Politics of the Asian Diaspora in New York City and Beyond

Amy Freedman
Department of Government
Franklin and Marshall College
exeasmail@columbia.edu

Table of Contents

1. Themes and Goals

This unit uses New York City's Chinatown as a site for the study of the immigrant experience in the United States. Beginning with the arrival of the first wave of Chinese immigrants in the 1840s and ending in the present-day, the unit introduces students to the complex politics that shape immigrant life in one of the nation's most vibrant ethnic neighborhoods. Through the study of this neighborhood, its politics, and its history, students will gain a better understanding of political and institutional dynamics at work not only in New York, but also in cities and communities around the country.

The primary goal of this unit is to understand the relationship between politics and ethnicity and between community-based politics and those of the larger nation-state. The unit will also help students understand different strategies that groups of people have used to exercise political power. They will explore diaspora politics and the obstacles that have historically kept immigrant communities from fully exercising their political and legal rights in the larger American polity. Students will come away from this unit with a greater understanding of the immigrant experience. More specifically, they will come to better understand the relationship between identity and politics; that identity can be shaped by politics and by the government. Identity is not just something people are born with. Different groups in society interact with the political system in different ways and these interactions have changed over time.

For many people the following are new ideas: that politics can shape identity (as opposed to identity being organic and immutable), that political institutions have a profound impact on the types of political mobilization that can and will occur, and that political institutions can empower or marginalize a community. It is logical to start with the belief that people have certain cultural, ethnic, and religious traits or beliefs and that these factors will impact how they behave politically. Scholars have found that the political system and political processes can play a role in shaping identity. For example, how the U.S. census categorizes groups can impact how

people identify themselves and what types of groups get funding and recognition from the government. There is some concern in black and Asian communities that the creation of a "biracial" or "multiracial" box will shrink the number of people counted as "black" or "Asian." Smaller census numbers can mean less public funding and less political influence.

Political institutions and actions can encourage or repress community behavior. For example, major political parties and individual candidates have sought out wealthy Asian donors to their campaigns, but have not worked hard at trying to increase voter turnout among Asians because too few are citizens of the U.S. and registered to vote. This dynamic has limited Asian influence over party platforms and public policy.

The types of community organizations that exist internally (within the Chinese community in this case) can shape how community members address the larger polity. Sometimes community organizations act as tools to get individuals more involved in the political process, and sometimes community organizations serve to constrain political mobilization or participation.

2. Audience and Uses

Course material is suitable for all levels of undergraduate work. Little (if any) prior course work on either Asian diasporas or political science is necessary.

Courses might include:

- Ethnic Studies
- Social Movements
- International Relations and Migrations
- Sociology of the Immigrant Experience
- Ethnic Politics
- History of New York
- Asian American Studies
- American History (citizenship/immigration)
- Intro to Sociology (race/ethnicity, politics, social movements/social change)
- American Politics
- Constitution and Civil Rights
- Asian Politics

The unit is composed of three main sections designed to span three to four course periods. However, each section of the unit can also be used as a stand-alone unit over a single class period.

A. Historical Patterns of Chinese Immigration to America

This section provides a general overview and discussion about patterns and waves of migration from Asia to the United States, focusing specifically on immigration to New York City. The readings explore the underlying causes for increases and decreases in Chinese immigration.

B. The Dynamics of Chinese Community Organizations in America

This section explores the intricate workings of community organizations within Chinatown in New York and the multiple purposes that they serve.

C. The Politics of the Chinese Diaspora

This section addresses the relation of diaspora community politics to national politics. It also contains readings that address the internal politics of Chinatown, showing how older community organizations have dealt with challenges from new social service organizations and various grassroots campaigns.

3. Instructor's Introduction

There are a few key events that are useful to know going into this unit. These are briefly explained here.

The first significant numbers of Chinese came to the United States in the 1840s and 1850s. They were mostly laborers and came to the US. either by a credit-ticket system or were recruited by mining and later railroad companies to work as contract laborers. By the late 1880s there was a backlash against the use of cheap immigrant labor, and the Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act, which barred the entry of Chinese into the U.S., was extended in 1892 and again indefinitely in 1902. These are the only pieces of legislation ever to specifically target one ethnic group for exclusion from the United States.

Immigration quotas meant to preserve the ethnic and racial make-up of the United States were established in 1924. These policies favored immigrants from Europe and North America. The 1965 Immigration Act put an end to these discriminatory national-origin quotas, replacing preferential set-asides with a flat number of 20,000 immigrants for each country outside of the Western Hemisphere. Like the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Immigration Act aimed to address racial discrimination as it was embedded in a variety of U.S. policies.

New York City's Chinatown dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century. There is a dense web of Chinese associations, which oversee economic, social, and political life within Chinatown. Initially, the most powerful community organizations were family-name associations and economic organizations (there was a great deal of overlap here). An umbrella organization called the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) was the real authority within Chinatown until the mid 1980s. The CCBA leadership came directly from the largest kinship organizations, and it controlled business links, loans, and working conditions within the community. Many scholars (Peter Kwong in particular) have argued that the CCBA was internally focused, preferring to keep issues within Chinatown rather than trying to engage larger political institutions. This internal focus enhanced community leaders' power and kept Chinese within Chinatown from getting to really understand and exercise their rights, keeping them dependent on the CCBA's leadership.

From the 1960s on, a new group of organizations arose that would often compete with the CCBA for support and loyalty. These are social service organizations (like the Asian American Legal Defense Fund) whose goals are to help community members get fair treatment from both employers and the political system. These organizations often serve as a conduit for the distribution of social services to the community. Much of their funding comes from local and national government agencies. Such social service organizations tend to champion the protection of individual rights rather than the interests of economic elites within the community.

Issues of current concern in Chinatown include labor activism, both from garment workers and restaurant workers; political representation (despite a concentrated population, no ethnic Chinese has been elected to the City Council from the district that includes Chinatown); accurate counting from the census; and economic revitalization after September 11, 2001. Since 1965 when the Asian population in the city began to grow substantially, other Chinatowns and Asian neighborhoods have developed throughout the city, including Sunset Park in Brooklyn and Flushing in Queens. These other "Chinatowns" are often the first stop for more middle class immigrants, leaving the original Chinatown to poorer, less skilled immigrants from Fujian Province in Mainland China.

For a more extensive introduction to these topics, consult the following sources:

- Amy Freedman, *Political Participation and Ethnic Minorities: Chinese Overseas in Malaysia, Indonesia, and The United States* (Routledge Press) 2000.

  Provides a short overview of the history of Chinese in the U.S. and New York and a summary of the internal and external dynamics of New York's Chinatown. Specifically, look at chapter 5 (pp.119-135) for an overview of Chinese in the U.S. and Chapter 7 (pp. 157-181) on Chinese in New York.

- Timothy P. Fong and Larry H. Shinagawa (eds.) *Asian Americans: Experiences and Perspectives* (NJ: Prentice Hall) 2000.

4. Student Readings

*** Most Important
** Recommended
* Optional

A. Historical Patterns of Chinese Immigration to America

- *** Timothy Fong. *The Contemporary Asian American Experience* (Prentice Hall) 1998. Chapter 1, pp.10-35.

Provides an overview of Asian immigration and the (un)welcome immigrants received.

- ** Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (NY: Hill and Wang Publishers) 1998. 3-24.

Good overview of Chinese immigration patters in the United States.

B. The Dynamics of Chinese Community Organizations in America

- *** Peter Kwong. *Chinatown, NY: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950* (NY: Monthly Review Press) 1979. pp. 68-91.

This chapter is essential for understanding the inner workings of the New York City Chinatown community.

- ** Timothy Fong. *The Contemporary Asian American Experience* (Prentice Hall) 1998. pp. 36-71.

Explores the dynamics of Asian communities and how they changed over time.

- ** Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (NY: Hill and Wang Publishers) 1998. pp. 3-24, 81-136.

Recommended for an overview of the internal politics of Chinatown. These excerpts provide an inside view of the power and strength of various associations within the community.

C. The Politics of the Chinese Diaspora in America

Secondary Scholarship:

- *** Timothy Fong. *The Contemporary Asian American Experience* (Prentice Hall) 1998. pp. 36-71.

Discusses political mobilization in the Chinese diaspora.

- * Peter Kwong. *Chinatown, NY: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950* (NY: Monthly Review Press) 1979. pp. 45-67.

Provides a general discussion of the politics of Chinatown.

Newspaper and Journal articles:

These recommended and optional short pieces can be used in conjunction with discussions on political issues. If you are not going to address politics then you can omit all of these essays.

- ** Chisun Lee. "Asian Power". *Village Voice*, March 28, 2000
http://www.villagevoice.com/print/issues/0012/lee.php

Short article on political activism and demonstrations, specifically, mobilization against racially targeted police brutality

- * Chisun Lee. "NY Immigrants Underground", *Village Voice*, May 28, 2002
http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0221/lee.php

Short article on post-9/11 fears of INS action against Arab- and South Asian- Americans.

- ** Ruth Ford. "Still Counting". *Village Voice* October 9, 2001
http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0140/ford.php

Article on voter behavior and election results.

- ** Andrew Hsiao. "Chinatown in Limbo". *Village Voice* June 5, 2001
http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0122/hsiao.php

On local government and politics.

- * Alison Stein Wellner. "Asian Identity" *Forecast* (Ithaca) June 4, 2001*
<available from Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, Periodical Abstracts Research II>

Discussion of the 2000 census.

Video suggestions:

- *** *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*. PBS. 2003. Program I, Program II, and Program III, 120 min. each. Available for purchase on DVD and VHS through PBS <http://www.shoppbs.org/> or Films for the Humanities and Sciences <http://www.films.com/>.

This 3-part documentary does an excellent job addressing the myths about Chinese in America and perceptions about the community. The documentary explores identity reformation and acculturation. The PBS website has a good historical timeline and interviews related to the project:

<www.pbs.org/becomingamerican>

There is also a 12-page viewer's guide downloadable for free. It has timelines, photos, and other primary documents to facilitate discussion of the issues.

- ** *Ancestors in America*. prod. and dir. by Loni Ding. PBS. 1993. Part I and Part II, 57 min. each (Part III forthcoming). Available for purchase through the Center of Educational Telecommunications (CET): <http://www.cetel.org/>.

  This terrific video series explores Asian immigration to the U.S. and Latin America. It discusses all different Asian communities (Indian, Chinese, Japanese, etc.) and different issues relating to migration. See website for details:

  <http://www.pbs.org/ancestorsintheamericas/>

- * *Chinatown Files*. prod. and dir. by Amy Chen. 2001. 57 min. Available for rental and purchase through Filmakers Library <http://www.filmakers.com/>.

  This project is about Chinese Americans who experienced the McCarthy terror of the 1950s. The film is useful for discussions about race relations and the conflict between democratic ideals and civil liberties on the one hand, and hysteria about national security on the other. See website for details:

  <www.chinatownfiles.org>

5. Student Activities:

A. Using readings from Peter Kwong's first and second books (*Chinatown, NY* and *The New Chinatown*), ask students to compare the experience of immigrating in 1880 vs. the experience of immigrating in 1980. Students could look at the differences in jobs, status, lifestyle, and connections with the home country that immigrants would have experienced in these different periods.

B. If instructors choose to go further with the listed topics and look at internal dynamics and/or political issues then students could do a variety of different assignments based on looking at different forms of political expression or activism. All of the methods listed below have been used at one point or another by Asian American communities to articulate political preferences and/or interests. Students could either do group exercises in class or do longer papers at home based on this framework.

Court Cases: For example:

- In Fong Yue-ting v. the United States of American (around 1900) Chinese tried to protect their right not to be deported as punishment for legal offenses.
- Ozawa v. United States (1922) challenged the U.S. to allow Asian immigrants to become naturalized citizens. The decision forbade Asian immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens and thus Asians were highly constrained in the types of political activities they could engage in (without being citizens they could not vote or participate in regular electoral politics).
- Korematsu v. U.S. on the internment of the Japanese during WWII.

To help with any assignment based on court cases see the short article: Leti Volpp May 2001. "Obnoxious to their Very Nature: Asian Americans and Constitutional Citizenship." *Asian Law Journal* 8 Asian L.J. 71.

Voting: Most political science literature on voter turnout finds a correlation between high levels of education and income and higher rates of voter turnout. Asian Americans have higher than average levels of education and income, yet vote at lower rates than whites. Some of the explanations for this include the effects of socialization (cultural differences) and the way that political institutions and political elites have long marginalized Asian constituents.

Suggested Readings:

- Wendy Tam Cho. "Asians — A Monolithic Voting Bloc?" *Political Behavior* 17, 2 (June 1995) pp. 223-249.

- James G. Gimpel and Wendy Tam Cho. "Getting Out the Asian-Pacific-American Vote: The Value in the Unpredictable." *Campaigns and Elections* 25, 6 (July 2004)

- Timothy P. Fong and Larry H. Shinagawa (eds.) *Asian Americans: Experiences and Perspectives* (NJ: Prentice Hall) 2000.

Mass Movements/Demonstrations: There are numerous examples of mass movements or grass roots campaigns by Asian Americans to assert their political interests. One such example is that of UNITE, a garment workers union in NYC that has served as a catalyst for greater political mobilization.

For additional readings to help with assignments on mass movements, consult Timothy P. Fong and Larry H. Shinagawa (eds.) 2000. *Asian Americans: Experiences and Perspectives*. (NJ: Prentice Hall). There are several articles on Asian American political empowerment.

Campaign Contributions: While Asian Americans vote at lower rates than white Americans, they are significant donors to both Republican and Democratic parties and candidates. During the 1992 election Bill Clinton accepted illegal campaign donations from Asian and Asian American sources. Peter Boyer's article "American Guanxi" from *The New Yorker* (April 14, 1997) provides a great deal of information about the 1992 election and who gave money and why. One of the things that becomes clear is that the Clinton campaign (and this is true of both parties) specifically targeted Asian and Asian American donors and then encouraged greater networking and fundraising within the community.

C. Ask students to compare and contrast the experience of immigrants in two different economic positions, for example a restaurant worker and someone who works in the high tech sector. Students could also compare the choices (jobs, places to live, education, etc.) available to immigrants arriving in the U.S. at the beginning of the 20th century with those of someone arriving today.

D. Ask students to pick one of the activities listed in section 5B above and to find examples of when, why, and by whom this form of expression has been used. This could be done as a short research assignment.

E. Break the class into groups of four or five in class and discuss the pros and cons of choosing the different methods of political activity listed above in section 5B (court cases, voting, demonstrations, etc.). Ask students to discuss who might choose these different tactics, why, and under what circumstances. Then discuss how successful each political activity might be for asserting/protecting the community's interests.

6. Comparative Suggestions and Theoretical Reference Points

Possible comparisons can be made with other Chinatown communities in North America (e.g. San Francisco or Vancouver) or with other Chinese overseas communities in Malaysia, Indonesia or elsewhere. One could also look at Chinese or Asian experiences in the U.S. in light of other immigrant groups — the Irish or the Jews for example. Again, temporal comparison is one of the most interesting: what is similar and different about immigrant experiences one hundred years ago and now?

There are several theoretical tie-ins that one could make with this unit.

1. One could use these ideas and resources to connect to larger work on social movements and democratic theory. This literature asks under what conditions people mobilize to participate in politics and what forms their actions take. See the following classic works:

- Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Harvard University Press) 1970.

- Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement; Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge University Press) 1998.

- Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* (Princeton University Press) 1963.

2. Material from this unit could also connect to theories of racial or gender formation and how race, class, and gender impact politicization:

- Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the US.* (Routledge) 1994.

- Ruth Frankenberg. *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Duke University Press) 1997.

- Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts and Asian American Cultural Politics*. (Duke University Press) 1996.

3. One could also tie this material to ideas about globalization and the movement of labor and capital. Several of the books already mentioned make this connection: Peter Kwong's *New Chinatown* and Jan Lin's *Reconstructing Chinatown* both do a good job at this.

7. Further Reading

- Xiaolan Bao. *Holding up More than Half of the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in NYC 1948-1992* (IL: University of Illinois Press) 2001.

- Jan Lin. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (Minn: University of Minn. Press) 1998.

These are useful for understanding the nature of Chinatown's political economy and its connection to the global economy.

- William Wei. *The Asian American Movement* (PA: Temple University Press) 1993.

For understanding particular types of political mobilization, this book looks at the student movement and political activism of the 1960s/70s within the Asian American community. Chapters six through eight are particularly useful.

- Pei-te Lien. *The Making of Asian America Through Political Participation* (PA: Temple University Press) 2001.