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Barriers to Voluntary Assimilation

Experiences of Chinese American Students at UCSB

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Abstract

This paper explores the barriers to voluntary assimilation encountered by Chinese American students at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). This study aims to explore the nuances of cultural assimilation by using a mixed-methods approach, specifically challenging the either/or dichotomy of retaining one's native culture and acquiring American culture. The study analyzed factors such as cultural identity, family cultural practices, and experiences of discrimination. The findings reveal the complex interplay between cultural identity, discrimination, and assimilation, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the assimilation process for Chinese American students.

Introduction

The theory of assimilation has been a cornerstone of American sociology since the early 1900s, when the United States emerged as a dominant global force in a number of ways, especially industrially and economically, attracting large numbers of immigrants from around the world. American sociologists commonly measure assimilation through cultural assimilation, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. Cultural assimilation involves adopting U.S. values, behaviors, social norms, etc., such as learning English and some consumption habits. Socioeconomic status pertains to access to and assimilation into U.S. social, political, economic, and cultural institutions, reflecting the extent to which immigrants achieve comparable socioeconomic mobility and status to other U.S. residents.

Asian Americans, according to the Pew Research Center, have the highest incomes, educational attainment, and growth rates among minority groups in the United States, making them a significant part of the minority population in American society. However, most of the previous studies treated Asian Americans as a monolithic group, overlooking the considerably varied assimilation processes of subgroups with different ethnic origins. In addition, contemporary studies on cultural assimilation often operate within a binary framework, which assumes that individual immigrants negotiate a dichotomy between retaining their native culture and acquiring American culture. This paper, focusing on Chinese American students at UCSB, challenges this binary view and explores the barriers they face in voluntarily integrating into American society.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the assimilation experiences of Chinese American students at UCSB. The quantitative component consisted of a questionnaire that was completed by eight randomly selected Chinese American students at UCSB. The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with 15 randomly selected students, each lasting at least 40 minutes, which were designed to capture the detailed personal narratives and complex interrelationships of the assimilation process. The study examined factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural identity, family cultural practices, and experiences of discrimination. Cultural assimilation was assessed through the students' sense of American identity, a concept highlighted by Gordon in *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*, where he mentioned "the development of a sense of nationhood that is uniquely rooted in the host society" (Gordon, 1964). This study was reviewed and approved by the UCSB Human Research Committee.

Findings

- Based on the research methodology, several key findings emerged:
- All 23 respondents identified themselves as either Chinese American or Asian American, with 20 identifying as Chinese American and three as Asian American.
- 6 respondents considered their American identity more important than their Chinese identity, 12 viewed both identities as equally important, and 5 prioritized their Chinese identity. The importance of the two identities correlated with their upbringing, family cultural practices, and language proficiency.

- 12 respondents supported the Democratic Party, while 11 were neutral or indifferent towards political parties.
- All respondents reported experiencing discrimination, which affected their American identity to varying degrees.

Classical assimilation theory posits that immigration creates a “marginal man”, and that immigrants are trapped between two cultures: that of their host and that of their country of origin (Zhou, 1997). Traditional views suggested that complete assimilation required shedding all ties to one’s native culture in favor of adopting White American culture. However, this study demonstrates that retaining Chinese cultural heritage is not a barrier to thriving in American society for Chinese Americans.

Firstly, Chinese Americans can integrate into American life—academically, culturally, and socially—without fully adopting White American cultural norms. They maintain their language, traditions, and identity while contributing to and enriching American society. In terms of language, Chinese Americans usually retain their native language, Mandarin/Cantonese, while living in an English environment. As their first language, first-generation immigrants are very proficient in Mandarin/Cantonese while learning English to integrate into American society. Despite being native English speakers, several respondents who are second-generation immigrants said that they are capable of conversing in Chinese. The reason is that their parents speak both languages at home or send them to extracurricular classes to learn Chinese. Dietary practices also reflect cultural retention. All respondents reported having mastered the use of chopsticks, and many of them reported that they use chopsticks in their daily meals instead of forks and knives. In addition, they indicated that they frequent Chinese restaurants and milk tea stores. They often shop at Asian supermarkets or Asian food websites to cook Chinese food for themselves.

Moreover, the formation of Chinese American identity is multifaceted and complex. As my research findings present, all individuals navigate a hyphenated identity (e.g., Chinese American, Asian American) rather than Chinese or American alone. This dual identity enables individuals to navigate between American and Chinese cultural contexts, with traditional ethnic and American cultural elements incorporated into the self-concept.

Furthermore, according to the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (2021), the median annual income for Chinese Americans in 2021 was \$82,000, approximately 1.158 times the national median income of \$70,784. Additionally, Asian Americans exhibit high educational attainment, with 29.3% having a bachelor’s degree, compared to the overall U.S. figure of 17.5%, and 19.5% having a graduate or professional degree, compared with the overall U.S. figure of 10.2%. These statistics underscore the educational success and socioeconomic mobility of Chinese Americans, which are achieved without having to completely assimilate into white American cultural norms.

Discussion

In the United States, the nature of racism has evolved over the decades but never disappeared. For Chinese Americans, this is reflected in the shift from outward discrimination that created discriminatory acts, the Chinese Exclusion Act, to subtle, indirect, and sometimes unintentional forms of microaggression. These forms of discrimination perpetuate many harmful stereotypes and reinforce the idea of Chinese Americans as permanent foreigners or second-class citizens. Microaggression can take many forms, including seemingly innocuous comments, jokes, or behaviors that imply that Chinese Americans are not fully American. For instance, one of the interviewees shared that he experienced being complimented on “your English is so good” when talking to strangers, despite his first language being English. Experiences like these can subtly undermine the legitimacy of one’s American identity.

Microaggression is widespread in contemporary society. Every participant in this study reported experiencing microaggression at some point in their lives, ranging from childhood through college. These experiences were not limited to one area of their lives but spanned a variety of settings, including school, part-time jobs, social interactions, and public spaces. For instance, one interviewee recounted an incident in elementary school when he attempted to join other classmates in a game of basketball, and his classmates ignored his athletic ability and rejected him with the statement that “all Chinese are nerds”. This early exposure to racial taunts left a lasting impression on him, and he felt that such experiences contributed to his timidity in integrating into American society. Another student described an interaction in her high school economics class in which the teacher singled her out to comment on China’s economy during a discussion of macroeconomic trends, implicitly conflating Chinese Americans’ identities with their ethnic heritage. The interviewees provided many more similar incidents. Furthermore, all the respondents indicated that this kind of experience diminished their American identity. Overall, interviewees felt that microaggression created a general sense of alienation. As a result, they often faced the challenge of living with a dual identity in their own country while being reminded by others that they were considered foreigners.

Individual reactions to these microaggressions varied. Some interviewees indicated that the microaggressions did not substantially affect their lives, and they remained active in diverse social activities, participating in community events or volunteering. However, others internalize these negative experiences, leading to self-doubt and questioning their place in American society. This internal conflict manifests itself in the form of closing themselves off from immigrant or Chinese American social circles. Additionally, according to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions can have a negative impact on mental health, leading to neglect, denial, and psychological distress.

Values among Chinese Americans also differ significantly from other cultural groups in American society, despite values being nuanced at the individual level and varying due to different experiences. The majority of respondents prioritized career and material success more than others. One of the interviewees’ answers represents the majority, “go to a good college and then get a good job, a good job can make money, ..., at least be able to achieve wealth freedom”. Only one respondent had very different values, where she consistently cited health and happiness as criteria for success. The formation of values can be considered a part of the process of acculturation. That depends greatly on how

individuals perceive their cultural identity and how much of their traditional culture they are willing to maintain. Individuals' judgments are also influenced by their understanding of traditional culture, family, and upbringing. China's test-taking system from ancient times (from the imperial examinations established during the Sui and Tang dynasties to the present-day college entrance exams) has existed for more than 1,400 years. In ancient China, the imperial examinations were the means of selection for court officials, i.e., only those who performed well in the imperial examinations could become court officials. The modern college entrance examination is the only way to enter a Chinese university, and all people need to take this examination to join a Chinese university, which treats them equally; even blind students need to complete a special Braille test paper. Such a testing tradition causes people to devote a great deal of energy and resources to education in anticipation of passing the exams to get into good universities and jobs. Consequently, this adds to an individual's material-driven mindset and limits the definition of success to finding a good college and job. In contrast, American society is unaffected by a similar examination system, and individuals do not have a strong material-driven mindset; therefore, American society has relatively diverse definitions of success. In my study, the influence of material-driven thinking on Chinese American students depends mainly on the values of their parents. If their parents are more inclined to the image of a "tiger mom" or "tiger dad", i.e., have higher expectations of them in terms of the traditional factors of success (going to a good school, getting a good job), or subconsciously pass on such values to their children, the children will also define these factors as their goals in life.

Although I only interviewed eight students and may not be able to draw comprehensive conclusions, the formation of such values seems to be less related to the length of time spent in the U.S. than to the socio-economic status of the interviewees' parents. When I asked another interviewee who was different in her values why she did not value education, work, and wealth as important, Ava (pseudonym) replied, "I do think that education is important, but only in terms of the value that the education itself brings to me, like the knowledge that you learn in a class, and not the kind of possible, potential job opportunities, probably because I don't need that kind of opportunity to change anything with money either". Indeed, the Chinese test-taking system from ancient times to the present can be seen as the most direct and cheapest means of achieving upward mobility. Unlike the diverse American college application process, Chinese universities only recognize one number: the college entrance exam score. Although there are some drawbacks to this system of education, compared to the monetary demands behind American college applications and the fact that Chinese universities are almost exclusively public and therefore have inexpensive tuition fees, this system of education allows students from all socioeconomic backgrounds the opportunity to attend college. Therefore, this material-driven idea of test-taking is essentially an expectation for oneself, or one's offspring, to make a class leap and improve the quality of life. Notably, unlike the other respondents, Ava stated that her family's income was well above the U.S. average (on a scale of far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average, whereas the other respondents answered in the range of below average, average, and above average).

Political participation can be seen as another aspect of cultural assimilation. This is because political participation is often seen as the collective sense of nation-state identity needed to keep a country safe

from social or economic collapse (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). My study found that when asked about their political stance, only respondents explicitly supported a political party, 5 indicated that they were neutral, and the remaining eleven explicitly stated that they were not politically involved. This trend was particularly evident among first-generation immigrants, who made up the majority of those who were not interested in politics (8 respondents), followed by second-generation immigrants (3 respondents).

Several factors may contribute to the low level of political engagement among Chinese American students at UCSB. One of the main factors is very much related to the previously mentioned values, whether it is education, work, or wealth that is success at the individual or family level, and that the scope of success does not encompass a wide range of community and political activities. For example, one of the interviewees responded to this question by saying, "If you're rich and living the good life, why do you care about politics?" In addition, the historical background of Chinese immigrants to the United States plays an important role in shaping political attitudes. Many first-generation Chinese immigrants come from backgrounds where political participation was either discouraged or fraught with risk due to political instability and authoritarian rule in their home countries (Lai, 2011). This historical baggage also contributes to a general distrust of the political system among individuals, who are thus more inclined to focus on personal and family development rather than political participation. Second-generation immigrants may be more exposed to American democratic values through education and socialization, but the influence of their parents' attitudes toward politics cannot be underestimated. These young Chinese Americans are often torn between their parents' more cautious or apathetic stance on politics and the relatively more politically active environment they encounter in the United States. This dichotomy creates ambivalence or a sense of disconnection from the political process. Additionally, experiences of discrimination and micro-discrimination, discussed earlier in this paper, can lead to political disengagement. Feeling marginalized or seen as a permanent foreigner can lead to a sense of disenfranchisement and doubts about the effectiveness of political participation. This sentiment is echoed in research findings that suggest experiences of racial discrimination can negatively impact the political efficacy of minorities and trust in government institutions (Garcia-Castañón, Zuckerman, & Sanchez, 2019). Despite these challenges, Chinese Americans tend to engage in politics primarily out of issue-specific rather than partisan loyalties. For example, respondents who expressed political preferences tended to do so in the context of policies that directly affect their communities, such as immigration reform, education policy, and anti-discrimination laws. This issue-based engagement suggests that while overall political participation may be low, there is potential for mobilization around causes that resonate with Chinese American experiences and values. Despite these challenges, some respondents indicated that they also engage in political discussions, but the content tends to be primarily motivated by specific issues rather than partisan allegiances. For example, respondents who expressed political preferences tended to do so in the context of policies that directly affect their communities, such as immigration reform, education policy, and anti-discrimination laws. This issue-based engagement suggests that while Chinese Americans can be less politically engaged overall, they remain focused on causes centered around those that resonate with the Chinese American experience and values and are not completely indifferent to political topics.

Finally, the language barrier is also one of the obstacles for UCSB Chinese American students to integrate into American society. Language fluency depends on how often Chinese Americans use the language and the environment in which they were raised. The language barrier is most pronounced among first-generation immigrants, as all first-generation immigrant respondents indicated that they were born and raised in another country and lacked the environment to communicate in English. The majority of second-generation immigrant respondents indicated that they speak English at a native level and, therefore, do not have a language barrier, but there were a few individuals who were born in the United States, returned to China for some education, and then returned to the United States to continue their education. The disconnect in the English language environment during their upbringing resulted in an inability to achieve a particularly fluent level of English, according to their own assessment. Language proficiency has a direct impact on the social activities and educational achievements of Chinese American students at UCSB. For example, Linda (pseudonym), a generational immigrant, told me that she had tried to fit into social circles that were not predominantly Chinese American/Chinese, but lost interest due to her inability to fully understand their conversations.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex barriers to assimilation faced by Chinese American students at UCSB. These barriers include experiences of discrimination, cultural retention, language proficiency, values, and political participation. The findings challenge the traditional binary view of assimilation, demonstrating that Chinese Americans can successfully integrate into American society while maintaining their cultural heritage. Addressing these barriers requires a nuanced understanding of the interplay between cultural identity, discrimination, and societal participation, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of assimilation for Chinese American students.

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