than Asian guys. I have …maybe it is because growing up in Kansas, I never see that many people of other races that I am not that attracted to them, I can’t say that’s the only factor. But it is like one of the factors that I can’t seem to control. So like a white guy with the same personality as an Asian guy, I would be more attracted towards the white guy because I don’t know, growing up in Kansas, people I have dated, and even the media, you know, you just see them more attractive [AC, 5/20/10]

Her Chinese ethnic background did not hinder her from hanging out and associating with white people because white culture was so prevalent that she could hardly resist but totally immerse herself in. However, interracial dating was not always pleasant for

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all informants involved. Lucy, coming from a biracial background disclosed her confusion

When I was dating this man [her white boyfriend], we would get dirty looks from people. I was dating a black man, and we got dirty looks. I would get dirty looks from black women. And he would get dirty looks from white men. I don’t agree with everything. But it was like I was taking away a black guy from black culture. Like, “Oh, you have to be with me because I am ‘better,’ because I am ‘white’. Or because I am not black.” And white men would be like, “Why are you dating ‘our’ women?” But mostly with white men. [They would say] like, “Don’t date one of ‘our’ women. Don’t date a woman of ‘my’ race.” And the same thing with black woman. [They would say] “Don’t date black man. They are ‘our’ men.” I think I should ask explanation from these people why I got dirty look. The white women didn’t have any problem with it. The black men didn’t have problem with it. I don’t know. I mean, in a sense, overall people are racist against each other. They don’t like any kind of interracial dating. [Lucy, 10/01/04]

Although Lucy located herself within the white group, what she later knew she never was, her account implies how controversial interracial marriages could turn out to be by raising up resistance from related racial groups whereas intermarriages mostly happen between white and other races. Research shows that black, compared to Asian and white communities, had a lower intermarriage rate (Lee & Bean, 2007; Segal, 2002). On the other hand, many Chinese immigrants look to whites as their referential standard of “becoming American” and whether successfully enter the dominant culture. In terms of intermarriage rate, it is higher between Asian women and white men than that between Asian women and black or other non-whites (Zhou, 2009).
How race and class interplays and the racial hierarchy and class stratification that dominate the American society all have impacts on Chinese American women’s dating choices.

Peggy met her African American boyfriend when they were both working for a political campaign in New York City. She had a very difficult time getting approval from her Chinese father and Greek mother. It was almost impossible for them to accept the fact that she was dating a black man. Her father emphasized that she should focus on academic study in college. Having a boyfriend was a distraction with negative consequences.

Q: So you are saying it’s very hard for them to accept your dating black people?

Peggy: Yeah, absolutely. I think the next thing that would probably scare my mother is if I dated a woman. That would be the worst for her. The second worst would be African American. But I don’t really care. I am kind of like…I like him, so he is a good person, and I know that. So, that’s all I need to know. But for her, I have to wait. I have to find the right moment to tell her. If I tell her the wrong time… like my dad will be like, “This is silly. You are in college, and you should be focusing on classes.” My mother would be like, “You are gonna throw your life away,” or “If he tries to do something bad to you.” It’s just kind of like, “Whatever!” I mean, they did something crazy.

They got married to each other. [Peggy, 10/13/09]

Ironically, Peggy’s parents would not let her do the same thing that they did before, such as dating a person of a different race in college. Her parents also made it clear to her that they could never accept her dating another woman. Peggy understood her parents’ comments of not dating black people and women with a hint of racism and
homophobia. Statements like theirs reinforce an institutionalization of racial hierarchy that positions black people at the bottom and discriminates LGBT groups by practicing heterosexual normalcy. Peggy later explained that her mother did not really interact with any black people except for some bad experiences, such as being mugged by black people a few times in New York City. Many informants’ parents agreed with the ranking in general, and wanted their children to follow it. However, it also depends on how their daughters, my informants, reformulate their identity because they might challenge racial stereotypes attached to that black-white binary.

### Summary

Parents’ ranking list of dating and marital choices for their children underlines and reproduces how race, ethnicity, class, and gender structurally intersect under unequal power relations. For those who prioritized Chinese and Asians, and eased it up with whites, their reasons varied. They saw it important to protect blood kinship and ethnic solidarity by “preferring” their children to have a spouse of the same ethnic back ground. Many of them also tolerated their children choosing a white partner as a way to integrate. Research shows that “Asians are closer to whites than to blacks,” and thus, have probably reformed a new color line that continues to separate blacks from other groups (Lee & Bean, 2007). Asians’ favoritism towards whites partially is because “becoming American” is almost equated with “becoming white.” Many informants’ parents, including Peggy’s, did not challenge those stereotypical portrayals of African Americans, and still hoped for the privileged status associated with whiteness.

What I argue in this chapter is that my informants worked their way out of constructing a consciousness through taking Ethnic studies and Asian or African American studies courses, engaging with pan-ethnic student organizations on campus,
and interacting with parents’ ideas on dating and marriage. In this sense, their college time period becomes a turning point in their life for an emerging negotiated subjectivity when they had more experience of “self,” “others,” and the society. They started to actively explore questions like, “How do I interpret who I am?” “Who are my people?” and “How am I perceived by others?” The conflict between adapting into the dominant society and keeping ethnic traits and group membership (although degree and motivation varies) has been responsible for my informants’ multiple self-identification approaches, underlying the trend that immigrants are “being absorbed by different segments of American society” (Zhou, 1009, p. 210). When my informants as children of immigrants feel pressure to claim who they are but not sure how, family and community could be influential leading to upward mobility as well as ethnic solidarity. And I will discuss how my informants work their way through their confusions and struggles and try to answer those identity-focused questions in the next chapter.
CHAPTER SIX: CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

What does it mean to be Asian American? To me, it means living in a place where I don’t look much like anyone else but in most respects act like them, knowing all the time that halfway across the globe is a densely populated region full of people who look just like me but don’t particularly act like me. It means forever holding the contradiction of belonging and not belonging, of feeling “at home” and wondering where home is. It means living with other people’s ideas about me, ideas that often do not coincide with the person I really am. It means doubting my self-concept. It means working to overcome stereotypes. It means sometimes playing stereotypes to my advantage. It means occasionally still wishing I was white. It means occasionally still feeling the sting of shame about my ethnicity trickling out from its hidden places. It means wishing, just this once, that someone could step into my shoes and see what life is like from my perspective.

What else does it mean to be Asian American? Wishing I spoke the original language. Wanting my children to feel good about their heritage and hoping they pass on at least a whisper of their cultural legacy to their own children. Feeling proud of Asian Americans, Chinese particularly, who achieve great things in this country. Not knowing what to do with my feelings of defensiveness when China or someone Chinese is criticized, even if I believe they have acted wrongly. Recognizing a hunger for more knowledge about the land my parents were born in. Finding comfort in the sound of spoken Mandarin, the act of eating Chinese food with Chopsticks. Feeling embarrassed when someone asks
me a question about Chinese or Asian culture that I can’t answer. Wishing I knew the answers. Feeling more than a little embarrassed about the fact that I try to distance myself from recent immigrants who don’t speak English, who wear those mismatched and garish clothes. Feeling a certain level of comfort with other Asian American women that I don’t find elsewhere in my life.

—Claire S. Chow, *Leaving Deep Water*

An American-born Chinese woman, who grew up to be a psychologist without much exposure to her ethnic community and culture, Chow’s comments illustrate exactly how complicated Chinese and Asian American women’s lives and identification could be. As children of post-1965 new immigrants, my informants were born in the U.S., and lived their lives through a racial hierarchy. Unlike those European groups who can get by their symbolic identity and do not have to claim that they are Italian American or Irish American all the time, to a large extent, my informants’ ethnic and racial identities are so intertwined that their “racial identity powerfully marks and constrains the process of defining their ethnic affiliations” (Kibria, 2002a, p. 69). What complicates this process is their double marginalized positions of being women in both cultures. Through adaptation and negotiation, to choose which segments of their identity to address and emphasize is subject to a number of factors. I already discussed in previous chapters some of the themes, for instance, ancestral immigration history, individual internalization of Chinese traditional values, geographical residential pattern, interactions with ethnic community, experience of racism, and how they are viewed by others.

To dismantle their confusion and struggles, in my study I concentrate on how
my informants understood and responded to “what it means to be Chinese American women” through the threads of how they make sense of the politics of race, class, ethnicity, and gender in the American context, and how they are affected and react. Being aware of the specificity of each informant’s experience, I hope to present a convergence of collectivity that every single woman participated could contribute to, compare individuals’ voice with stories of others, and finally, to transform their “invisible past” into a “visible present.”

This chapter is about how Chinese American women understand, interpret, and perform their Chinese American identity as daughters of Chinese immigrants. I explore how my informants interactively developed their identities. Their experience of what was ascribed to being Chinese American and negotiations with ethnicity and race are closely interrelated. For them, this process of identifying who they are as individuals and a collective is subject to “‘outsiders’ ascription, meaning that how others perceive them” (Zhou & Lee, 2004, p. 21) as well as how they internalize their social locations corresponding to their race, class, gender, and ethnicity identities.

The more I interacted and became familiar with my informants’ accounts, the more I realized that it was neither accurate nor true just to describe their identity as a self-evident, static “being” status. Their life experiences emerge from consequences of being daughters of Chinese immigrants, associating with ethnic enclaves and isolated areas, and getting advanced education, and taking actions from certain social positions in which they are located. Due to such complexity, it is important to investigate how they relate to those social representations, and how other people with a same or different ethnic background think about them.

In order to decipher the emergence of hybrid and multiple identities that my informants present, I look at how they understand their racial and ethnic identities
when they make meanings out of their in-between location going through different worlds, and a continual effort of locating where to belong and where home is (Chow, 1999). It is also an intertwining process of making sense of “who I am” and “who I want to be.”

I further examine how my participants affirm and act their identities (e.g. Chinese/Asian American, American-born Chinese, person of color, white-washed Chinese American, biracial/interracial, Chinese) when they draw the boundaries between self and others, how they associate with and relate to some people, and distinguish themselves from others, how they develop the ideas of “my people” and “my culture” either consciously or unconsciously, how their understandings continually have been questioned and reconstructed when they interact with different socio-geographical settings, how their identification process simultaneously involves a de-essentialization of Chineseness, and much more engagement with local contexts, and how their authentic interpretations of Chinese American identity intertwine with a primordial core embedded in their blood kinships and a negotiation of ethnic consciousness and pride.

Even sharing one umbrella label of Chinese American, my informants have come up with different interpretations depending on what segments of society and culture they internally accept and are immersed in. As understanding “the self” involves reaction to “others” and what has been produced “out there” in the external world, for some informants, representing their Chinese American identity is to share their same upbringing experience, whereas for some others, it is more about relating to each other and reinforcing their ethnic pride while strategically resisting racialized images. Some informants asserted their ethnic roots by mostly getting involved with what they thought representing their ancestor’s history and culture, and would
associate with being Chinese rather than American. Some informants even take it to the next level of claiming a political standpoint and integrating it into their identity formation process, which is significant but underestimated in studies done on immigrants about this new commitment.

Such complexity and hybridity have been constructed through academic scholarship of de-essentializing Asian American ethnicity. Lowe (2007) articulates a paradoxical tendency of both essentialization and uncertainty, if projected on a spectrum that would mark “at one end, the desire for an identity represented by a fixed profile of ethnic traits and, at another, challenges to the very notions of identity and singularity which celebrate ethnicity as a fluctuating composition of differences, intersections, and incommensurabilities” (p. 508). The indeterminacy of identity results from a continual process of verification influenced by multiple determinants concerning different social forces and contexts during a person’s life course through her interaction with the broader society (Moya, 2000, p. 84), which is also a process of discovering “self” as my informants as children of immigrants continually engage with “practices that are partly inherited, and partly modified, as well as partly invented” (Lowe, 2007, p. 508). Segmented assimilation theory offers new perspectives on how Chinese Americans relied on ethnic communities and ties to achieve social status and upward mobility in the mainstream. At the same time, selectively assimilated into different segments of the society, my informants’ narratives have also showed that their identities were subject to various tensions and conflicts while discovering, internalizing, and recreating who they are.

In agreement with Lowe’s (1996 & 2007) studies, my research also shows that Chinese Americans are such a “heterogeneous” group where not only intergenerational and cultural conflicts exist in regard to cultural truncation or
transmission, which separately corresponds to upward and downward acculturation of segmented assimilation, but also socio-geographic variations horizontally affect how a Chinese American identity has been constructed at individual and group levels. Hence, given an “unstable and changeable ethnic solidarity with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification with and relation to a ‘homeland,’ and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from ‘majority culture’ in the United States” (Lowe, 1996, p. 66) it is equally urgent to examine the contingency and heterogeneity of Chinese American identity and meaning-making practices and processes where identity was produced when situated in certain social, historical, and material conditions and power dynamics.

I organize this chapter into three sections. First, I argue that mass media as an important factor influenced how my informants worked out their understanding of what being Chinese or Asian American means in the U.S. Mass media in my study primarily includes TV programs and drama series, movies, and works of English literature. Second, relating to and being judged by people who share the same racialized ethnic category affected greatly how my informants achieved self-recognition and belongingness while distancing themselves from what was stereotypically prescribed to shape the profile of what Chinese American women should be. Third, my informants worked out their interpretation of “my culture” and connected it with a political pursuit while forming up a new alliance with other minority groups and striving for a political self-affirmation.

**Interactions with Cultural Products**

In addition to demographic features of local community and family background, another significant context influential to how my informants developed a sense of self is overlapping interplays of American and Asian media and popular
Interactions with U.S.-based and Chinese-based cultural products enable my informants to make comparative and transnational connections to representations produced about Chinese and Chinese Americans in various contexts, and information about their ancestors’ origin, which supplements the blank of the mainstream media.

Being mediated through racial and class hierarchies, what has been portrayed in mass media including TV programs, newspapers, music, and literature directly affect how certain groups are perceived and positioned (Davé, Nishime & Oren, 2005; Ma, 2000; Ono & Pham, 2009). When my informants were younger, such representations were very powerful references especially for those who had no predominant ties with other people of the same ethnic background, and lacked enough life experience. However, their different responses can be apprehended in relation to a diversity of media and cultural products, including Asian roles in American movies and TV shows, Asian American novels and autobiographies, Chinese channels and programs imported from Asia or produced in the U.S., or Asian music and soap operas. Some informants were passionate about relating to those products as tokens of the cultural origins that they might lack previously. Some scrutinized those products and representations, and differentiate racial stereotypes from more “authentic” reflections of Asian/Chinese Americans. Some informants threw themselves into Asian cultures more thoroughly since they watched many Asian TV soap operas, listened to Asian music, and even developed their appreciation of beauty accordingly.

Interacting with mass media at a younger age and in a positive and embracing manner, Peggy talked about how she would love to associate with the local ethnic community but being treated as an outsider, and how seeing Chinese on TV became one of the few exciting moments when she could connect to somebody else as “my
people.” She said, “I know for sure that’d (identity of being Chinese American) come from TV. You know. Whenever you see somebody Chinese on TV, or somebody Asian on TV, you’re kind of, ‘Wow!’ You feel happy” (Peggy, 10/13/09). Of course, Peggy was not the only one that worked out her identity through engaging with media and popular culture. Joining her, as one of those who lived far away from Chinese ethnic community, AC’s early perception of being Chinese largely originated from what was portrayed as the “Chinese way,” referring to those racial stereotypes and prejudice targeting Chinese/Asian people.

I guess what I see from the media is what I considered to be Chinese. TV programs, the way the stereotype is of Chinese people being engineers and being really smart, and having really strict parents, like really pushing for grades. I am always worried about that I am offending the Chinese culture [since I do not relate to it that much in spite of my Chinese ethnicity], but I try not to [offend it]. It is just like… growing up in Kansas, like the Chinese way has been through the media, and that is the only way I know what the Chinese way is. And that is why I consider myself as American. ‘Cause what the media portrays, that I don’t think myself as that. I consider myself as something else. So I guess the Chinese way from what I think, well, my friends think too, ‘cause we were doing research about different cultures in China, and how that is successful, and if it is successful, and the idea of going to an Ivy League school, then graduate school. And within that, you go more towards science and math. And if you go to social sciences, you are looked down upon. Even with the comedian, we see a Chinese or Asian American focus, they play on the same jokes. Those reinforcements make me think that was the Chinese, traditional way. [AC, 11/24/09]
Living far from her Chinese relatives or any forms of ethnic community, AC had no deep relationship with ethnic culture even though her parents both were Chinese immigrants. Apparently, the way that Chinese people were portrayed in the mainstream media did not enhance her self-esteem and closeness to being Chinese. Instead, she did not appreciate the way how “traditional Chinese culture” was framed including strict, grades-oriented parents. By distinguishing herself from these “traditional” representations that were reproduced through a highly selective process, the more AC got rid of those constraints, the more she pushed her towards becoming Americanized.

For AC, Peggy and a few other informants, what has been problematic about the American media is the scarcity and misconception of Chinese male roles. Reflecting upon personal experiences and media representations, they thought that most of Chinese males are patriarchal and weak, not attractive, not masculine, produced according to a racialized script that favors a white-black framework denying yellow in the middle. Peggy mentioned that her Chinese girlfriends were even against the idea of dating Asian men because of those twisted images of Asian men, and wanted only white guys.

Peggy: I think among my friends, a lot of us don’t like Asian guys.

Q: Why?

Peggy: I don’t know what it is. It could be anything from not as tough and masculine to they will lock you in the house, and want only sons from you to like… I think actually those two are probably the most. For my friends, one that would be that, they won’t be as strong as other guys or something. And two that, they are like, they can get back to that traditional thinking, and like, okay, women, just, whatever, cook, clean. You can have your own career. But
there are those little stereotype things. And in fact, he would want only sons from you. My friend told me specifically. She’s like, “That would be my worst nightmare to get married to an Asian guy. And then he did that, like he would do that to me.” She said she would hate that. So, I don’t know. I guess that’s it. [Peggy, 11/17/09]

Peggy later described why her Chinese/Asian girlfriends had antipathy towards Asian men, and how they assumed that Asian men could probably physically hurt and restrain them. I was curious about why they were caught up by those stereotypes, and would want to believe that all Asian men as chauvinistic, patriarchal, and violent. But accordingly to their perceptions of those media portrayals, Asian guys probably all think and behave the same way, “evilly and out of date,” and far less attractive than their white counterparts who have big muscles and act heroically all the time. When I raised my confusion of how so, Peggy mentioned the role of media in the following quote.

Q: Where did they get that impression from?

Peggy: Um, TV. TV does play a big role. From growing up, like I can tell when you watch TV, the kid’s programs, the main characters are white, to begin with. And then, if there is a minority, they are either black, like light-skinned black or they are Latino. It’s just the way… it’s just one of these underlying Hollywood things. You almost never see Asians. Pretty much you don’t see Asians on TV shows. And it’s only been a very recent thing. You know Heroes, or like Lost, like those things, that’s really recent. When I first saw Lost, I was so surprised that the two main characters [are Asian American]… A lot of lines. That was amazing. But it’s like an all depiction of them of not being a typical Asian couple, like “a typical Asian couple.”
‘Cause they are like very outward. They are just as equal characters, just as deep characters as the other characters on the cast. But growing up, all the TV shows I used to watch, there were like either all black cast or there were all white cast. Or there was a minority. But that minority was an Asian doctor. Or it was like a Latino grocery owner. Or something like that. You know you watch like.... There is all white people. For example, the hot dreamy guys are white guys. It’s not black guys. Or if it’s black guys, it’s on the TV shows. And it’s never an Asian guy. I am waiting for the show where like an Asian guy would be like the hot, sexy character. But that’s not happened yet. I don’t think it’s going to happen soon. [Peggy, 11/17/09]

Peggy was aware of how the American movie and TV industry institutionally maintains white supremacy and Euro-centrality, and marginalizes Asian and other racial minorities so that they are hardly visible, or visible only through distorted stereotypes. Yet, a minority version of “hot white men” is not meant to be the way out to revitalize Asian men. Peggy observed that Asian Americans still confront enormous barriers and are subject to the racial hierarchy that American entertainment industry is reinforcing. Given certain cultural connotations that are pervasively widespread, it is likely for teenagers to associate with what they hear and watch everyday.

See, the thing is like I told you about my dad and how he never brought it [dating and marrying a Chinese guy] up. I think it’s a combination of the American culture where Asians aren’t seen on TV, so they are not in pop culture, for example. There is that. And the parents were just not to bring it up. So like, kids just decide it for themselves. So like if you’ve seen it on TV, like the tall, blonde guy is the ideal for like being a boyfriend or something, or the ideal of beauty for a man. [Peggy, 11/17/09]
Identifying with images in the media was one of the major ways for my informants who did not possess strong ethnic ties and affiliation, like Peggy, when they were younger, to perceive who Chinese or Asian Americans are, and develop an ethnic membership while making reference to other ethnics. I usually asked them whether and how they understood those images? Did they accept or resist them, and how? More importantly, these perceptions are not fixed but negotiable and contingent. In some extreme cases, my informants even made a dramatic turnaround from negative denial to positive acceptance or vice versa as they had more exposure to their own ethnic culture and the mainstream society. For example, AC hated being Chinese because she, as one of the very few minorities in class, always got picked on by others. After her mother educated her that being Chinese is part of who she was, she learned to look at herself in a new way and to value her Chinese background.

When Chinese parents did not educate ethnic culture in the family, such as AC’s and Peggy’s parents, my informants would have to refer to whatever was offered by the mainstream, which was usually very accessible and influential. Under such circumstances, according to segmented assimilation theory, selective acculturation across generations is likely to happen when parents’ culture does not get passed down, and children only choose to associate with anything conducive to their successful integration into the larger society. For example, I asked Peggy why those Chinese girls would rather believe how the media portrayed Chinese men than make reference to their own fathers or other Chinese males in their lives, she reiterated her point that “pop culture is more influential.”

Many informants such as Sandy, Ann, Hebe, and Kelly mentioned their experience of watching Asian soap operas and animations. Some of them did that because they enjoyed accompanying their Chinese grandparents or parents even
though my informants sometimes did not really know the language, and barely grasped its plot. For example, Kelly believed that watching Chinese dramas with her grandparents made her ethnic identity more salient than that of her half Chinese half white younger brother, who never got involved with such activities.

Hebe liked to watch Asian dramas, and adored good-looking actors. She not only watched Asian soap opera episodes on DVDs but even downloaded Asian dramas and music from internet. Her being caught up with Asian media products and young male entertainment stars helps explain why she felt only attracted by Asian guys. Compared to American TV shows that she randomly watched, she was more interested in shows produced in Asia. Except for Cantonese ones that she could understand easily, when watching Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese or other Asian language shows, she would have to read subtitles because of language barriers. But even so, she was still fond of Asian TV programs. She said she was motivated to learn Asian languages by watching them.

I mean I watch American shows too. I like American shows. You know. I watch Gossip Girl, something like that. But most of the shows I do watch are either cartoons or reality shows. So, like MTV, it’s full of like reality shows. So I watch that. I guess I like watching Asian… ‘cause when I watch the show, I want to see attractive people. Like I told you last time, I am attracted to Asians. [Hebe, 11/19/09]

I noticed that Hebe mentioned her attraction to Asian men many times. Growing up in Chinatown, hanging out with mostly Asian friends, and throwing herself into Asian culture all helped Hebe achieve a high salience of cultural ties and ethnic identity. To test if she kept updated with what was populated in Asia, I asked her if she watched Boys over Flowers, one of the most popular TV drama series in recent years in a
couple of Asian countries as well as among younger Asian immigrants. Hebe responded to me with a big positive answer and joyful expressions right away. She commented on the plot, actors and actresses, and even different versions.

Yeah. I watched that one, *Boys over Flowers*. Yeah, I first watched the Japanese one. Then I watched the Korean, no, I watched the Taiwanese one, and Japanese one, and then I watched the Korean one. I have not watched the Chinese one. But then, I saw the actors, and no they look very young. Compared to all the other actors, you know, like in the Taiwanese, Japanese, and Korean versions, like all the actors, they look older. But this one, they all look really young. So yeah, I need to watch that. Even though I know the plot basically, I have it all on my head, I love watching it over, you know, different takes in it. You know, they changed like certain scenes…so yeah, I love that, I love this plot. I keep watching it. [Hebe, 11/19/09]

*Boys over Flowers* was firstly adapted from a Japanese cartoon and produced into two TV drama series in Taiwan called *Meteor Garden* and *Meteor Garden II*. Later, the Japanese version came out in 2005. After that, this story continually hit the whole of south-east Asia, and was reproduced in South Korea, mainland China, Philippine and other regions. One vital commonality that all those TV series share is the four main male roles were young, handsome, delicate, and cool guys, and grouped together as the “Flower Four” (F4, see Appendix D for a sample image of Korean actors) implying that these men are even more beautiful than flowers as an alternative way of challenging masculinity and manhood. It proved that Asian men can be popular and attractive without showing off big muscles or playing Kung Fu. As a teenager drama with mediocre acting and storyline, it swept over Asian countries with a new wave in hairstyle and dress code reaching far beyond just adolescents. Its success does not
have much to do with how well those actors and actresses performed but more because it influenced younger generations’ aesthetic perceptions and consumption habits. Young men, either celebrities or ordinary people, in Korea, Taiwan, Japan and China thought fashion was to have the same haircuts and wear makeup as those male characters did. These new aesthetic trends in Asia also influenced cultural practices of some of my informants in that watching Asian dramas became part of get-together activities that they would do with their family and Asian friends, and the images of F4 became their “dream boys.”

However, the U.S. mainstream media did not show strong interest in Asian popular culture, or cared about its influence on Asian immigrants, especially younger generations. Its concern about potential harm of incorporating Asian roles, as my informants observed, reinforces the notion of Asian Americans as “the others” or “perpetual foreigners,” who do not appropriately fit in American society for American audiences due to their non-White (non-European) origins and distinct physical attributes (Chuang, 2004). As my informant Peggy interpreted it, “I think mostly it’s American society. Like Hollywood doesn’t want to play Asians on TV. They are very reluctant to do it because they don’t know how the overall audience would accept it” (Peggy, 11/17/09). If things are like how she described that Hollywood did not shoot Asian roles because of a concern about the acceptance and consumption of American audience, then it is important to delve into the reasons why they concern, and scrutinize the ideology embedded in the entertainment industry that systematically excludes Asians.

Another ambiguous phenomenon is inconsistency between a growing body of Chinese American literature and how well those texts have represented what second and later generations of Chinese immigrants have undergone. Many English-speaking
Chinese writers have whined over the lack of recognition of American mainstream through memoirs or autobiographies. But their effort of capturing the essence of Chinese American identity has not always been appreciated by their ordinary ethnic fellows. For example, one of the most famous autobiographies telling stories about Chinese/Chinese American women, *The Woman Warrior* has received many appraisals for challenging sexism in Chinese traditions. The author Maxine Hong Kingston was also accused of distorting Asian American reality to suit a Western imagination of the *Oriental* by other Chinese American writers including Frank Chin. The debate of authenticity was somewhat taken by my informants in the way to question how works like that would speak to their lives. The same question was raised when I asked my informants about their opinions about *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). It was adapted from the same novel written by Amy Tan and directed by Wayne Wong, and both of them are Chinese Americans. I assumed my informants would have heard about it or preferably watched it. But, in fact, very few informants knew about it, and none of them really watched it or had an interest. As the only one who read this book, Lynn gave me some clues why she was not that into this kind of movies.

**Q:** Have you ever watched the movie *The Joy Luck Club*?

Lynn: Oh, I haven’t. But I read the book. But I read this book probably at early high school or late middle school. I heard some complaints about it.

**Q:** What kind of complaints?

Lynn: Like all the Chinese men portrayed there are like either weak or evil. And all the Chinese women were all like assimilated and stuff, like into American culture, or trying to be. So I don’t know. I don’t know what I feel about that. Yeah, I think the Asian men, they were portrayed as evil or weak. What bothers me more is probably that it is so popular. Like why is that the
only book that is popular? Why can’t we have like other Asian American novels? ‘Cause there are plenty out there. But just, the Joy Luck Club is still like assigned in classes whereas other Asian American writers aren’t. I feel like there should be more being paid attention that way. I think my major complaint is, the relative representation or the deservability of certain authors or certain books. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

In some ways, I agreed with Lynn’s critique because I felt disturbed when watching that movie. On the one hand, I appreciated the author’s efforts to dismantle the hardship that Chinese women and Chinese American women encountered crossing national and cultural boundaries. On the other hand, I got an impression that, for all four mothers in the movie, China is a token of a miserable and uncivilized past that should be totally dismissed. Those women could only find their way out in a new modern life in America, which does not go hand in hand with today’s immigrants’ pre- and post-migration experiences. Those intergenerational and intercultural conflicts between mothers and daughters are even too dramatic to resonate with in reality. Feeling distant from reproductions like that, Lynn would prefer something she sees as more realistic and comfortable to relate to.

There is one [book] on Japanese Canadian internment, by Joy…[Joy Kogawa]

What is her last name? It is like a historical fiction. That was a pretty good book. And there is another one called No-No, Boy where basically the protagonist was a Japanese American, and he refused to be a soldier during World War II. And it was like basically the explanations of his feelings, and of his family. And that was a pretty good book. And I feel like there are probably others out there. There are a lot of books. I hate forgetting their names. But I write them down sometimes. There is another book on Chinese
American family dealing with suicide in their family. So I felt like that definitely rang true to me, like the silence about it. And also, how they were focused more so on work, and a lot of the communication was not polite or silent. So I felt like it rang true to me. It was a Chinese American woman who wrote that book too. I thought they are good because they are realistic. And also it ran true to me emotionally as well as historically. Like it was historically accurate as well as…I felt like they portrayed well, like the family dynamics or the friendships or whatever. I felt very real, stuff like that.

Yeah, basically I can see the realisticness of it [the novel]. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Lynn recommended novels like *Obasan* and *No-No Boy* not only because of her personal favor of Japanese literature but also because those works, in her point of view, authentically describe the ambiguous in-between status that immigrants posit. She got help from reading them to think about questions like “Where to belong?” Asian American literary works are also very different from what were produced massively by the mainstream cultural industry. One feature is that these texts rung more current as she saw those similar plots and stories happening in a real life. Those works also touched upon controversial issues, which impact on immigrants’ identification and assimilation process in different forms.

**Comparison, Differentiation and Denial**

In addition to interacting with the media and Chinese American writers’ writings, another manner that my informants took advantage of is to compare themselves with people around them, especially those who share the same ethnic and racial category. Research shows that “the pressure that one feels to ‘be ethnic’ comes from the inside of a person and the ethnic community rather than from the outside dominant society,” and in Asian American experience, it involves an ethnicization of
racial boundaries while a new form of collectivity is coming into being (Kibria, 2002a). A controversial topic often mentioned by my informants is a “thickness” of their Chineseness. In other words, how “Chinese” they felt they were or were not. However, the term “Chinese” sometimes is racialized when it is used to affirm a generalized identity to all people of Chinese origin or even other Asian origins. For some informants, they felt offended because their ethnicity was devalued based on some standardized rules of how of a Chinese/Asian person should look like. Sometimes, the rules were implemented by other races. In some situations, my informants felt that they were unqualified for claiming their Chinese identity compared with other Chinese Americans either because they had a mixed blood or they did not know the language well. However, my informants interpreted “authentic Chineseness” differently. Some equalized it to those stereotypes of being Chinese, and tried to distinguish themselves from them. Some informants understood it by interacting with local Chinese people and Chinese communities. It was tough when they were accused by other Chinese or Chinese Americans of being “not Chinese enough,” and confronted exclusion from local ethnic communities. In contrast, particularly powerful in making visible to my informants their Americanness were situations in which they were judged to lack knowledge of Chinese ethnic culture in the eyes of other Chinese Americans.

Peggy recalled how she and her sisters were questioned by other Chinese in terms of how unqualified they were for being Chinese even though they had access to institutionalized Chinese culture. Peggy’s town in New Jersey had a Chinese cultural community. The big part of it was a Chinese Christian church. Peggy’s father was never really willing to tell his daughters anything about China or be involved in any cultural activities. As a result, her family did not have a close relationship with the
church even though most of her father’s clients were Chinese. As I mentioned in previous chapters, Peggy’s identification process was intensively intertwined with her social surroundings, like Asian American people she interacted and hung out with. Unlike her youngest sister, she and her other siblings always tried to relate to Chinese culture, and performing their Chinese identity when they felt the need to have a standpoint. From what she and her sisters went through, they tried hard but made very limited progress in justifying their membership as part of the local Chinese group.

Like I know my sister, she is only 15. But she had a boyfriend already. And he was Chinese. He gave her a lot of trouble for not knowing Chinese, and made her feel bad that she wasn’t Chinese enough. So she broke up with him, and said all this stuff. I was like, “What a jerk!” You know, he was a 14, 15 year old boy. How could you say [that?] But it’s obviously that we wanted to understand Chinese more. But we are not Chinese enough for the Chinese community, in my area?! It’s like we can hang out with them. But we can never really be part of it because we are too Americanized, I guess, at some level. But we also don’t look Chinese. We look half. We look Mexican, or we look Native American or whatever other race I’ve gotten before. It’s weird.

They accept us, and they’re really open, they don’t care, but only to an extent.

[Peggy, 10/13/09]

The presumption of an authentic ethnicity is highly tied to ethnic cultural capital. By that I mean the cultural knowledge and resources that are available to my informants to legitimize and reinforce their Chineseness that have material effects. Some informants needed to work much harder than others to achieve. One indicator mentioned by Peggy and many other informants is language. My informants all thought, no matter how well they can speak it, Chinese language conveys both
symbolic and realistic meanings in terms of an authority to declare their ethnic identity. In other words, unlike whites who practice symbolic ethnicity, my informants do not have the freedom of making a choice. The operation of an ethnic identity is complicated when my informants only have very few or no knowledge of Chinese language. They Chineseness could become “faked” in the eyes of other people. It also affects how my informants would pursue and cultivate an ethnic identity, and develop their belongingness accordingly. Informants who could not speak Chinese or did not have well-developed ethnic social networks were more likely to feel interrogated by other people of the same ethnic background in terms of their creditability of being Chinese. However, such interrogation of cultural authenticity actually leads to a challenge to the intention to oversimplify the meaning of being “Chinese American,” for example, equalizing it with “Chinatown Chinese American.”

It’s very strange. Because for me, growing up to be half Chinese to….like people would tell me that I look full Chinese, and I wouldn’t accept that ‘cause I knew I was more than just Chinese. It’s very difficult to explain. I have friends, and I can see them going to Chinese church. And I can see them talking in Chinese. They were hanging out with each other all the time, and they dated each other when we got older and everything. But it was kind of strange by not really being part of that [Chinese community.] My dad didn’t really talk about [Chinese] culture and where his family was growing up at all. So I was just kind of included in that group being Asian American, but not really feeling it. [Peggy, 10/13/09]

As Peggy elaborated, the distance between her family and the local Chinese community makes her connections with other Chinese superficial and fragile, and does not enhance her sense of a genuine belongingness. Her Chinese father did not
provide enough ethnic network support and resources. It discouraged Peggy and her siblings from establishing an ethnic solidarity. But I have to acknowledge that I was even not able to identify her Chinese background at the first time we met in a gathering.

What I heard more from my informants was how they were assumed as “originally” came from “other places” instead of the U. S. when questions like “Where are you from?” were raised. Many informants faced such weird “foreign” moments when not only their English language was questioned but even their nationality was challenged. Take a short conversation that AC had with a stranger for example. She recalled how she was approached and heckled by a janitor, a white woman, in her previous school in Kansas. The following is their conversation.

Janitor: Where are you from?
AC: I am from Marysville, Kansas.
Janitor: No! Where are you from?
AC: Well, my mom’s from Chengdu.
Janitor: Oh, so you are Chinese, right?
AC:…Yeah. [Her commentary: But it was kind of hard to categorize myself like that.] [AC, 11/24/09]

I am not sure if the janitor really knew that Chengdu is in China. But, it does not really matter whether the questioner is informed in geographic knowledge. Instead, she already had an answer for AC, and presumed that she was from “somewhere else.” Usually, “Chinese” would be a first-choice guess as long as the person looks Asian. My informants talked about how harmful stereotypes like “All Asians are Chinese” could be. As Hebe, who lived in New York City, said, “I feel like people generalize that Asians are only Chinese. They don’t really think Asians, and think
Korean, Japanese, they only think Chinese. So my friends and I get pissed off when people pick up lines and say “你好吗?” [How are you?] Well, you know we may not be Chinese. We could have been Korean and Japanese. And we could’ve been offended.” Far from flattering, some informants experienced these instances as being compelled to acknowledge a sense of foreignness and racial ignorance from others.

Moving to Marysville, Kansas from California was a “huge cultural shock” for AC because there was very little racial diversity in this suburban town and her family was the only Chinese there. The transition was so “hard” that she could barely “relate to anyone.” It was the first time that she was informed of “her being different” when what her way of defining normal was considered “weird” according to her new white friends. In California, AC was used to see diversity, which resulted from a phenomenon showing that “Everybody is different. So no one is conspicuously different.” Whereas in Kansas, she and her family were singled out and assigned to an inferior position in comparison with the rest majority whites in her local community. Not being enlightened as to how society is organized along racial lines, AC did not understand why her family faced hostility in the past.

Actually there was one incident that really made me realize that we were different. It was when my dad was taking out the trash, like people were driving around yelling at him. It was tough to deal with because I didn’t understand why they were treating us differently. So I guess it didn’t hit me until that moment. [AC, 11/24/09]

At that moment, AC began to realize the idea of “difference” and how it inferiorized her as a racial minority when compared to how other people were treated. She also had a hard time in school because she was made fun of and being said to some racial slurs, which she never confronted in California.
Actually my first day of school, the boys were really mean to me because I was Chinese. They were making Asian faces, and making jokes and stuff. That really shut my self-esteem down because my being an Asian was really a negative part of me. So I hated it throughout my elementary school years. I remember one day at lunch, a kid said, “Look at the Chinese girl.” And I cried, and I went to my mom. And she said, “AC, you need to understand you are Chinese!” She was telling the truth. I remember that day very clearly. Then I realize that is what I am. I am Chinese. It’s not a negative comment on myself. It is just a way to categorize myself. After that, I realize that it isn’t a negative thing. So through school, I tried to adjust myself to that mentality. And then in high school, I volunteered for a lot of things. I became a valedictorian. I became a cheerleader. I became presidents of multiple clubs and organizations. That… the fact that I was Chinese never influenced my upbringing… To be honest, I don’t feel like I consider myself to be Chinese. Sometimes, to be honest, I forget. Because I grew up in Kansas for so long that me being Chinese has never become a factor in my life really. [AC, 11/24/09]

For AC, growing up in Kansas means growing up around white since she did not have any other Chinese ethnics to associate with other than her nuclear family. The message of “being Chinese” that AC received from other people was made sense of through racial harassment and racial slurs that had severe negative impact on her ethnic identity, which made her feel that she was different in a derogatory sense. She developed an antagonistic attitude towards her Chinese ethnicity, and even tried to deny it. However, her mother made it clear to her that her ethnicity was part of her that could not be disguised no matter how other people treated her.
Acknowledging being ethnically Chinese and overlooking those negative comments, AC strategically changed the way of interpreting what being Chinese meant from what other people said to how she wanted it to be told. It was not just a turning negative to positive process but more to explore alternative approaches to surpass her peers and distinguish herself from what was negatively attached to her racialized ethnicity. She made a comment that her ethnicity “never influenced her upbringing” partly because she intentionally distanced herself from stereotypical portrayals of Chinese, and thought her educational achievement and outstanding performance in school has nothing to do with her ethnicity. On the other hand, her account implies an individualist approach, which means personal efforts can override institutionalized discrimination and disadvantages. As she mentioned, her experience of growing up in a white, suburban town in the Midwest overrode her ethnicity in the sense that she was too immersed in the white culture to be aware of her being Chinese as a barrier. Her younger sister who followed in her footsteps had herself a much easier time because “there is no racial comment towards her now that I know of. She has never said to me that people comment on her being Asian.” She and her sister excelled not only in academics but also sports and many social organizations and activities in which “traditional” Chinese might not even participate. AC was also confused about how to define herself when she had to choose categories and fill out forms and documents.

AC: Every time people ask me that, I just think of the banana, the banana analogy…. It’s kind of hard. You know when you fill out this paper work, it asks what race are you. When I check the Asian or Pacific one, it’s a little… it’s a weird feeling because I don’t associate myself with that much to that culture even though I am that. So it is kind of hard for me. Every time I
check it, I kind of hesitate a little bit. I wish I can… Physically I am this. But culturally I am this. I feel like I should check two boxes.

Q: Which one would you really like to identify with?

AC: I guess the white Caucasian because that is what I feel inside. Because I grew up that way. [AC, 11/24/09]

AC talked about how confused she was when she was dealing with some paperwork. Those forms usually did not provide her the appropriate description that she expected. It was always a dilemma for AC when she was asked to specify her race in that she felt there was no appropriate way to categorize herself. In her case, there was a conflict between what she was socially assigned to and what she really wanted to associate with. Explicitly differentiating biological characteristics from a cultural identity, AC identified much more with white culture that she felt “inside” of her rather than a label of Chinese that applied to her just because of her physical features.

In American society, race intersects with ethnicity in a sense that racial categories to some extent override ethnic diversity. In other words, as long as you are recognized as Asian, all racial discourses that apply to Asians can apply to you. It does not matter if you are Chinese, Japanese or Korean because those are all lumped into one box in racial system. When my informants make comparisons, they intend to pursue and reconstruct identity centered on how they perceived and related to so-called “Asian stereotypes.” While AC critiqued being labeled a typical Chinese girl, Jennifer and her sister were taught to purposely reject those racialized discourses and go the opposite way of stereotypes attached to being Chinese/Asian. Her father usually taught them not to follow the stereotypes, and try to turn it upside down. Jennifer remembered how her father would not let her pick a “typical Chinese/Asian” musical instrument.
They [her parents] tried to kind of not to say “Don’t hang out with Asian Americans.” But at the same time, they kind of pushed us to look pass some of this...they didn’t want us to be the stereotypical Asian Americans. So you know, like they didn’t want us to be like nerdy...Did I tell you this before? I wasn’t allowed to play violin because it’s too Chinese. It is too traditional, like nerdy Asian. And my dad didn’t want us to get picked on and stuff. So I only had two choices. I could either do the saxophone or guitar. So I said, “Well, okay, I will play the saxophone.” So I played the saxophone. But I kind of wanted to play the violin. But he wouldn’t let me. He was like, “All Asian kids, or Chinese friends’ kids are playing the violin. So you are not gonna play the violin.” So he made me not to play the violin. It’s weird. The same thing with my sister. So she played clarinet. But we did play the piano. It was weird. I remember thinking of that when I was even a kid, I was like, “Oh that’s weird.” You know? “Why can’t I play the violin?” And he’s just like, “No, no. You don’t want people to pick on you. You don’t want to be that Asian kid.” So I think my dad wanted us to be different. [Jennifer, 5/20/10]

Her father assumed that she and her sister could get away from being targeted by any forms of racism as long as they chose not to do what Asian/Chinese kids were supposed to do. Not to fall into but to keep away from stereotypes was a strategy that her father implemented in order to protect Jennifer and her sister from getting “picked on” due to how ethnic and racial identities get blurred for Asian Americans.

In addition, there were some other principles that her father instilled them. For example, “Don’t take shit from anybody. Always stand up for yourself, and be aggressive.” “Don’t let other people step on you. Don’t be so humble.” Jennifer’s
father worked in a large American car company in Detroit area for many years until he retired. He always told his daughters stories of how it was so hard for him to deal with discrimination and inequality in the workplace. A famous story that he told concerned a time when he was making a presentation to all senior managers in a large meeting. Someone walked in and said something like, “Isn’t it ironical that Japs are taking over our company? Japs right here, speaking on behalf of our company?” Experiences like that shaped how her father thought and reacted in an aggressive way when he was encountering racism and inequality. Jennifer came to share her father’s point of view because of her observations and experience of being ignored as a Chinese woman in the public sphere, so she tried to adjust herself to the “anti-typical” model that her father instilled.

I am kind of a shy person. And my father, growing up, one of the things that he always told us was, “You don’t want to be that little wall flower. You don’t want to be that little kid in the corner with the head down. And you always have to make a good impression, always look at people in their eyes. Don’t shuffle.” He always wanted us to have this confidence about this. And even growing up he always said, “You know, as an Asian …as a Chinese person, and as a woman, you are going to have some issues.” But yeah, when we were kids, he said, “Don’t take shit from anybody. Don’t take crap from anybody. Always stand up for yourself, and be aggressive.” [Otherwise], people are gonna think you are not gonna say anything. And he’s like, “Show them that you are extra strong.” I remember when we were kids, my nature was so…I mean I was pretty quiet. And it was so hard. It would traumatize me. But I think it’s his way of trying to make sure that we weren’t kind of left behind, and we did succeed, right? I know it probably was hard for him to
deal with, his own, overcoming his stereotypes being put upon him. Like I noticed that you have been overlooked a little bit if you are Asian female, you know? I feel people definitely don’t … they will go to the white guy. They will assume [you won’t say anything], and you have to be a little bit louder. Otherwise, people don’t…they do ignore you. [Jennifer, 5/20/10]

As Jennifer noticed, racial and gender stereotypes were so powerful that minority people, as vulnerable individuals, were hardly in a position to challenge those dominant discourses, even if they had the awareness of striving for more equality. She showed a great appreciation of how her father educated her and her elder sister to deal with social barriers and racial inequality. However, at the same time, because her father selectively emphasized the “not to be” side of Chinese American identity, she was not cultivated with a good understanding of the “to be” aspect.

I feel like we were never raised to know exactly what Chinese culture was supposed to be. You know what I mean? It was weird. Almost basically, all I know about Chinese is what I should not be, which is a real shame. I feel like that is a really negative way looking at it. ‘Cause there are so many things that you could appreciate about it. I was not ashamed of being Chinese. But I knew I was very different. You know. And I didn’t try to hide it ‘cause you can’t really hide it. You just accept it. I know I am Chinese. But I always felt very different. I felt like this odd thing. I felt perpetually misunderstood by students and teachers a lot when I was growing up. [Jennifer, 5/20/10]

When she wanted to develop a better sense of being Chinese, Jennifer could not make real connections because she never had a chance to practice it, which left her with an ambivalent feeling. Although she wanted to associate with her Chinese ethnicity more, she neither knew know how to nor could justify it when having confusion or
encountering inquiries from others. Different from Jennifer who was intentionally educated not to behave “the Chinese way,” AC spontaneously reinforced her status of “not being Chinese” by differentiating herself from those stereotypical Asians and Chinese women.

I just remember this one girl. But she was Asian. She didn’t talk much, she was very very quiet. I think that kind of built on the stereotypical, the quiet Asian women or something like that. And I wasn’t the same as that, like this stereotype, quiet Asian woman. I was in forensics. I was in cheerleading. I was always out there. And that really changed, I guess, my thoughts about what I guess Asianness is because I guess my cousins, when I compare myself to them, they are very, they almost fit the stereotypical Chinese, like the quiet [type], you know. And my sister and I are completely opposite, not…but opposite of my cousins. We are very outgoing. We are very stubborn. My sister is very loud. She sings all the time. She never shuts up, really. She is a great debate speaker. She is very confident. And, she is very pretty. And I think that helps her get away with some things. [AC, 5/20/10]

According to Jennifer and AC, their configuration of ethnic identity is framed by deconstructing fixed characteristics of what Chinese/Asian Americans are assigned to. My informants became critical of how representations of Chinese/Asian culture and people are mediated through racial discourses. As Lowe’s (2007) argues, “interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians” (p. 507). The racialization of Asian American is a process of homogenizing Asian American groups based on scripts designed by the dominant culture as if all Asians are the same.
I argue that the way my informants defined their Chinese American identity is a segmented adaptation process of continuity, intermittence, and contingency. They have to confront what has been passed down from their parents, how their environments have changed, and how their identification has been negotiated and transformed along the way. One common way that most informants would pursue to understand their positionality is to locate “the self” somewhere between two heterogeneous cultures socially constructed as two opposites like American versus Chinese/Asian. These women in my research were moving towards the mainstream and maintaining certain ethnic distinctiveness to different extent leading to a variance of representing their hyphenated identities. Some emphasized more on Chinese values and ethics instilled by their immigrant parents. Some considered themselves Americanized inside and their being Chinese did not mean much to them. Some others would pursue a balance of both.

Q: When you are thinking of yourself, what would you call yourself?

AC: I would just say American. When I say Asian American, I do feel like I am lying to myself, even though I am, like outside I am Asian…I am Chinese. It’s just…I feel cultural difference makes it really difficult. When I was in Chinese Dance Performance, which was a Chinese cultural dance troop, I wanted to be more connected with my Chinese cultural side. And being in that group really showed me how different I was. Well, they were all ABCs. And I thought I was ABC too. But I guess not as … I don’t know I guess I am more American than [them]. It was just difficult to categorize myself, especially being in a group with other ABCs. And it was just an eye-opening. That’s why I dropped out. ‘Cause I didn’t feel comfortable. [AC, 5/20/10]

For informants who grew up outside ethnic enclaves, they had less experience of
practicing Chinese culture, and were not used to being around those Chinese people from ethnic communities in inner cities. Those informants were usually more Americanized and assimilated. But, what is controversial is that they still have to substantiate their Americanness with extra effort. Frequently, my informants expressed confusion that they did not know how to describe their situation of “being not really this or that,” whereas they felt they were “part of this and that.”

I don’t really fit in with white people. Obviously, I am not white. But then, in a group of Chinese people, I don’t totally feel comfortable either. Because I feel like it is not really my culture. You know, A, I don’t speak the language. And B, I feel growing up in the Midwest, there is a different sort of Asian than…like a difference if you grow up in Chinatown in New York or in California. I did try to go to the Chinese Student Association when I first started my undergrad. And I definitely didn’t fit in, you know what I mean? People might think I was weird. You know, I had dyed hair, and I was kind of out there. People thought that was so weird, so that didn’t really fit either. So now, I feel a little more comfortable on my skin, you know, knowing there is a variety of different types of people, different experiences of Asian Americans. And also I guess meeting people who are like me. So that was good. And I also feel comfortable balancing, you know, Asian and American.

[Jennifer, 4/16/10]

In terms of biological features and blood kinship, it is not that difficult to recognize Jennifer’s ethnic identity since both of her parents were ethnic Chinese. However, it caused her trouble when her authority of being a cultural Chinese was questioned. Jennifer talked about how white kids in her primary school “overruled” her choice of her favorite food depending on what they thought would be the right answer for her.
When things like that happened, she felt incapable of defending her position. They asked what my favorite food was. And at that time, it was Dou Fu, right? I know it’s weird. It was my favorite food at that time. So I said, “Dou Fu.”

And they said, “What is that?” And I said, “Dou Fu.” You know what I mean? And they, the Americans, they said, “Oh, yeah Tofu.” And they’re like, “Tofu.” And they’re like, “You can’t make things up. That’s not your favorite food. It is not a food.” And I was looking at them, I said, “Yes, it is.” So I was supposed to draw my favorite food. So I was drawing this little block. And I was like, “Dou Fu.” And they were like, “That is not food.” I don’t know what they were thinking. They were like “Your favorite food is ice cream.” And I said, “Ugh…Okay.” ‘Cause everyone was like an authority figure. So I was like, Okay, ice cream. But it wasn’t. It was Dou Fu. But at that time, in Michigan, in the 80s, they didn’t know what that was ‘cause no one ever ate that. [Jennifer, 5/20/10]

Even though she got a chance, Jennifer could not justify why her answer was right because she lacked convincing evidences to prove her arguments. It was not just that. In many occasions, she was assumed to be knowledgeable about Chinese culture whereas, on the contrary, she knew as little as her white peers. She also faced risks of becoming “disqualified” for her Chineseness since she could not explain “her culture” explicitly in other people’s eyes.

And every time [when] they did have this cultural thing, they would be like, “Oh, tell us about your culture.” And I would feel really on the spot. You know when I was a kid, and I was just like, “Oh, I don’t really know what you want to know.” And they were like, when they would celebrate Chinese New Year or something, they would be like, “Tell us about it. Bring your
stuff.” When they did Chinese culture, I always cringed. I was like, “Everyone is gonna highlight how different and how weird I am.” And they would tell my mom. I remember one time I brought shrimp chips. You know the shrimp chips? And I would have to learn about Chinese culture in order to teach my class. But they would think I inherently knew about all this stuff already. And they would ask me these questions, and I would be like “I don’t know.” You know what I mean? They were just like, “Oh, this is weird.” Well, first of all, I felt like a fraud because I don’t know anything about this culture. I am learning it as you are learning. And you think I am already into this. And secondly, you think I am weird. You know what I mean? And they would definitely…after that, everyone would look at me, “Oh, you are that…” It was a weird experience. [Jennifer, 5/20/10]

Jennifer was not confident standing up for her Chinese identity in front of her white classmates. She did not have a connection to the culture that her parents carried on although she was expected to possess it as well. Jennifer not only was not considered authentic Chinese by white people, but also felt strange as an outsider when she was interacting with a group of Chinese people. For Jennifer, identification was definitely a continual negotiation. Not knowing her own ethnic culture and being educated by her father the oppositions of not “being a Chinese,” Jennifer struggled with not really feeling Chinese or American because of differences she saw between her and other white Americans or Chinese Americans from Chinatowns. It was not until she met Chinese Americans who shared the same growing up experiences, particularly experiences of not fitting in either way, that she reconstructed her identity around an alternative interpretation of being Chinese American. Her new way is different from that of those who newly emigrated or grew up in ethnic enclaves.
Jennifer’s father always taught her not to do things that a typical Chinese was supposed to do. She was well-informed about how Chinese and Asian Americans were stereotypically portrayed and misrepresented. On many occasions, she was targeted as “different” in a public environment where whites dominated because of the sharp physical differences between her and other white people, although she did not have slanted eyes and was not slim or tiny at all. When situations like that happened, she felt pressure to work harder to challenge those stereotypes. Ironically, the impression she made could change depending on who “recognized” her. She talked about how she was considered “white” when she went to college and met different people, and how she felt confused and upset about such comments.

Q: But you said, sometimes people thought you were white.
Jennifer: Oh, yeah. I don’t know. I kind of get offended on that. I don’t think it is wrong being white. But I almost feel like I work kind of hard on my like, you know, Asian identity. I was like, “Don’t call me white. That is rude.” So yeah, yeah, they do. Or they have. Yeah, unfortunately.

Q: Did you ask them why?
Jennifer: I did ask them why. I confronted like a bunch of people. And then, no one would give me a specific answer. So, I just left and I was really offended. I mean nothing was wrong with it. But it’s just like …I guess it’s just like you know, I do cherish being Chinese, and being Asian. You know, I don’t want people to think that I am something else. And when I was growing up too, I felt like a lot of people, you know, they called me Banana, right? ‘Cause I am the yellow on the outside and white in the inside. I really try so hard to not be so white. So, and when people are just like, “Oh I think you are white.” I am like, “No, not really, I am not white.” But apparently,
there is something that is not quite…Asian? I don’t know. [Jennifer, 5/20/10]

Talking about being identified as white by other people, Jennifer expressed a strong concern about how her being ethnic Chinese and racially Asian might be ignored and devalued because she was misplaced into some other racial categories that she thought did not apply to her. Being associated with those categories did not mean recognition or appreciation for her. For example, she was reluctant to being seen as white or being labeled “banana,” an analogy with derogatory implication, especially when used to tease or blame American-born Chinese for not being able to maintain Chinese languages and traditions.

For informants including Jennifer and Peggy, how they thought about themselves was, to a great extent, subject to how they were perceived by others. When being asked about how she understood her own identity, Peggy talked about how her understanding of who she was contradicted how she was defined by others. Being Chinese was legitimized by her blood kinship because of her Chinese father. But what really matters is how she related to various representations of Chinese American, or Asian American people. Those social narratives, on the one hand, were imposed on her with a prescript of what she should be, but on the other hand, operated as interrelated signifiers that Peggy (re)negotiated with.

Q: So you always identify yourself as Chinese American?

Peggy: It depends. Like I definitely do, like I am not thinking that I am not Chinese American because like, I mean first of all that is how people see me if they don’t…like if they see me on the street, nobody thinks I am Greek American at all. Nobody thinks I am white. I met some Chinese people from China who were like, “Oh, I thought you were white when I initially met you.” But actually I am not. It’s kind of I can’t really reject it (that I am
Chinese). I grew up having animosity towards being Asian American ‘cause like there were a lot of stereotypes growing up…

Q: Like?

Peggy: It’s almost like Chinese or Asians in general embrace the stereotypes that they have like the “model minority,” and like, we have to be smart and everything. And we can’t go out because our parents are so strict, and they don’t let us do fun things. And we always get As. Yeah, we don’t have fun. We just play tennis. And we don’t play soccer, that kind of thing. I felt like in my high school, the students embraced it in a wrong way. It’s good to want to be smart. But it’s not good to be smart because you are Asian. It’s not good to say like “Oh, you got an A because you are Asian, not because you are smart.” So I didn’t want to be Asian American. When I came to college, I met a big pool of people, not just from my town. And it was like talking about how Asian Americans in the United States were always very neglected politically. And I am very interested in politics. I worked for a councilman this summer. He ran for New York City office. And he is Asian American. He’s the first one, and he won. So that’s really great. He won recently. You know being in school and like being with more mature, adult-age people, I felt like I understood it like, “Okay, I am Asian American, and I should not want to deny it because it is my culture. It is my identity. Whether I like it or not, it is how I am perceived. It is better to stand up for it, and not to be ashamed of it.” So it’s kind of like that. [Peggy, 10/13/09]

Knowing about her being Chinese and being really informed of it were two different stages for Peggy. For her, the second required a much stronger affiliation lacking in her parents’ parenting. It also discouraged her when she was aware of identifying with
Chinese/Asian means accepting those racial stereotypes to some degree. The identification process for my informants always involved more than just a symbolic relationship between what being Chinese means to themselves and in the eyes of other people. It was more of the experience that they went through while being grouped into the same category that defined their individual and collective identity. Peggy recalled her way of developing an understanding of how she formed up her racial and ethnic identity was full of sharing and imposing. When I asked her in what situations she would identify herself as Chinese American, she gave me an ambiguous explanation.

I don’t know. Like, it’s weird, strange. I’ve never thought of it. I think I always know. I always think of myself as Chinese American because it is like when you hang out with your friends or something… it doesn’t matter which race they are. I don’t know. I don’t feel like that I have it in my mind all the time. [When] I hang out with my Asian friends, I know I am Asian because we share the same…. Like our parents would do the same silly things, and make the same mistakes. ‘Cause they were immigrants and they came here. It’s kind of like a joke around about how your parents acted when they came here. So we share that kind of thing. We also understand what it is like to have …. Like my dad was very strict. [When I was] growing up, he was very like “Asian parent.” We know we kind of have that commonality, and we can understand where we’re coming from. But then when we are hanging out with different races, sometimes they push it on you, and they say like, “Oh, you are so Asian for doing this or that.” [Peggy, 10/13/09]

Identity for Peggy is not something self-explanatory. Her ethnic identification closely relates to how she was accepted by her ethnic fellows. One example is that they shared common experiences of dealing with their typical “Asian parents.” How other
non-Asians thought of her, which was mostly based on some essentialized ideas of what it means to be an Asian, also influenced her identification. Therefore, Peggy did not think her being Asian/Chinese was something “natural.” It, instead, required effort to act while hanging around with Asian friends, or sharing the same growing up experiences, and even being told by people of other races how Asian they were.

Identity as Reconfiguration

Approaching the question of identity totally different from AC and choosing between two opposing options of either being Chinese or being American, AF intended to reverse the order of the two defining components of her hyphenated identity.

AF: A lot of people say they are American-born Chinese. But I’d like to describe myself as Chinese-born American. ‘Cause I don’t really like to be identified as American. Because American history is kind of ugly. You know, the thing “ugly American?” So I found it out when I went abroad. Someone asked me, “Are you Japanese?” I am like, “No.” And I have to say, “Oh, I am Chinese American.” When I said American, I was like “Ugh, Crap!” Like it made me feel so bad ‘cause I know that the U.S. has done a lot of horrible things to other countries. And I don’t want to be identified with that, you know? So that is how I identify myself, Chinese-born American.

Q: How do you see yourself related to the two cultures? More Chinese?
AF: I don’t think I am more of one than the other. But I am not very proud of being American whereas a lot of Asian Americans are like, “Yeah, American!” They are very patriotic. I am not really like that. I am just…[inaudible]. I am American because I was born on this land, [and] raised on this land. So I have that part of identity because I was raised here.
That shapes who I am. But I also have a Chinese aspect where my parents…
how they raised me. Like my relatives, that kind of environment.

Q: What makes you feel you are Chinese-born?

AF: Oh, because my parents are Chinese.

Q: What is the difference between American-born Chinese and Chinese-born American?

AF: I guess the different lands, the different territories. I think I would like to
be identified more with China than I am with America just because that’s
where my ancestral roots were from.

Q: What do you know about China?

AF: There was like peasants… and…the Cultural Revolution.

Q: So you want to identify with that?

AF: Yeah. I’d rather identify with that. Like this right now, you heard that
JD¹ is gonna speak at the graduation, right? Like the country I am living in
now, it is very corporate-based. Everything is owned and controlled by
corporations.

Q: You mean capitalism?

AF: Yeah. The divide is so big. Everyone is so…caught up with what is
happening, celebrities’ lives, that they are not paying attention to their own
lives. I don’t want to be identified with that culture. ‘Cause growing up, I
have had exposure to that. But I can choose to not identify or be involved
with that.

Q: What did you get from your Chinese aspect that can justify that you are
Chinese-born?

¹ A makeup name for the public figure.
AF: Well, my parents always talked about how living in China was so much better. They’re like, “The food is so good. And you have this sense of community. And everyone knows each other in the village.” They talked about hardships and stuff too. But it just seems that they were so much happier there. And here, I see that they have to work so hard, and my dad, he basically has no life but work. Like work is his life. [AF, 4/28/10]

AF is the only informant that specified a strong willingness to identify with China, although she had very limited knowledge about that country and where her ancestors came from. Many informants’ parents occasionally mentioned their old lives back in China. However, most of their stories were about how their wealth was taken over by the Communist party so that they had no choice but to escape. The United States was their dream land full of opportunities for a better life. However, AF had a different opinion. She thought that immigrants were fooled by that idea because, in reality, her parents struggled a lot in order to sustain a family. For example, language, working conditions, discrimination, and other social barriers. Her father, the only breadwinner in her family, worked more than twelve hours (from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.) every day from Tuesday to Sunday as a meat cutter in Chinatown. Compared to other informants’ parents who recollected their fragmented and miserable history, AF’s parents held some positive memories for food and a friendly, community-based lifestyle in China. AF imaged that Chinese culture conveys some of the values that American culture and political system lacks as it is driven by capitalism that systematically disadvantages working-class immigrants like her parents. She also referred to the impression of “ugly American” as a reason why she would rather associate with a country that she had never really been to but just imagined in her mind simply based on her parents’ dated memories than the place where she was born and raised. Moving towards a
different direction from informants like AC, the more AF felt disappointed with the
U.S. in terms of its politics, economy, and social realities, the more she “ostracized”
her Americananness, which in a way stimulated her internalization of “becoming
Chinese” and “relating to China.” She also romanticized China, and constructed her
imagination based on her parents’ fragmented out-of-date memory and her own
assumption. By doing so, she was able to reconceptualize her identity as Chinese-born
American, a label that she believed could better describe herself than American-born
Chinese, and prioritizes her Chinese roots.

Lynn, one of those who learned critical theories and got involved with activist
praxis, worked on her identity around a consciousness of how race, gender, and class
are interrelated. From high school, Lynn started to notice how Asian American women
and men were portrayed in TV programs and other forms of cultural production in the
U.S. “I always see the Asian women being exotic or sexual and stuff like that. Like
Asian men being the nerdy type. Regardless of gender, sometimes, you would have
someone who doesn’t speak English, and that person is made fun of in the show or
something like that. So I really didn’t like that. That’s where I started with media
representations. And then I learned more about race, and learned about all these other
issues.” With a racial and gender awareness, Lynn engaged in many activities in
college that challenge racism, sexism, and patriarchy systematically suppressing and
oppressing Asian American women. She also connected her personal identities to
collective actions and stances with certain agenda, rather than resorting to apolitical
cultural ties like some informants may do.

Q: What do you think is your culture?
Lynn: I guess what I care about is not only being Chinese, but being a person
of color, and also being someone who fights for social justice. So for me, my
culture would be like music that talks about oppression, or music that talks about fighting oppression, or like going to rallies or whatever. Those are the things I care about. It is hard to say what my culture is, exactly. Because I feel like I am not so connected to Chinese culture. At least I haven’t really heard of Chinese music that talks about oppression and stuff like that. I wish I did. But yeah, I feel like it would be better if the cultural aspect of it was tied to my own personal identity or like the language I know. I wish there were some music in Cantonese that I can listen to, or TV or radio or whatever that talked about social justice. That would be really cool. So for me, I just take whatever I can. I see a lot of black artists talk about oppression. So I listen to them or whoever.

Q: How would you identify yourself?

Lynn: I guess I identify myself more so as a woman of color. So I think that helps me rally with black women and Latinos and women in general. I guess it’s a broader category that we can all associate with. So that’s why we would have that something in common. ‘Cause if I say just Chinese American, it would seem very exclusive and not a lot of people can relate to it. So I identify more with “women of color.” Chinese American women would probably be the subset of women of color. And like white women couldn’t understand what it means to be Chinese American women. I would choose women of color as a broader category.

Q: But you still identify with Chinese American?

Lynn: Yeah. I think woman of color might be a stronger category for me ‘cause I associate with Asian Americans regardless of their nationality, and I hang out sometimes with black friends and Latinos. So I feel like I put on the
woman of color identity more often than Chinese American woman. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

Academically trained in an interdisciplinary program combining hard science and social theories, Lynn took advantage of her theoretical background and transformed her personal life experience into a critically enlightening political engagement agenda. She had been equipped with a vocabulary of describing how the society was constructed in a way that women of color as a collective had a potential of becoming an important political force to achieve social justice. She also showed disappointment when there was a gap between what she wanted to pursue politically and what she was bestowed ethnically. Lynn challenged feminism on how it is annotated as if it is the theory for all women. She thought that feminism is dominated by certain groups of women and weakens others. Her critique also reinforced her self-recognition as a woman of color not just as an Asian or Chinese American woman. It is partly because she felt not being well-presented in feminism, which has already been taken over by white women.

Yeah, I feel like often times feminism is like a white middle class issue, even though obviously all women are involved, women of color and then economic classes are affected. Because I think most of the women in America are white, and an enlarging middle class, it’s become like a white middle class issue. [In classes,] we talked about how sometimes women of color tried to take back the word feminism, and tried to use another word instead ‘cause they don’t associate themselves with being the white feminist. Yeah, so I feel like we are women of color in general, not just Chinese. Like we care about economic issues, we care about racism. We care about citizenship. A lot more issues than just being female. ‘Cause to be female and
poor, and being a woman of color, you face discrimination when you try to get medical care or stuff like that. So it’s definitely like, all these issues matter, not just gender. And not just gender alone. [Lynn, 5/20/10]

A point that Lynn sheds light on here is how race, class, and gender intersectionally correlate to each other, which complicates the process of how women of color engender their particular epistemological standpoint and political initiatives. It does not mean that Lynn ignored her Chineseness when she focused more on political aspects of her identity. On the contrary, her self-recognition as Chinese American and all experiences that she had because of the locations attached to that identification represent a powerful stimulus for her to relate to other minority women and racial groups more extensively. What Lynn articulated corresponds to Hames-García’s claim that identity is not a simple addition of all social categories but a relational interaction of how those categories act together in a person’s real life. He said,

Memberships in various social groups combine with and mutually constitute one another. Membership in one group (e.g., “femaleness”) thus means something different in the context of some simultaneous group memberships (e.g. “blackness”) than in others (e.g. “motherhood”). The totality of these relations in their mutual constitution comprises the self. One important consequence of this fact is that one cannot understand a self as the sum of so many discrete parts, that is, femaleness + blackness + motherhood. The whole self is constituted by the mutual interaction and relation of its parts to one another. …These various categories of social identity do not, therefore, comprise essentially separate “axes” that occasionally “intersect.” They do not simply intersect but blend, constantly and differently, like the colors of a photograph. They expand one another and mutually constitute each other’s
meanings. In other words, the subjective experience of any social group membership depends fundamentally on relations to memberships in other social groups. (Hames-García, 2000, pp. 103-104)

Echoing Hames-García’s post-positivist realist statement, Lynn realized, and many other informants also did but just in a more implicit manner, that identification means not to just define any one decisive dimension of the self, such as either being Chinese or being American. Instead, it calls for more adequate knowledge of the multiplicity and complexity that particular historical, social, and political contexts convey to engender reliable descriptions of what “becoming a Chinese American woman” involves. However, social categories may convey different weights in various situations, and, therefore, produce both resonant and dissonant adaptation experiences. Nonetheless, enlightened by such post-positivist realist arguments, I would also argue that only through comparison and meaning-making of Chinese American women’s experiences and social forces could a more reliable and accurate interpretation of their world be positively expected.

For those informants who did not grow up sheltered by ethnic culture and institutions, identifying with both sides is an on-going process full of negotiating, struggling, questioning, and configuring. By configuring, I refer to situations where my informants have to continually construct and reconstruct their identity in relation to how they make sense of who they are. This process is, at the same time, subject to how they see themselves relating to others, and in what contexts. Also, their relationship with the larger society dynamically affects their understanding of being Chinese American women, and always leads to transformation in one way or another. When AC was confronting her cousin from California, who grew up with more peers with the same cultural origins than she did, their debate showed how they, as two
Chinese American women, approached the question of “What my culture is” so differently.

She [her cousin] asked me if I considered myself Asian, or something like that. And I was like kind of “Not really.” And we kind of got into this argument about keeping our culture. And for me, keeping your culture or my culture is having both [Chinese and white American cultures]. You know, like, because the majority of my life I have grown up with white families in Kansas. That’s really shaped me. And that’s my culture, I feel. And my cousin feels like because I’ve adopted this white culture that I’ve excluded my Chinese culture. Which was, I felt it’s very offensive to me for her to think that I abandoned my roots. In reality, I just gained something else. [AC, 5/20/10]

AC did not conceptualize Chinese and white cultures as two exclusive and incompatible entities. Instead, to prove her cousin’s accusation was not true, she argued that she learned to harmoniously preserve what was passed on to her from her Chinese parents together with the white culture that she interacted with more often and was deeply immersed into. I think she wants to make two points. First, being a full Chinese (both of her parents are Chinese) biologically does not legitimize the authenticity of a person’s Chineseness. Second, the taken-it-for-granted framework of constructing what being Chinese means may need reconsideration. She and her cousin interpreted her way of being Chinese American differently. Her cousin blamed her for what she lost on her Chinese side, whereas she emphasized her gaining something extra and valuable on her American side. By labeling herself and her younger sister as the “opposites,” which means they are “outgoing, loud, active, confident, and even stubborn,” from her cousin, AC recaptured a sense of Asianness that is very different
from how her “traditionally raised” cousin and friends who lived in California behaved.

When I got here, all my friends I realize are Chinese but white-washed. All my closest friends here… are technically Asian, but they grew up around white people, like me. So it was funny that I found out all those people that we made a group of Chinese people that are…consider themselves as …that kind of see themselves as white even though their outside is Chinese. You know, like the banana. We all feel we are like the banana, which is funny ‘cause we … but we are all together, which we are Asian. So we all have the same growing up situation living with traditional Chinese parents but living, I mean associating, interacting with people that are considered white. [AC, 11/24/09]

AC associated more with those Chinese Americans who also grew up in white communities since they shared stronger emotional proximity and identity embodiment to white culture instead of Chinese ethnic culture. People sometimes use “banana” to refer to Chinese Americans who can only speak English and have no or very few knowledge about Chinese culture. It is a metaphor meaning that these Chinese Americans, although look yellow (Chinese) on the outside, but got whitened out in the inside. How they do or think about things is very similar to the whites, a symbol showing how fully assimilated Chinese could be. Today, it often means whoever the label applies to does not qualify for her ethnic identity. But because there is no way to quantitatively define how Chinese is Chinese enough, recognition/rejection from ethnic fellows always becomes a reliable marker of whether a person’s ethnicity is thin or thick.

I feel like race and culture is like a spectrum. It is more that than …
categories. I am not leaving the Asian group. I am just moving along the spectrum towards maybe more white. And eventually, maybe I want to learn more about Chinese. I just go back over here. And it is just this … I don’t want to see it as I am losing culture. I am just changing it. ‘Cause the white, the white society is still a culture. [AC, 5/20/10]

According to AC, she can put on multiple identity labels whereas whether and how her ethnic and racial identities are salient depends on which culture she wants to associate with more. Identification is ongoing, contextual, and multidimensional. AC was aware of conflicts between two cultures. But she took it for granted that Chinese and American cultures are different but equal so that she was free to work out her particular way of being Chinese/Asian American by having both. She thought she did not have to make a either/or choice based on how she was assumed by others. In her point of view, making it in the mainstream and maintaining ethnic and cultural distinctions are not contradictory, corresponding to the selective acculturation pattern proposed by segmented assimilation theory. In this aspect, AC got some allies, such as Cathy. Cathy articulated her Chinese American identity in a well-structured framework with which she developed a sense of belongingness to those who were born and lived in the U.S., and got used to the lifestyle here. But, in the meantime, she retained some Chinese cultural traits, including Chinese food, language, and holidays.

Q: How would you describe what your culture is?

Cathy: I think I am very comfortable with identifying as either Chinese American or Asian American. But obviously, if I were to pick a country that I was comfortable in, it would definitely be this one [America]. Because I’ve only been to Hong Kong once. And, so I don’t identify with being Chinese in terms of place of origin. But I guess I identify with being Chinese in terms of
language or food or you know celebrating like the Chinese New Year, and things like that. But I see myself as more Chinese American or Asian American than either wholly Chinese or wholly American. Because I think that there are just…I mean there is a whole group of people in this country, you know, who have the same experience as I do, who are growing up here, but who look like they might be from somewhere else. You know, people have assumptions about us because of the way we look. So I think…you know, it is not a particular place in this country. But there is this imaginary space where Asian Americans exist. [Cathy, 4/16/10]

Although interchangeably using the vocabulary of Chinese American and Asian American, Cathy’s point here was to emphasize how it is important not to project a rigid Chinese American identity on a backdrop of simplifying Chineseness or Americanness. She was aware of the foreignness that Asian Americans confronted, which derived from how ethnicity has been racialized to other and inferior minorities. It also relates to her experiences of living through a life negotiating with not being considered merely Chinese or American. It was the in-between status that, in Cathy’s point of view, brought together and materialized the “imagination” of Chinese Americans because how they think “who I am” interactively shapes and is shaped by how they think of the world and their relationship with others.

Summary

How my informants developed and interpreted their Chinese American identity is subject to multiple factors. It is a spiral development process of education, comparison, differentiation, construction, resistance, and compromise. They took advantage of information from media products, either in America or from Asia, to initially form up a more prescribed “self,” which was subject to further reiteration.
Not all of the cultural images are conceived in the same manner. Some participants became more critical of how they thought of those cultural texts and what they would like Chinese Americans to be represented in the media. Examining how they thought of Chinese/Asian American representations in the mainstream, they were aware that the market and consumption trend was mediated by racial hierarchy. Some informants’ personal and political perceptions of sex and gender were influenced by American and Chinese cultural texts. For some others, realist descriptions of Chinese Americans’ current lives were more meaningful and relatable than literature.

As I argue that my informants as a whole embody the selective acculturation type of the three general patterns segmented assimilation theory proposes, they were achieving upward mobility and integrating into the mainstream while deliberately preserving ethnic ties and distinctions. It is also important not to dismiss an intra-group diversity in terms of how they maintain and assert their ethnic identity across generations and life stages. In other words, for those coming from inner-city enclaves or closely connecting with other forms of ethnic institutions, their ethnic identification got legitimized by themselves and others with less trouble and uncertainty. However, things were more complicated for those who lacked compatible strong connections. They usually had to negotiate and deal with misunderstandings, and strive for recognition. My data show that those participants who came from white, suburban areas are more separated from their ethnic community and have a difficult time retrieving and fortifying their ethnic identity. They could receive blame from other “more Chinese” ethnic fellows due to them acting white or becoming “banana,” or doubts from other ethnic or racial groups. These forms of denial sometimes intertwine with how being ethnically Chinese in the U.S. conveys racial meanings. Hence, ethnicity is not just a personal option, but subject to how it gets defined by others. In
the cases of my informants, their ethnicity has symbolic aspects as well as material outcomes, exemplified by the fact that they might be disqualified for being either Chinese or American.

Their family education affected how they positioned themselves given how their ethnic characteristics brought them with racial inequality and discrimination. Subtly but gradually, they learned to frame their own interpretations of identity with focuses on different segments of a cultural self that they hoped to represent. Finally, some of them reached beyond the dichotomy of two “oppositional” categories of being either Chinese or American, and explored alternative possibilities with political significance, such as women of color.
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this dissertation, I have analyzed how twenty-seven Chinese American women, as daughters of Chinese immigrants, constructed their identities and integrated into American society while negotiating different social locations. Not identical with earlier European immigrants’ experience of melding into the mainstream, Chinese Americans’ experience has its own distinctiveness across time and contexts. As children of post-1970 new immigrants from China, my informants exhibit diverse adaptations depending on financial, social, and human capital that their family possessed before and after migration, and ethnic capital they had access to within or outside an ethnic community. Taking all those factors and the racial and class stratification that dominates the society into consideration, segmented assimilation theory successfully characterizes Chinese Americans’ selective acculturation pattern of moving upward into the dominant culture while retaining ethnic culture and features. At the same time, the racialization of ethnicity further explains how Chinese immigrants and their offspring were forced to merge into the society dealing with an institutionalized racial hierarchy. That is, their process of adopting the middle-class, mainstream way to become Americanized is also a process of resisting being homogenized into the racial labels of Chinese/Asian American while still committing to shared culture, history, and values. My research investigates how my participants, as American-born and -raised adult daughters of Chinese immigrants, integrate into different segments of American society while negotiating and situating themselves within the dynamics of various social structures and power relations.

Summary of My Research

The twenty-seven women research participants’ acculturation processes have
shown that how they understood and acted out their Chinese American identity involves what their immigrant parents brought with them when they initiated a boundary-crossing journey, how their parents located geographically and socially, how my informants were educated with both cultures and values, how they interacted with ethnic culture and social structures in the mainstream society, and how they continually negotiated with the intersection of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and other social categories and power relations. I have explored the multiplicity of their adaptation and identification in three data chapters organized by themes emerged from how race, class, ethnicity and gender played a role and how they made sense of it in different stages within a person’s lifetime.

Yet, to represent the diverse identification and adaptation processes of Chinese American women with different social locations is not an easy project. I was interested in how my participants growing up in inner-city enclaves and suburban white neighborhoods developed interpersonal relationships and ethnic connections differently. Through the lens of segmented assimilation theory, we know how this social phenomenon can not be well articulated unless immigrants’ pre- and post-migration conditions are incorporated for analysis. In Chapter Four, I emphasized how residential patterns, ethnic practices within family, and immigrant parents’ high expectations of children’s academic performance predominantly shaped my informants’ identification and growing up experience in their early age. Their parents’ social and economic background as one of the most crucial factors determines the type of neighborhood my informants lived in, the nature of school they went to, and friends and people they associated with. More specifically, those whose parents graduated from college or had even more advanced degrees were usually scattered into suburban areas. In contrast, with limited education and professional skills,
immigrant parents from the working class were more likely to rely on ethnic resources and networks in a sense that they had much less social mobility. However, my data in this chapter show that nearly all my participants were instilled by their parents with the idea of “making it in America” via education, no matter what socioeconomic backgrounds they were from. For the average Chinese immigrant, a high-quality education will guarantee a financially stable middle-class life that is expected to pay off in the future. This is also a vital motivation for the majority of immigrant parents of my informants to overcome any kinds of obstacles in order to come to the U.S., sacrificing whatever it takes them.

Many people believe that it is self-explanatory that Asians are born to be good students, and always achieving high test scores, as the “model minority” stereotype assumes. Many Chinese immigrants believe in this myth and hope it can work for their children. My informants reported that their parents always asked them to get straight As, and hardly accepted any grades that were not “good;” kept them doing extra work in addition to their homework; and did not let them participate in extracurricular activities including sports. These behaviors are some of the examples showing why and how education is overemphasized for achieving success in American society for Chinese Americans.

Excelling at SATs and attending an Ivy League college is just half the way to success\(^1\). What really matters, according to my informants’ parents, is what to study in college in order for their children to be occupationally successful and maintain middle-class livelihoods. In this regard, I argued in Chapter Five that the ethnic effect from families and larger ethnic communities, including pan-ethnic interests-based student organizations, persisted in how my informants would find themselves through

\(^1\) Success is also a controversial idea that conveys different meanings for people affiliated with three different modes of assimilation that segmented assimilation theory addresses.
taking advantage of ethnic social networks and resources to achieve self-fulfillment and upward mobility along the social status ladder. It is not a coincidence that more than half of them accumulated in Science fields—mostly Premed, Biology, and Chemistry. On the other hand, it is also not surprising to see that some of them were so worried about not knowing how to talk to their parents about switching to some other majors that would be considered as not being helpful, or as even ruining their future and family’s honor. Intergenerational and intercultural conflicts often emerge from different levels of cultural competency, knowledge of the social, economic, and political systems, and awareness of how racism structurally manipulates the American society. Most of the foreign-born parents in my research were not well-informed about what race is and how racism works. They were vulnerable to racial and ethnic stratifications, and did not have the knowledge to critically scrutinize different kinds of misrepresentations and stereotypes portrayed in the media, not only about themselves but also concerning other racial and ethnic minorities. Therefore, when advising their children regarding dating and choosing a marriage partner, my informants’ parents stuck to a hierarchical preference list always positioning Chinese/Asian at the top, then whites, and with an objection to blacks for most of the cases. Although ties with ethnic social relations may not necessarily lead to positive outcomes for all immigrant groups, my research findings show that sharing the same values and norms with others from similar ethnic background and memberships of these pan-ethnic organizations prove to reduce intergenerational conflicts and promote participation into the dominant society.

Zhou (2009) points out that many Chinese immigrants would accept that “‘white’ is mainstream, average, and normal, and look to whites as their frame of reference for attaining a higher social position” (p. 233). If to score racial groups
according to their achievements, whites are probably the most compatible among all non-Asian groups. Given the priority of intra-ethnic marriage, intermarriage with whites is conditionally acceptable for my informants’ parents. Two patterns are expected to strategically preserve ethnic solidity by minimizing cultural gaps or to benefit my informants with resources that may only be available to the dominant white ethnics. However, as my informants reflected on their parents’ overoptimistic preference, things worked out completely different on their side. Many informants clearly expressed that they felt pressure to follow their parents’ preferences list even though they cared much less about their partner’s racial and ethnic background. My findings do not predict any absolute trend of inter- or intra-ethnic coupling, but reveal a fact that Chinese American women started committing to a relationship, or seriously thinking about it, mostly after getting into college. At the same time, they were also more conservative than their non-Asian peers in terms of approaching or being approached by guys. One reason is that Chinese parents more strictly disciplined daughters’ social behaviors with traditional Chinese values.

In Chapter Six, I examined how ethnicity and race intertwine to make it complicated for Chinese Americans to assert their ethnic identity as Chinese while becoming American at the same time. From my informants’ narratives, their identification involves both how they choose to identify themselves and how they are identified by others. The answer to why and how some identity categories make more sense than others to my informants helps understand why some of them only wanted to date white guys, some felt addicted to Asian media products, and why they described themselves so differently while using Chinese American, Asian American, Chinese, Chinese-born American, or women of color. It does not mean that my informants only adhere to one category throughout their lives. On the contrary, they
never stop negotiating with different parts that compose a whole “self,” and these parts, either voluntarily chosen or compulsorily imposed, interact with each other in accordance with salience and prominence attached at particular locations and times. It is rarely to see any complete rejection or acceptance to “being American” or “being Chinese.” Most informants believed that, for their benefits, they would choose to locate somewhere in-between. During the process, they would try to integrate Chinese upbringing and American socialization, and invoke and act out certain aspects of their identity according to different settings and frame of reference. It is fair enough to draw a conclusion that my informants’ identification is a contextual, conditional, historical, and heterogeneous process.

Limitations and Significance

This research may be limited in the sense that both universities are located on the East Coast, in the northeast, even though universities are not the only space and setting my research focused on. All the informants were expected to have finished a relatively full time period of formal k-12 schooling and college education, which excludes those who have not. However, from the demographic information that I have collected, coming to the two eastern universities, Orange Lake and Townhill, does not contradict the fact that the students grew up in varied neighborhoods. My informants were not only from the East Coast, and some came from thousands of miles away to the west. I would not assume that it should bring major differences if more types of colleges were involved, since my research takes a variety of factors into consideration. In addition, the majority of existing studies on Chinese American and Asian American populations have been produced on/about the West Coast and immigrant-accumulating gateway cities. In that sense, my research will contribute to a more diverse insight to Chinese American women’s contemporary lives in the United States.
In addition, my being a woman doing research on women and being Chinese doing research on Chinese Americans, such an “intimate relationship” may reduce the social distance between informants and me, but also leads to some taken-for-granted assumptions that requires stronger reflexivity.

The underrepresentation of and misconceptions about Chinese American women in academic disciplines, such as Asian American Studies, Immigration Studies, Women’ Studies, and Cultural Studies, closely relate to the multiple layers of oppression that they have undergone and confronted as the society is race-, class-, and gender-mediated. An on-going challenging mission for cultural and education researchers like me is to find new ways of representing these women, and acknowledging their role in history-making and knowledge production. My research can make a contribution by bringing Chinese American women’s experience to the forefront to empower an alternative way of knowing, and revealing how their identity has been conditionally (re)shaped, (re)mapped and (re)invented under different social contexts.

Taking advantage of feminist qualitative research that relies on the interviewees’ own narratives, I explored how Chinese American women identify themselves in creating, resisting, and maintaining gendered cultural and social formations by encouraging the participants to tell their life stories to represent their own voices. The lived experiences of Chinese American women will convey the power of challenging Westernized and male-dominated cultural discourses, as well as transforming our understanding of women’s history as their lives are situated in the intersections of race, class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity. This research can also attribute to the promotion of cultural exchange and critical reflection on current policy practice within the contexts of globalization.
Implications for Policy-Makers and Educators

The American society is run based on race. After more than fifty years since *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the civil rights movement, people may come to a conclusion that racism does not exist, especially as politically correct phrases are used to polish speeches in public to make them sound “perfectly composed to everyone.” However, it is still in question by people who are targeted by racism in everyday life.

On May 21, 2011, the webpage of a Chemistry professor, Clifford Kubiak, at the University of California-San Diego, publicly issued racially offensive terms to Chinese people. In his “lab rules,” following the first three rules of “no Disney music,” “don’t be that guy,” and “if you can’t turn on the instrument, you shouldn’t use it,” the fourth one is “Don’t believe anything the Chinaman says.” Immediately, this brought about a blast of protests from Chinese students, and debates over how to frame it. Some people thought it was just an inappropriate joke gone wild, nothing serious. But the Chinese student group took it very seriously, and won support from many Chinese communities locally and internationally to bring it to the university’s and the public’s attention that racism is still occurring on campus.

Not a long time ago, in February 2010, at the same school, another action of racial discrimination was aimed at African American students. A noose, a symbol of racism, was found hanging on a bookcase in the library. Rage boiled over and more than 300 UCSD students gathered outside of the chancellor’s office to protest. Even though the offending student was suspended later, it is absolutely not and should not be the end to it. It is no coincidence that the derogatory lab rules case comes along as one of the many latest racial discrimination issues on college campuses. Demographically, among its current undergraduates, 64 percent are students of color, and 44 percent are Asian at UCSD. Those percentages have increased dramatically.
over the years.¹ Not alone having such high proportions, it was reported that “39 percent of the students admitted to UC Berkeley in 2003 and 45 percent of the freshmen at UCLA were Asian” (Kwong & Miščević, 2005, p. 257).

It is nationally well-known that Ethnic Studies programs in the UC system have been the longest running and best-structured across the country, and its Asian American Studies programs founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s were considered a huge political achievement in academic settings. The launching of Asian American Studies at UCLA and UC Berkeley as well as other leading research universities and Ivy League schools² worked in conjunction with other ethnic and cultural minority programs to promote better understandings and interconnections among Asian subgroups, and served as a critical tool to educate American society about the history and reality of Asian Americans. Despite the long existence of Asian American Studies programs and prosperous diversity of the resident population on the West Coast, Chinese people still confront racial slurs and stereotypes regardless of the “real” intent behind such slurs. Whether Clifford Kubiak deliberately plotted to discriminate against Chinese people was not clear. If his point was that Chinese people’s research cannot be trusted, in addition to this unsubstantial accusation, he might have forgotten that his colleague, Professor Roger Qian, was one of the 2008 Nobel laureates in Chemistry. As I argue throughout this dissertation, “the Chinaman” label functions just like other stigmatized stereotypes that reinforce racism and racialization of ethnicity that all Chinese have to confront because of how they are positioned.

Upon the strong request from outraged UCSD students, the school administration started to get involved, and that particular lab webpage was removed.

¹ Retrieved May 27, 2011 from http://www.ucsd.edu/explore/about/facts.html
² Those include University of Wisconsin at Madison, Yale, Princeton, and Columbia.
In his apology letter, Clifford Kubiak imputed it to insensitivity and unawareness of offending language, and lack of training. Universities have requirements for faculty to be prepared for students with disabilities and different sexual orientations. However, it is not clear how faculty can get training in not behaving in a racist manner. To get rid of all racist words? Even if it is practical, does it risk reinforcing racism of another form as a negative consequence?

On March 11, 2011, a UCLA student, Alexandra Wallace, posted a video on YouTube.com about how she was disturbed by Asian students using cell phones in the library. Immediately, and continuing over a few days, it provoked tremendous responses from the local community and other places all over the country regarding how she described “these hordes of Asian people” and mimicked Asian (usually Chinese) ways of speaking like “Ching Chong Ling Long Ting Tong.” Among those responses, LA Chinese American musician Jimmy Wong’s creative song with more than two million clicks spoke back to it with its humorous lyrics like “Ching Chong, it means I love you/Ling Long, I really want you/Ting Tong, I don’t actually know what that means.” It even became popular to replace “love” with “Ching Chong” to reverse its original racist derogatory connotation. In her later apology message, Alexandra Wallace made an excuse of being ignorant and insensitive. This incident, not surprisingly, heated up debates over topics of racism, freedom of speech, Asians being overactive, and everybody having prejudice, again.

What inspired me as an observer from a distance, in addition to anger and being upset, was that taking advantage of social media and incorporating its products, such as Jimmy Wong’s song, could be an alternative way of getting “trained” and raising consciousness, especially for those who have never really realized their privileges. It is a more innovative and refreshing way, at least for younger generations,
than just sitting in a classroom being lectured about what racism is. It spreads out faster, reaches much more people within a shorter time, and costs less than traditional formats do in terms of delivering knowledge.

It is equally important to get administrators, faculty, and students all involved in discussions over race and racism in order to build up open and conscious communities from both the top down and bottom up, especially in higher education institutions. The women in my study had different levels of awareness toward their multiple marginalized locations, partly because not all of them had access to knowledge about the relationship between racism and other forms of oppression and discrimination. Among the two universities that my informants studied at, only Townhill had an Asian American Studies program, and a vast range of on-campus pan-ethnic and cultural organizations. In contrast, my informants from Orange Lake expressed more concerns about how Asian American students were structurally alienated, and how urgently it should respond to students’ appeals for designing a new Ethnic Studies program on Chinese/Asian Americans. For administrators, they need to be more aware of and support students’ need to see themselves represented officially. Being exposed to the experience of various ethnic and racial groups in the U. S. helps these students and even faculty members know about their own history and their relationship with other groups, and facilitate further critical examination of whiteness and white supremacy. By doing so, universities and colleges will not just be places where middle-class values and class stratification get reproduced, but rather, will become spaces where minority students learn how to resist racism and other forms of social inequality. Sometimes, when experiencing racial discrimination, Chinese American students and other minorities do not know how to connect their individual experience with the larger social context, or how to make a change as active agents.
Suggestions for Future Studies

There are many directions I would like to explore to continue this research in the future. First, enlightened by the diversity of my participants’ adaptation processes, I believe it will be meaningful to incorporate voices of their counterparts of other Asian and non-Asian ethnic groups, and of the other gender. Starting from Chinese American women in college settings and making connections to other groups who might experience the same journey, we will be able to make an intergroup comparison of how U.S.-born and -raised children of immigrants negotiate their lives from their own perspectives.

I would also want to expand this study to the first generation of Chinese American and Asian American women, and examine their boundary-crossing and acculturation. According to my data, some issues concerning why my informants’ parents came and settled where they were and whether and how they maintained transnational connections were still ambiguous in the stories told by their daughters. The more I interacted with those women in my research, the more curious I became about how their parents would tell their stories, and what it would look like to have insights from different generations. From my personal experience of coming to the U.S. as a grown-up Chinese woman, I had very different ways of approaching American culture and society, which in some ways more fit in with my informant’s parents’ acculturation process. Of course, I am not saying that mine is identical with theirs. What makes this direction intriguing is because of how fragmented my informants’ narratives were about their parents and family history moving from China to America. Knowing more about their pre-migration conditions will not only help these individual families with their own history, but more importantly, to further understand their present by exploring their past in relation to transnational migration,
multiculturalism, and the politics of identity and the nation-state.

Another thread is to continue this research within a longer time frame. My informants were all in higher education institutions studying, full-time or part-time. Upon the completion of my fieldwork, some of them were graduating and looking for jobs. I would like to follow them up and interview them again when they have their own career and start a family. Then, for some of the issues they brought up in here and were struggling with, such as college majors and dating choices, they may have more stories to tell given how race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other identity categories may constitute each other and have shaped their experience very differently from now.

Immigration is one of the most important social phenomena that have transformed the U.S. as a nation-state as well as its civil society and culture over time. We may go back and trace down how it started, but can hardly foresee where it ends, since the history of America is inherently constituted of the history of immigration. However, Chinese American women’s history and presence is still full of ambiguity and confusions. As an alternative to male-dominated and privileged accounts, my research reframes contemporary Chinese American women’s lives by positioning them as active agents in the center of their own history. I hope to fill the gap of how they are left out and oversimplified in the fields of racial and ethnic studies, women’s studies, immigration and transnational migration, and even Asian American studies. Given the multiplicity of the Chinese American population, the research is meaningful not only to this particular group, but also to other racial and ethnic groups. Reconstructing Chinese American women’s everyday experiences encourages more dialogues of and insights into rethinking these women’s lives as sites of intersections of various social categories, and striving for equality by challenging the way of representing who they are.
APPENDIX A: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General information
Could you tell me something about yourself?
Where were you born?
Where did you grow up?
Please describe your neighborhood.
What ethnic organizations did you associate with while growing up?

Parents’ background
Could you describe your family?
How did your parents come to the States?
What were those conditions?
What did they do? What are they doing now?
Have your parents kept in touch with your family back in China/Asia? How?
Why not?

Home/Intergenerational relation
Tell me a little bit about your primary, secondary and high school.
What Chinese cultural practices did your family keep in the States? Why did they keep? Why not?
What are your parents’ requirements or expectations in term of grades and educational achievements?
Do you think there are any differences between how men and women are raised up in your family/ethnic community?
How often do you talk to your family? What did you talk about?
How did your parents help you out with choosing college majors?
How likely your parents would give your advice on career?

Social activities
How often do you engage with your ethnic community?
How did you feel when you were with other Chinese Americans?
How did you make friends?
What do you usually do with your friends? Do the activities ever feel different based on who you are with?
Why do you feel close to those friends?
How could conversations differ on whether the friends are from the same ethnicity or not?
What television shows do you like to watch or what movies have you seen lately? Have you ever been reminded of your ethnicity while watching? Please give me some examples.
Have you encountered discriminations in stores, restaurants, etc.? What happened?
How would you react to stereotypes, racist behaviors and slurs?
If you do no mind, could you tell me something about your dating experience?
Why did you want to date or marry Chinese/Asian? What did your parents say?
School/University-related
Were there any occasions when your ethnic background related to your experience in school? Examples?
How do you like this major?
Why did you change majors? What was your parents’ response?
Any courses you have taken influenced your values and life? How?
What on-campus organizations do you participate? What do you do?

Identity-related questions
How would you respond to the question “What are you?”
Have you ever thought about your own identity?
How would you identify yourself? What do you mean by that?
When did you start noticing “difference?” In what situations?
What do you mean by “fit in?”
What would you define the idea of “my culture?”
Anything you know about China? Would you consider going back to China, e.g. visiting family, doing research?
If you did visit China or Asia, what was it about? How did you feel?
Why did you change the way you recognized yourself?
What are the differences and similarities between Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans?
How do you feel as a Chinese American, being American and being Chinese?
APPENDIX B: INFORMANTS' AND THEIR PARENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION  
(Listed Alphabetically by Pseudonym)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Job(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Industrial and Labor Relations</td>
<td>Marysville, KS</td>
<td>Cambodia, Chengdu</td>
<td>Restaurant owner, Restaurant owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
<td>Chinatown, and Brooklyn, NYC</td>
<td>Guangdong, Guangdong</td>
<td>Waiter, Waitress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AF</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>African American Studies</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NYC</td>
<td>Toisan, Toisan</td>
<td>Meat cutter, Garment factory worker Not working now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Premed-Medicine</td>
<td>Stanford, CT and NYC</td>
<td>China, Taipei</td>
<td>Entrepreneur, Working for a company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Biology and premed</td>
<td>Long Island, NY</td>
<td>Guangzhou, Guangzhou</td>
<td>Data Administrator (M), Accountant (B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Staten Island, NYC</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Toisan</td>
<td>Pastor (Ph.D.), School counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NYC</td>
<td>Guangdong, Guangdong</td>
<td>Factory worker, Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Law (M) Psychology (B)</td>
<td>San Francisco, CA</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Guangdong</td>
<td>Real estate, Housewife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Here, “age” refers to how old my informants were when I first interviewed them.
2 “Neighborhood” refers the places where my informants stayed the longest, since many informants moved around different areas growing up.
3 “Place of Origin” means where my informants’ parents came from. Among the places my informants mentioned located in mainland China, Toisan (Taishan), Enping, Guangzhou are in Guangdong province. Fuzhou in Fujian province, Chengdu in Sichuan province, and Nanjing in Jiangsu province. Hainan is another province in the down south.
4 (M) refers to Master’s degree, and (B) refers to Bachelor’s degree.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Job(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>International Relations and Political Science</td>
<td>Buffalo, NY</td>
<td>Fuzhou</td>
<td>Restaurant owner</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Brooklyn, NYC</td>
<td>Fuzhou</td>
<td>Restaurant owner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Music Education</td>
<td>Queens, NYC</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Mainland, China</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Computer consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Chinatown, NYC</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Enping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Waiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seamstress Now home attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Chemistry (B &amp; M)</td>
<td>Raleigh, NC</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Electrical Engineer (B) Now retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Biology &amp; Society</td>
<td>Berkeley Heights, NJ</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>America (Chinese)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Teacher (B) Now receptionist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Premed, Biology</td>
<td>Marboro, NJ</td>
<td>Fujian, Hong Kong</td>
<td>Fujian, Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Store owner Half unemployed</td>
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<td>Seamstress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Biology &amp; Society</td>
<td>Long Island, NY</td>
<td>U.S. (Chinese)</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Insurance Agent (B)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Art History</td>
<td>Detroit, MI</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>U.S. (Chinese)</td>
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<td>Marketing Executive</td>
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<td>Housewife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Elementary Education and Special Education</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NYC</td>
<td>Irish Italian</td>
<td>Hainan Island</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Working for a company</td>
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<td>Teacher (B) Now working for a company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>Place of Origin</td>
<td>Job(s)</td>
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<td>Lauren</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Planting Breeding and Genetics (M) English Literature and Biology (B)</td>
<td>Honolulu, HI</td>
<td>U.S. (Chinese)</td>
<td>Singapore Retired Housewife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Broadcast Journalism (BS) with a minor in English and Textual Studies Education (M)</td>
<td>Born in Euclid, Ohio, lived in MA, NY, and moved back to Ohio</td>
<td>U.S. (Chinese)</td>
<td>U.S. (white, Welsh/German) Accountant for power plants Office jobs (high school diploma)/ Laid off in 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Biology and Society</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NYC</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Hotel worker Manual worker Now unemployed</td>
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<td>Mary</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Townhill</td>
<td>Premed, Chemistry</td>
<td>Holmdel, NJ</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Taiwan Worked for a company (B) Stay-at-home (M)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Undecided (maybe Pharmacy)</td>
<td>Chinatown, NYC</td>
<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>Waiter Now butcher Home attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Neighborhood&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Place of Origin&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Job(s)</td>
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<td>Peggy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>International Relations and International Security and Diplomacy</td>
<td>Morris County, NJ</td>
<td>Nanjing, Greece</td>
<td>Businessman, Housewife, Part-time worker</td>
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<td>Penny</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Inclusive and Special Education</td>
<td>San Jose, CA</td>
<td>Taiwan, Taiwan</td>
<td>Doing stocks, Working for a company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Premed</td>
<td>Chinatown, NYC</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Fujian</td>
<td>Restaurant owner, Now restaurant worker, Clothing factory worker, Now housewife</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
<td>Manhattan, NYC</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Hong Kong</td>
<td>Accountant (B), Accountant (B)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Orange Lake</td>
<td>English and Creative Writing</td>
<td>Syracuse, NY</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Hong Kong</td>
<td>Restaurant owner, Now supermarket worker, Restaurant owner, Now housewife</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C: THEMATIC LAYOUT

Religion

Asian Media

Environment/Neighborhood

Family

Relatives

Class

American Media

Friends

Higher Education

Negotiation of Identity

Ethnic Languages

Chinese Schools

Trips to China

Popular Culture

Racialization
APPENDIX D: A SAMPLE IMAGE OF FLOWER FOUR

1 Downloaded from Internet.
REFERENCES


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Zhou, M & Xiong, Y. S. (2005). The multifaceted American experiences of the


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DEGREES AWARDED:
Doctor of Philosophy, Cultural Foundations of Education, 2012, Syracuse University
Master of Science, Cultural Foundations of Education, 2008, Syracuse University
Certificate of Advanced Studies, Women’s Studies, 2006, Syracuse University
Master of Education, Comparative Education, 2003, Beijing Normal University, China
Bachelor of Arts, English Education, 1999, Hunan Normal University, China

AWARDS AND HONORS:
Creative Research Grant, School of Education, Syracuse University, 2008-9
Syracuse University Scholarship, 2006-7
Syracuse University Fellowship 2003-4 & 2005-6

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Teaching Assistant, Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University, 2010
Teaching Assistant, Cultural Foundations of Education, Syracuse University, 2004-5
Research Assistant, School of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China 2000-2
Instructor, Hunan Women’s University, Changsha, China 1999-2000