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Jane H. Wang April 3, 2022

Model Minority Under Duress: Chinese Student Immigrants to the U.S. and Houston, 1978-2000

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Abstract

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This thesis tells the story of a recent cohort of immigrants whose circumstances and lives have thus far remained relatively understudied: Chinese students who came to the U.S. in the late twentieth century. The eighties and nineties provide a significant time period for my project because it presents a time at which Chinese student immigration had spiked to never-before-seen highs; as evidence, the 1990 census found that people of Chinese descent numbered over one million for the first time in American history. In my research, I make two primary arguments about the new students who contributed to this uptick. Chapter 1 contends that Chinese students offer a case study on how lawmakers utilize immigration policy to shape population demographics. More specifically, both China and the U.S. implemented various programs and laws such as the Gao Kao, the Immigration Act of 1990, and the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992, which incentivized a highly skilled group of Chinese students to seek out an American education and career primarily in STEM fields. Chapter 2 then examines and contextualizes the lives of six Chinese student immigrants in Houston. I argue that the requirements foisted upon them by contemporary immigration laws essentially compelled other Chinese students like them to exhibit many of the qualities of the model minority. Their collective need to survive through visa hurdles, financial issues, language barriers, labor exploitation, and more in the United States therefore added to the preexisting perception of model minorities, creating the cycle of expectation that still exists today. Throughout the piece, I also include testimonies and historical facts relevant to Houston, Texas as a way of illustrating how one microcosmic U.S. community reacted to and shaped the particular Chinese student immigrants that I interviewed.

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Lastly and perhaps most importantly, I want to express the deepest and sincerest gratitude to my family, the very people who inspired this thesis. In the following pages, I chart the struggles and sacrifices of Chinese-American immigrants like my parents, whose journey has led me directly to the home and life that I love. Mom, Dad, Ashlyn — this one is for you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In 1993, Shaoyu and Wenxia Wang boarded a series of flights that would take them from the familiarity of Changchun, China to an entirely new life in Houston, Texas. They arrived at that time with very little money and a seemingly standard goal: to receive advanced U.S. degrees in computer science and electrical engineering, respectively. After achieving this objective, the Wangs set their sights further still and found employment in Houston, with the eventual aim of obtaining sponsorship for their green cards. Shaoyu and Wenxia Wang stayed in this country out of a belief that they could build a better life here for themselves and their children: my sister and me.[1]

All my life, I have grown up with the passed-on assumption that this story is a rather ordinary one not meant for the history books. Indeed, my parents' lives have charted a similar path experienced by many of the nearly 40,000 Chinese students who attended school in the United States in 1993.[2] This made their immigration all the more historically compelling though. My parents did not simply decide to uproot themselves on a whim or in a vacuum. They were instead part of a larger wave of new Chinese student immigrants whose arrival in the United States resulted from changes in immigration policy that had the deliberate effect of reshaping the American population as a whole. Once settled, this new group of Chinese immigrants would also redefine the Asian American community and the model minority myth's application.

This thesis traces the history of Chinese student immigrants to the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, it focuses on the evolution of communities in Houston, Texas as both a case study and a microcosmic example of similar trends elsewhere. Through the course

[1] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[2] Todd M. Davis, "Open Doors 1995-1996: Report on International Educational Exchange," (Research Report, New York, 1996), 8.

of my exploration, I ask top-down questions that dissect relevant Chinese and American institutions as well as bottom-up questions that address the people affected by those institutions.

At the institutional level, what caused the dramatic increase of Chinese people and especially Chinese students in the United States towards the end of the twentieth century? The 1990 census showed that the population of Chinese in America exceeded one million for the first time in that year. What factors primarily triggered this? Were said factors social, political, economic, or a mix of all three? When it comes to relevant policy decisions, why did the U.S. and Chinese governments choose the methods that they eventually implemented? I will attempt to answer these questions in the first chapter of my thesis.

I also contend that the drastic increase of Chinese students in America is not merely a statistic. On the contrary, these students had individual lives and communities, which I intend to explore in the microcosm of Houston, Texas. I therefore ask the following questions in my second chapter. How did new Chinese student immigrants adapt to and transform the new communities that they joined? What challenges most shaped their experiences and the way that they conceptualized their identities? What can the influx of highly educated Chinese people in the United States tell us about the evolution of the model minority myth? On this score, I argue that the sheer number of Chinese students in the U.S. at the end of the twentieth century caused the popular imagery of the model minority to morph into something that more greatly resembled these same Chinese students. In addition, the obstacles endured by student immigrants who sought U.S. citizenship would suggest that the characteristics exemplified in the model minority are less a product of superior culture and more a result of policy-based selectivity.

Before expounding upon this further, it is important to note that the typical profile of a Chinese person in the U.S. did not always match that of my parents and their fellow white-collar

STEM workers. Prior to World War II, Chinese-Americans were often railway workers, laundromat operators, and restaurant owners, along with the occasional Christian missionary.[3] They usually lived in coastal cities, enduring exploitation at best and outright vilification at worst.[4] As such, the number of Chinese people in America during this time remained very low (well under 100,000).[5] This was partly due to explicit policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 — one of the United States' first restrictive immigration laws — and partly because the U.S. and China did not share nearly as robust a relationship as they do today.[6] The eventual growth to today's population of 5.4 million Chinese-Americans is thus a considerable development worthy of historical analysis.[7]

These numbers first started to climb in 1943 when the U.S. Magnuson Act repealed Chinese exclusion.[8] Later, the population of Chinese in America rose steadily higher in the aftermath of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which inadvertently allowed for Chinese people already in the U.S. to take advantage of a new family reunification clause.[9] Conventionally, scholars would start their analysis of modern Asian American immigration patterns here. However, I choose to start at a later date because my focus is specifically on the uptick of Chinese *students* in America.

My thesis begins by arguing that post-Cold War political conditions enabled greater interaction between the U.S. and China that would eventually take the form of various

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[3] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 1-11.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3.
[6] Teresa B. Bevis, *A World History of Higher Education Exchange: The Legacy of American Scholarship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 93.
[7] Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population," Pew Research Center, published April 29, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/.
[8] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 256.
[9] Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 84-88.

international student programs. As Chinese-Soviet relations slowly soured and power transitioned from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, both Chinese and American leaders saw cooperation with the other as advantageous.[10] The two countries therefore reestablished their longstanding tradition of educational exchange, which previously dated back to the Chinese Educational Mission from the late nineteenth century.[11] The renewed exchange, though not necessarily equal in full, was still bidirectional. Aside from the usual interests related to untapped economic potential, the United States wished to position itself as a provider of uniquely American opportunities and a facilitator of intercultural networks,[12] while China sought to rapidly modernize in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.[13] Subsequent policy changes would directly reflect these overarching aims by emphasizing education and work in the sciences and technology, which in turn shaped the overall population of Chinese students who ventured to and remained in America.[14]

I next argue that these Chinese immigrants, as both distinct individuals and products of their geopolitical environment, soon began to reshape the model minority myth, which had originated in the 1950s as a way to portray Japanese-Americans as more hardworking and cooperative "models" for other minorities.[15] Just as China under Deng Xiaoping became a model for post-communist economic prosperity, so too did Chinese students in the U.S. become the new face of the model minority. Due in part to the significant volume of Chinese student arrivals,

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[10] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 14.
[11] Teresa B. Bevis, *A World History of Higher Education Exchange: The Legacy of American Scholarship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 83-88.
[12] Paul A. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century." *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (2009): 775-806, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214049.
[13] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 279-280.
[14] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 15.
[15] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 16-42.

they gradually replaced the imagery of the hardworking, obedient, and politically apathetic Japanese-American. These same qualities were still ascribed almost solely and misleadingly to the cultural values of Chinese people and Asian-Americans in general, but this subtle shift nonetheless carries broader implications that cast further doubt on the validity of the model minority myth.

For one, Americans had scorned Chinese people for possessing the wrong cultural values mere decades prior, and it would be quite dubious to believe that those centuries-old values drastically transformed after the Cold War. Moreover, the elaborate U.S. immigration system also created a selection bias for a certain type of Chinese immigrant. As immigration from China to the U.S. climbed higher and higher, the laws in place carefully ensured that most Chinese people who could eventually gain U.S. citizenship were those from well-educated backgrounds with the requisite diligence, patience, compliance, and luck to endure struggles with finances, English proficiency, visa sponsorships, workplace discrimination, and more. Under conditions such as these, it is no wonder that the Chinese students who ultimately became Americans ended up resembling idealized pictures of success.

However, where proponents of the model minority myth have viewed these collective achievements as testaments of a superior culture, I instead emphasize the role of structural restrictions and duress. I do this because the structural side of group perceptions has previously received much less attention than the cultural argument. Cultural appeals also have a tendency to devolve into vagueness — how exactly does one group create a culture that becomes more "successful" than another? On the other hand, we can often trace structural factors back to historical policies that have contributed to present-day circumstances, which is what my thesis seeks to accomplish.

This project makes arguments about educational exchange, immigration policy, and the model minority myth that apply broadly beyond the specified time period. For instance, restrictive and selective immigration policies, which first originated as a means of specifically targeting Chinese immigrants, have also been used in recent times to screen for more "desirable" qualities in immigrants of other non-Asian races (especially Latinx people).[16] This is a practice largely inspired by the treatment of Chinese and Indian student migrants during the late twentieth century. By writing immigration laws that favor foreigners with higher levels of education and cultural capital, U.S. policymakers in the present day have gradually reshaped the immigrant population into a group that occupies a higher social class and thereby elevates the entire country's economic status in the world.[17]

My research further extends to the twenty-first century because China to this day remains the largest source of international students in the United States.[18] Asian-Americans in general are also the fastest growing minority in the United States, and people of Chinese descent continue to compose the plurality of this group at approximately 24%.[19] As such, the evolution of the model minority myth that first began in the late twentieth century continues to impact an ever-growing population of Americans. Despite these facts, academic study related to the immigration and living patterns of Chinese students in the U.S. has remained astonishingly underdeveloped. My research rectifies this by focusing on the recent wave of Chinese student immigrants during the 1980s and 1990s.

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[16] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 203.
[17] Maia B. Cucchiara, "Sociology of Education," in *A Sociology Experiment*, eds. Shamus Khan, Patrick Sharkey, and Gwen Sharp (New York, NY: panOpen, 2021), 8.
[18] Teresa B. Bevis, *A World History of Higher Education Exchange: The Legacy of American Scholarship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 315.
[19] Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key facts about Asian Americans, a diverse and growing population," Pew Research Center, published April 29, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/.

To begin, I consulted and developed the scholarship of Lisong Liu, who authored *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community, and Identity between China and the United States*. His book broadly examines Chinese student migration after China reinstated diplomatic relations with the West under Deng Xiaoping and splits the time period from 1978 to 2015 into four waves, two of which fall under my chosen time frame. Liu's use of a wide array of sources — from federal legislation and Chinese news articles to online web forums and oral interviews — provided significant inspiration for the start of my research. He also utilized the Twin Cities in Minnesota as a case study of Chinese-American communities, which offered a model for my own investigation of Houston, Texas. However, Liu primarily challenges the rhetoric of the "American Dream" among individual Chinese students in the United States.[20] I instead plan to explore the different ways that American immigration policies and Chinese students both influenced each other. Moreover, Liu uses the term "selective citizenship" to describe the negotiations that migrants made with their respective nation-states when choosing a nationality.[21] I would argue for the expansion of this definition to also include deliberate and selective choices made by the state, which effectively placed filters on who could immigrate at all and ultimately become a citizen.

Also crucial to my thesis is Madeline Hsu's *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority*. In her monograph, Hsu describes how educational diplomacy helped to shape the original perception of the "model minority." She then goes on to demonstrate how selective immigration policies excluded the working-class Chinese for decades while still allowing well-educated and strategically advantaged Chinese people into the United States. The

[20] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 1-246.
[21] Ibid.

scope of her work ends in 1965 with a contemplation of China's impending "brain drain," a term typically used to describe the mass emigration of a country's most talented or skilled citizens.[22] My thesis continues where Madeline Hsu's story ends, although my theoretical framework does not place much emphasis on "brain drain" (especially since China appears to possess more than enough highly educated brain power within its borders today). Hsu's subjects also hail mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, while my focus is on the mainland Chinese.[23] As such, I hope to incorporate a robust analysis of modern relations between the United States and People's Republic of China.

Both of the texts above underscored to me the importance of themes such as educational exchange and immigration policy. More specifically, Paul Kramer's well-known article, "Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century," yielded further insight on the geopolitical dimension of educational exchange. Here, Kramer details the way that the U.S. exercised its soft power through such means as the Fulbright Program, viewing international students as "both an index and precondition of strength." At the same time, tensions during the Cold War exacerbated distrust of the very same international students whose arrivals were encouraged by the U.S. state. Kramer's era once again precedes my thesis, but he offers a critical lens through which to consider the delicate position occupied by international students in the American imagination.[24]

To address the overarching theme of immigration policy, I looked to Aristide Zolberg's book, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*. Although Zolberg

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[22] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1-353.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Paul A. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century." *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (2009): 775-806, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214049.

writes almost exclusively about European-Americans, his framework of immigration as a mechanism for nation-building has applications that have lasted well into the present day. He further notes that migration often "mirrors the world as it is" and operates as a scheme of utility maximization. These are ideas that I hope to expand upon and modify as I apply them to a nonwhite population in a globalizing world.[25]

Lastly, I read through *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* by Uzma Quraishi in order to situate my subject within the city of Houston. I found Quraishi's analysis of Houston as part of both the South and the Sunbelt to be particularly useful for my understanding of the city's racialized and cosmopolitan past.[26] I also supplemented Quraishi's monograph with articles about Houston's oil industry and the longer history of the Chinese in Texas.

Aside from these secondary sources (and many others that will have to go unmentioned for now), my research draws from an abundance of primary sources as well. Chief among these is the use of oral interviews with Chinese students who immigrated to Houston around thirty years ago and have since become naturalized. For the purposes of this project, I conducted four interviews with former STEM graduate students from the University of Houston. Most of my questions came from a prewritten list and addressed topics such as the decision to study in America; the F-1 visa process; activities, challenges, and cultural differences at an American university; primary communities here; treatment from other Americans; experiences in the workplace; and the H-1B to green card process. To the best of my ability, I kept our conversations as broad and open-ended as possible in order to fully leverage the advantages of a

[25] Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 1-23.
[26] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 6-9.

personal account. One such advantage is that individual stories can bring the sweeping nature of policy and politics into the realm of everyday lives. That said, oral histories do inherently rely upon potentially fickle memories, and I have kept this in mind throughout my interviews and thesis.

In addition, I have included federal legislation, Congressional hearings, census data, and newspaper clippings, as primary sources for my first chapter, which will contextualize the content of my second chapter. In the second chapter, I elaborate on my oral history interviews to depict the challenges experienced by Chinese student immigrants from the late twentieth century. These two chapters form the bulk of my thesis and its associated arguments, which I outline below.

In Chapter 1, I identify three Chinese and U.S. policies as significant influencers that led to an increase in student migration between the two countries. First, Deng Xiaoping's reestablishment of formal diplomatic relations with the West allowed the first class of post-Cultural Revolution visiting scholars to travel to America in 1978.[27] This was a way to test the waters for future increases in educational exchange, which were further encouraged by the 1984 Provisional Regulations on Self-Funded Students Studying Abroad.[28] As Lisong Liu describes it, this "sparked a fever to go abroad"[29] — my mother called it a fashion, but she and my father nevertheless hopped onboard.[30] By their time, two additional factors on the U.S. side had also increased the practicality of staying in the United States: The Immigration Act of 1990's provision of the H-1B visa meant that students could eventually work in certain specialized

[27] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 342-348.
[28] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 19.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

industries (especially STEM ones) if a company sponsored them.[31] This provision was, and still is to some extent, used overwhelmingly by Chinese and Indian students.[32] Furthermore, the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992 provided many people with a streamlined path to permanent residence in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests.

In Chapter 2, I explore some of the challenges that shaped Chinese students' journeys to and through the United States, including a lack of English proficiency, financial woes, visa hurdles, and discrimination. In fact, these struggles often overlapped to compound the difficulty of surviving in America as a student immigrant. For example, many newly self-funded international students of the eighties and nineties arrived with little to no financial assets, yet their F-1 visas did not allow for gainful employment outside of their universities.[33] As a result, some Chinese student immigrants had to confront an impossibly harsh choice: either find work illegally or return home with nothing. Moreover, the design of the H-1B visa, which tied legal status to businesses rather than immigrants, created work environments that were ripe for pay discrimination and exploitation.[34] All of this occurred throughout the United States but also quite distinctly in the city of Houston, which presented a unique intersection of ongoing racialization and rising cosmopolitanism that many immigrants had to navigate.[35] In particular, the subtle portrayal of Chinese students as peaceful and apolitical belies the depth of the adversity endured by many Chinese student immigrants just trying to survive in their new home.

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[31] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.

[32] [32] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 100.

[33] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 6-9.

Such challenges and experiences played a key role in determining which Chinese students were "good enough" to remain on the path to U.S. citizenship. Seeing as countless students flunked the TOEFL, failed to receive adequate scholarships to go abroad, faced crackdowns of U.S. immigration officials, or simply lost the desire to appease exploitative employers, the Chinese student immigrants who made it through the end of this process had no choice but to work hard and occasionally keep their heads down. I therefore argue that Chinese-American "success stories" from the late twentieth century to the present day are less a result of superior cultural values and more a result of the selection bias imposed by economic, legal, and political factors in both the U.S. and China. Their collective perception as a model minority similarly reinforced their high economic earnings in ways that other minority immigrants may not have experienced; it also simultaneously pigeonholed Chinese-Americans into certain racialized stereotypes.

In other words, many Chinese student immigrants from the 1980s and 1990s found their niche in America under great duress. Presenting this process as the natural rise of the "model minority" obscures these nuances and further discounts the struggles endured by all immigrants to the United States.

Chapter 1: Immigration Policy and the Design of Modern America

A History of U.S. Educational Exchange

Over the course of our 250-year history, people of the United States have often referred to our country as a proud "nation of immigrants." This moniker, while ostensibly true, conceals the complex motivations behind numerous U.S. immigration policies across time. Conventionally, many historians have focused on the restrictive nature of U.S. immigration laws as evidence against the idealized narrative of a universally welcoming America. In particular, Asian Americanists have been able to point to legislation such as the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as early examples of the United States government's racist discrimination against "undesired" groups. Under this body of scholarship, the U.S. has consistently excluded non-white outsiders by erroneously labeling them as dangerous, immoral, uncivilized, or unassimilable.

While these views have added another dimension to the history of U.S. immigration, they still tell an incomplete story. As Madeline Hsu explains in her book *The Good Immigrants,* American immigration law has never been a mere matter of keeping out unwanted foreigners. Instead, the United States has employed both restrictive and selective measures to control for the specific characteristics that it wishes to embrace and augment in its new immigrant population.[36] Aristide Zolberg presents a similar argument in his book *A Nation by Design* by framing U.S. immigration policy as a lengthy nation-building project and tool for shaping the country's demographics. He further notes that immigrants have frequently functioned as "utility-

[36] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 2-4.

maximizing agents" with political, cultural, and economic worth in the eyes of the state — all of which factor into the degree to which they are welcomed or scorned.[37]

This chapter pays special attention to the function of U.S. educational exchange in selective immigration. Since the nineteenth century, the United States government has both exported its own education programs and imported international students for a multitude of geopolitical purposes. These efforts have helped the U.S. to spread its influence abroad, exhibit its soft power, learn from other cultures, and mold the future development of non-Western nations, to name just a few historical reasons.[38] Regardless of the intentions behind such exchanges, one of their major effects was to essentially open a "side-door" to the U.S. immigration system, wherein student migrants could legally enter the country as temporary visitors and then later transition towards the more carefully examined processes that would lead to permanent residence.[39] Throughout the history of the United States, Chinese students have represented a disproportionate number of those who have taken this pathway to citizenship, even as the federal government levied increasingly exclusionary policies against the vast majority of other Chinese people.

One of the first forays into U.S.-China educational exchange began in 1872 with the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM). Under this project, the Chinese government sent a cohort of 120 carefully vetted boys to New England for training in Western science and engineering. In many ways, this cooperative mission held great promise for both China and the United States: the former country's leadership believed it would gain prized American knowledge for its own

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[37] Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 12.
[38] Paul A. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century." *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (2009): 775-806, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214049.
[39] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 5.

development, while the latter felt that it could play a key role in shaping that same development. However, proponents of the CEM soon had their hopes dashed. As anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S. rose to record highs, so too did the discontent of Chinese conservatives who felt that the boys in the CEM were becoming too Westernized and abandoning their Chinese pride. Shortly after the U.S. refused to allow Chinese students into American military academies, the CEM was disbanded.[40] All of its participants returned to China by 1881, just one year before the U.S. signed the Chinese Exclusion Act into law.[41]

Despite its short-lived existence, the CEM nonetheless laid the groundwork for future student exchanges between the U.S. and China. When the Department of Education began growing its foreign education divisions in 1889, it did not shy away from recruitment in China.[42] Part of the reason for this arose from the creation of Boxer Indemnity fellowships. After the failed Boxer Rebellion against western influence in China, many countries like the U.S. had inflicted outrageous fines on the Chinese government, a move that gradually drew widespread condemnation. In an effort to apologize for its previous harshness, the U.S. developed a scholarship program to allow an eventual 1,300 Chinese students into American universities.[43] As a result, the number of Chinese students admitted to the U.S. in 1920 was higher than any other individual country even though the Chinese Exclusion Act would not be repealed for another twenty-three years.[44]

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[40] Liel Liebovitz and Matthew Miller, *Fortunate Sons: The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization* (New York, NY: Norton, 2011).
[41] Teresa B. Bevis, *A World History of Higher Education Exchange: The Legacy of American Scholarship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 88.
[42] Ibid, 103.
[43] Madeline Y. Hsu, "Chinese and American Collaborations through Educational Exchange during the Era of Exclusion, 1872–1955," *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (2014): 322, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2014.83.2.314.
[44] Ibid, 115.

Early programs like the CEM and Boxer Indemnity fellowships had a lasting impact on Chinese views of Western education. For one, these exchanges primed many Chinese students to associate a Western education with prestige, as only the most well-connected and well-qualified candidates could dream of receiving such opportunities. In the United States, both of these experiments helped to plant the idea that American-educated Chinese students could become an extension of U.S. influence if they later attained leadership positions and implemented Western-style reforms. Moreover, the emphasis on science and engineering in both the U.S. and China would linger well into the twentieth century, especially after the start of World War II and the subsequent Cold War.

As tensions heightened during the Cold War, the United States, Soviet Union, and their respective allies all increasingly invested their time, energy, and wealth into scientific and technological advancements as a means of protecting themselves and signaling superiority. One method that the U.S. State Department employed to further this aim was the expansion of "cultural diplomacy programs," which involved (among other things) inviting greater quantities of international students to study and conduct research in STEM-related fields.[45] Elite students from the Republic of China took great advantage of loosened immigration restrictions that arose from this, up until Mao Zedong's takeover of the country in 1949. After Mao adopted a policy of isolationism and forbade study in the West, the United States found its educational exchange with China restricted to Taiwanese students until the late 1970s.[46]

As shown by various programs from the 1870s to 1940s, the United States already had a long history of allowing select Chinese students into the country even as they sweepingly

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[45] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 20.
[46] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

excluded all other Chinese citizens. The federal government's earlier policies toward Chinese students would also provide a foundation for later policies that were meant to respond to similar circumstances. For instance, after Mao Zedong's rise left thousands of Chinese students stranded from their homes, the U.S. eventually allowed many of them to obtain permanent residence — a rule that the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992 would later mirror after the Tiananmen Square protests.[47] Additionally, older laws such as the McCarran-Walter Act, which restricted international students' ability to work, would continue to impact Chinese students well into the twenty-first century.[48]

This brief overview provides a wider context for how the U.S. government would treat later generations of Chinese students during the 1980s and 1990s. Even when the absolute number of international students in the United States remained low, the relative welcome that Chinese students enjoyed in comparison to other countries' students and other Chinese people illustrated the United States' perception of China as a potential source of well-educated migrants. The longstanding American focus on Chinese students' economic and political value directly influenced new immigration policies in the late twentieth century, and these policies in turn paved the way for a resultant spike in Chinese student immigration to the United States.

This chapter of my thesis essentially argues for a policy-oriented approach to explaining China-to-U.S. immigration trends during the eighties and nineties. During this era in both China and the United States, policymakers deliberately crafted laws and regulations that would encourage Chinese students (especially those in STEM-related fields) to pursue U.S. education, which then contributed significantly towards reshaping American demographics and values. In

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[47] Teresa B. Bevis, *A World History of Higher Education Exchange: The Legacy of American Scholarship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 153-156.
[48] Ibid, 158.

the following sections, I elaborate upon three of the most critical government decisions facilitating this process: Deng Xiaoping's reinstatement of formal diplomatic relations with the United States, the Immigration Act of 1990, and the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992.

Reestablishment of U.S.-China Diplomatic Relations

Despite the apparent Cold War tensions that existed between the communist People's Republic of China and the capitalist United States, their countries' leaders had already begun taking tentative steps toward reestablishing friendly relations by the early 1970s. After the erosion of Sino-Soviet collaboration in the previous decade, President Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing served in part as a way of uniting the U.S. and China against the common threat posed by the U.S.S.R.[49] However, several domestic and international crises hampered the fruits of this initial effort. In the United States, Nixon's Watergate scandal two years later put an abrupt end to his diplomacy and effectively ousted him from office.[50] His successor, Gerald Ford, then spent much of his presidency handling the U.S. withdrawal from the Vietnam War.[51] Meanwhile, China had its own crises to manage as the decline and death of Mao Zedong produced a series of power struggles between communist party leaders. Once Deng Xiaoping had triumphed over both Hua Guofeng and the Gang of Four in 1977, his new administration brought about the Cultural Revolution's conclusion and set itself on a determined path towards normalizing relations between the P.R.C. and U.S.[52]

As China's new de facto leader, Deng made it clear that he viewed modernization as China's top priority. He especially stressed the importance of U.S. knowledge and aid in this

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[49] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 311.
[50] Ibid.
[51] John R. Greene, "Gerald Ford: Life in Brief" (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Miller Center), accessed March 4, 2022, https://millercenter.org/president/ford/life-in-brief.
[52] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 187-190.

process. For decades, Deng had already witnessed the United States' influence on advancement in other East Asian countries, and his more recent visits in Europe revealed the disproportionate share of technological patents held by American inventors.[53] As such, Deng quickly sought to resume political and economic negotiations between the U.S. and China within three days of his return to the CCP's Standing Committee.[54]

The United States likewise had its own reasons for wanting a swift resumption of international ties with the People's Republic of China. Aside from the significant anti-Soviet support that China could offer, its population of one billion enticed U.S. businesses that were looking to tap into new markets. In the federal government itself, there was also an increasingly prevalent view that bringing China into the global economy could spur other reforms in the country. Thus, the new President Carter and his cabinet expressed all due eagerness to reach an agreement with Deng Xiaoping. Even though the issue of Taiwan's political status remained as a sticking point between the two powers, the tide of American public opinion towards mainland China nonetheless began to turn as a result of various outreach efforts by Deng. For instance, he openly welcomed interviews from leaders of such prominent U.S. media outlets as the New York Times, Washington Post, and Associated Press. He met with sympathetic congressmen as well in an effort to build a more robust China lobby.[55] As a partial result of Deng's swiftly rising popularity, he and Jimmy Carter were able to settle on an official arrangement to reestablish diplomacy between their two nations within months of their first meeting.[56]

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[53] Ibid, 312.
[54] Ibid, 311.
[55] Ibid, 315.
[56] Jimmy E. Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 1982), 191-220.

In his quest to modernize China with the help of U.S. resources, Deng's administration prioritized scientific development above all else, even trade and foreign investment. In March 1978, China held its first National Science Conference, where communist party officials openly encouraged their country's premier scientists to connect with and learn from corresponding researchers in the West. This marked a drastic departure from prior rules during the Cultural Revolution, which not only forbade such contact but also classified many scientists as capitalists to be scorned.[57] In effect, the new government now flipped this Mao-era policy on its head and even offered compensation to scholars who had experienced persecution under the old regime. It similarly welcomed scientists from the West to visit China.

The scale of Deng's aspirations for scientific advancement and student exchange surprised American officials. While many of them expected the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to send only a few dozen students who would all be kept on a tight leash, Deng Xiaoping instead publicly voiced his wish for the United States to promptly accept no less than 700 Chinese science students in 1978. He hoped even further that the U.S. might admit Chinese students in the tens of thousands within a few short years.[58] President Carter's administration enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to receive new talent in the sciences, and the quantity of Chinese-sponsored students in the U.S. reached around 19,000 within just five years.[59]

The P.R.C.'s decision, though much appreciated in the United States, nevertheless engendered widespread shock because of the way it deviated from conventional concerns about "brain drain." The Soviet Union, Mao Zedong, and even Chiang Kai-Shek of Taiwan had all

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[57] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 321-322.
[58] Kathlin Smith, "The Role of Scientists in Normalizing U.S.–China Relations: 1965–1979," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 866, no. 1 (2006), 114-136, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1998.tb09149.x.
[59] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 323.

articulated some level of worry about the possibility of losing prized scholars abroad, and they had restricted student emigration accordingly.[60] Though certain CCP members echoed these sentiments, Deng Xiaoping expressed no such fears. In stark contrast, Deng maintained confidence that enough Chinese students abroad would eventually return home to benefit their country, and even those who did not go back would become assets through trade or foreign investment.[61] In keeping with such a belief, he therefore sent vast numbers of scholars to attain advanced degrees and conduct research in the United States.

Even so, opportunities for an American education remained relatively restricted in the early eighties when compared to later decades. At that time, study abroad still required government sponsorship, which was only given to top students who usually sought doctoral degrees and already had family connections in the West. However, this policy soon changed with the 1984 Provisional Regulations on Self-Funded Students Studying Abroad.[62] Under these new guidelines, China would also allow certain students without an official government sponsorship to study internationally if they had proof of sufficient funding to last them at least twelve months abroad.[63] This change in policy, along with Deng's earlier reinstatement of the national college entrance examination, sparked a renewed emphasis on education and a "fever to go abroad" among Chinese students, which ultimately resulted in self-funded Chinese students outnumbering government-sponsored ones by 1989.[64] In fact, U.S. census data additionally showed that the number of Chinese students at American universities reached nearly 40,000 by

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[60] Ibid, 455-456.
[61] Ibid, 476.
[62] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 19.
[63] Chad C. Haddal, *Foreign Students in the United States: Policies and Legislation* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL31146.pdf.
[64] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 19.

1990.[65] They comprised just under 10% of all foreign university students in the United States despite making up less than 1% of that same population in 1980.[66]

China's post-Mao era in many ways demonstrated the power of policy to shape and influence a population. In the first place, Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution had already primed an impoverished nation to desire the material comforts of the West. Once Deng Xiaoping's new administration made such opportunities possible, countless people joined the carefully engineered trend of exploring the West. The Chinese government further influenced the characteristics of this westward migration when it pointed its primary focus to students and scholars. By first restoring the use of national college entrance exams, Deng Xiaoping sent a strong message that educational attainment would form the foundation of most opportunities in the new era. By next prioritizing the exchange of scholars in science and technology, the CCP directly incentivized the study of these subjects. And finally, the sheer volume of student immigration from China during the eighties and nineties could occur only with the approval of the Deng administration.

P.R.C. policies that encouraged and expanded student immigration compose only part of the explanation for why America's Chinese student population spiked so sharply in the late twentieth century. In the United States, landmark federal laws such as the Immigration Act of 1990 likewise played an outsized role in many Chinese students' decision to stay abroad.

The Immigration Act of 1990

Before the House of Representatives began its final discussion on the Immigration Act of 1990, Representative Bruce Morrison (D-CT) described the bill as "the first truly comprehensive

[65] National Center for Education Statistics, *Table 310.20* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1980-2015), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_310.20.asp.
[66] Ibid.

reform of U.S. immigration law that has ever occurred."[67] He was not the only lawmaker to understand this legislation as a potentially lasting landmark in the area of federal immigration policy. Senator Alan Simpson (R-WY), one of the bill's original sponsors, most tellingly remarked, "Never again will we go twenty-five or thirty years without carefully reviewing immigration levels [and] how they should be adjusted to bring our immigration policy more in line with our national interest."[68] These testimonies suggest that American legislators crafted their new immigration act with the intention of fulfilling a specific set of political goals and thereby shaping the country to their liking.

In particular, congressmen in 1990 stressed the importance of utilizing immigration law to improve American economic competitiveness. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the burgeoning development of new computer technology, congressional legislators were eager to seize any opportunity for the United States to cement itself as the leading global innovator and authority of the upcoming twenty-first century. To this end, the Immigration Act of 1990 not only increased the country's total immigration limit from 530,000 to roughly 700,000 but also set aside a significant proportion of these available spots for employment-based visas.[69] As Representative Chuck Schumer (D-NY) explained, this differed considerably from prior eras when less than 4% of immigrants to the U.S. came for job-related reasons.[70] Beginning

[67] "Congressional Reaction to Immigration Act." C-SPAN video, 19:20. October 26, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14719-1/congressional-reaction-immigration-act.
[68] "Senate Session." C-SPAN video, 15:24:18. October 26, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14706-1/senate-session.
[69] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[70] "Congressional Reaction to Immigration Act." C-SPAN video, 19:20. October 26, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14719-1/congressional-reaction-immigration-act.

in 1990, the U.S. would instead allow up to 140,000 new permanent workers and 65,000 new temporary workers into the country each year.[71]

The United States did not admit international employees at random under the 1990 Immigration Act though. It especially prioritized professionals whose jobs required at least two years of training or experience; of the new policy's 140,000 annually allotted work visas, 110,000 were reserved for highly skilled workers,[72] while the quota for low-skilled workers was capped at just 10,000.[73] This legislative emphasis mirrored the Chinese government's hyperfocus on the forces of modernization, and an increasing number of white-collar Chinese workers would come to benefit from the 1990 Immigration Act's carefully expanded opportunities. For many Chinese students, however, the new law was even more notable for its creation of a novel H-1B visa.

The initial provisions of the non-immigrant H-1B category established that the U.S. government would offer 65,000 temporary visas per annum for international workers employed under "specialty occupations."[74] (This would later be raised to more than 100,000 in 1998, a demonstration of the continued U.S. preference for skilled migrants).[75] In its text, the Immigration Act of 1990 stipulated that "specialty occupations" should require a bachelor's degree at minimum, among other qualifications — a high bar that privileged university students

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[71] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[72] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 100.
[73] "House Session." C-SPAN video, 11:02:00. October 27, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14723-1/house-session.
[74] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[75] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 105.

over other possible immigrants.[76] An additional set of political factors would also combine to advantage Chinese STEM students in particular.

For one, lobbying efforts by multinational corporations in the IT industry, which had in the first place helped to produce the H-1B, meant that many of the new visas would inevitably go towards engineers under the employ of companies like IBM.[77] Given China's own STEM-forward modernization movement and the unique geopolitical negotiations it undertook with the United States, it therefore came as no surprise that an extensive share of H-1B visas were requested and accepted on behalf of Chinese science students. Indeed, the INS yearbook in 2001 found that Chinese citizens comprised nearly 10% of approved H-1B applicants, second only to Indian visa holders.[78] A second study further determined that nearly a quarter of H-1B status workers had previously held a student visa in the United States.[79] All of these external circumstances mixed to concoct a perfect storm for the upcoming spike in Chinese student immigrants, many of whom could see the H-1B visa as a seemingly tailor-made tool that not only incentivized them to arrive in the U.S. but also paved the way for them to extend their stays and eventually pursue full American citizenship.

At the same time, the makers of the 1990 Immigration Act implemented a variety of provisions that would broaden the United States' long history of racializing different groups of immigrants. In their conference debates about the bill, members of both the House and Senate revealed through their comments a delicate but systematic approach that set supposedly "good"

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[76] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[77] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 101.
[78] U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *2001 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2003): 135.
[79] Wilawan Kanjanapan, "The Immigration of Asian Professionals to the United States, 1988-1990," *International Migration Review* 29, no. 1 (1995): 7-32. https://doi.org/10.2307/2546995.

immigrants against purportedly "bad" immigrants. When it came to Chinese students, the immigration act's development exposed several subtle ways that they (and Asian migrants in general) were simultaneously pitted against illegal immigrants, European immigrants, and American citizens. This both arose from and contributed to the continued evolution of two key tropes regarding people of Asian descent: the model minority myth and the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner.

According to the model minority myth, Asian-Americans as a whole have attained greater success in the U.S. because their culture supposedly values education, hard work, and obedience to the law more highly than other cultures; therefore, other minorities in America should seek to emulate Asians in order to achieve the same results. This misconception not only overlooks the diversity of the Asian-American community and the persistent harms of racial discrimination but also ignores the circumstances and policies that engender disparate results for differing minority groups.[80] The Immigration Act of 1990 represents one such policy.

Before the new immigration act took on its final form, the House had originally considered an alternative bill that some members such as Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) criticized as "reward[ing] those who broke our immigration laws… while others who abided by the law waited for visas."[81] Due in part to these complaints, this initial effort at reform failed. In response to this, the Senate began crafting its own immigration reform bill. Ultimately, Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and four of his colleagues sponsored what would eventually become the Immigration Act of 1990, an end product that President George H. W. Bush lauded as "open[ing]

[80] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 255.
[81] "House Session." C-SPAN video, 11:02:00. October 27, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14723-1/house-session.

the ‘front door’ to increased legal immigration” after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) had closed “the ‘back door’ on illegal immigration.”[82]

Throughout the process of building, debating, and amending the 1990 Immigration Act, members of Congress repeatedly extolled the superior qualities of skilled immigrants while decrying illegal immigration as a national crisis. The imagery surrounding these labels quickly became racialized, if they were not already: “skilled immigrants” typically referred to overseas Asians and whites who received an overwhelming majority of employment-based visas, while “illegal immigrants” meant Latin Americans from south of the border. In this way, Chinese students found themselves pigeon-holed into a very specific stereotype that idealized and contrasted them with Hispanic immigrants living under a dissimilar set of circumstances.

On the flip side, American history has continually demonstrated a tendency of casting Asians and especially Chinese people as perpetual foreigners who will never fully belong in the United States. From well before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the infamous internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, the U.S. has consistently exoticized, otherized, and shunned people of Asian descent.[83] Even after the model minority myth gained popularity during the 1950s, it still singled out Asians from other Americans — this time with an expectation of seemingly positive qualities. The Immigration Act of 1990 would likewise proceed to carry on this legacy by contraposing Asian immigrants with other immigrants as well as American citizens. This in turn would shape the way that thousands of Chinese student immigrants found their niche in the United States.

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[82] George H. W. Bush, “Statement on Signing the Immigration Act of 1990,” The American Presidency Project, accessed March 6, 2022, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-signing-the-immigration-act-1990.
[83] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

One key indication of the new immigration law's conception of belonging in America lay in its diversity-related provisions. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 had eliminated quotas based on nation of origin, the proportion of American immigrants from Latin America and Asia sharply increased to never-before-seen highs, while the share of Europeans arriving declined.[84] As a result, many congressmen by 1990 began making overtures to "reopen the door of immigration for…countries such as Ireland and Italy and Poland, countries that have been part of the basic source of immigration to this nation."[85] To accomplish this, they framed their effort using the language of diversity and essentially suggested that immigration reforms from the Civil Rights era had generated an "anti-European bias," as Representative Constance Morella (R-MD) put it.[86] When juxtaposed against the blatant exclusion that Chinese people had endured for decades, it becomes clear that unequal treatment of immigrants on the basis of race has been and continues to be deeply rooted in policy decisions.

Lawmakers further widened the divide between immigrant groups by directly setting them against each other. For example, Representative Chuck Schumer plainly stated on the House floor, "We told Asians and Latin Americans that they could not pit themselves against Europeans and Africans" with the new immigration act.[87] This not only falsely implied that immigrants themselves somehow outcompeted each other for entrance into the country but also added another layer to the complex social circumstances that would stratify the experiences in outcomes of differing immigrant minorities. In chapter 2, I detail how these perceptions of Chinese students affected the way that Americans at large behaved towards them.

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[84] Lei Zhang, "Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992: Student Immigration and the Transpacific Neoliberal Model Minority," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 455. http://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2021.0035.
[85] "House Session." C-SPAN video, 11:02:00. October 27, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14723-1/house-session.
[86] Ibid.
[87] "Congressional Reaction to Immigration Act." C-SPAN video, 19:20. October 26, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14719-1/congressional-reaction-immigration-act.

Finally, passage of the Immigration Act of 1990 also hinged heavily on assurances that an increase in employment-based immigrants would only help rather than harm American workers. Congressmen like Representative John Bryant who opposed the bill insisted that importing foreign workers would "drive down the value of [American] labor."[88] They then presented immigrants as directly interfering with the interests of Americans by claiming that workers from abroad would take jobs that U.S. citizens could have been trained to take.[89] In response, proponents of the 1990 Immigration Act asserted that skilled immigrants in particular would "promote the employment of Americans" by preventing U.S. factories from relocating overseas to gain more ready access to skilled workers.[90] Although supporters and detractors of the new law disagreed on the actual impacts that skilled immigrants to the U.S. would have on those around them, they found consensus on at least one of their aims: that immigrants to the U.S. needed to demonstrate sufficient usefulness to Americans in order to be deemed worthy. Representative Chuck Schumer phrased this most transparently when he commented, "We're not doing this for the immigrants; we're doing this for America."[91]

Hidden in the specifications of the 1990 Immigration Act were countless conditions that privileged the arrival of advanced Chinese STEM students while nevertheless allowing for them to suffer from discrimination in broader American society. Through this policy's prioritization of skilled workers and implementation of the H-1B visa, Chinese student immigrants found themselves with more opportunities to naturalize than ever before, a factor that doubtlessly contributed to the great increase in their numbers during the 1990s. At the same time,

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[88] "House Session." C-SPAN video, 11:02:00. October 27, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14723-1/house-session.
[89] Ibid.
[90] "Congressional Reaction to Immigration Act." C-SPAN video, 19:20. October 26, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14719-1/congressional-reaction-immigration-act.
[91] "House Session." C-SPAN video, 11:02:00. October 27, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?14723-1/house-session.

policymakers who put the new immigration law together made it abundantly apparent that some immigrants would always take precedence over others and that above all, immigrants to the U.S. should provide maximum possible utility to the American national interest. This expectation would come to define many of the challenges that Chinese student immigrants experienced once they began living in the United States, as I will elaborate upon in the second chapter of this thesis.

The Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992

In addition to the Immigration Act of 1990, Chinese students also became the subjects of other policy choices that would shape their behavior and experiences in the United States. One unique instance of this came in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations. After the Chinese government's crackdown on student protesters had gained international attention, Chinese student activists in the U.S. quickly began calling on American lawmakers to pass legislation that would permit them and their peers to remain in the country despite typical visa restrictions.

President George H. W. Bush initially responded by launching a Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) program for Chinese nationals in the United States, which would protect them from deportation through January 1, 1994.[92] A month later, Representative Nancy Pelosi proposed the Emergency Chinese Immigration Relief Act to waive the two-year home residence requirement for J-1 scholars from China (which accounted for about 70 to 80 percent of Chinese students at the time).[93] Upon hearing this, the P.R.C. threatened to cut off cultural and education ties with the United States if the bill became law, at which point President Bush pocket-vetoed

[92] U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, by Jill H. Wilson, RS20844 (2012), 4.
[93] U.S. Congress, House, *Emergency Chinese Immigration Relief Act of 1989*, S.1216, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in House June 21, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/house-bill/2712/text?r=3&s=9.

it.[94] For three years thereafter, Chinese students lived in a state of legal limbo, uncertain of just how long they would be able to stay in the U.S.

In the end, Senator Slade Gorton of Washington sponsored what would eventually become the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992 (CSPA), which essentially created a streamlined pathway for Chinese nationals to receive green cards if they had resided continuously in the United States since April 11, 1990. It further exempted Chinese people from "provisions regarding visa number availability, numerical levels, labor certification, entry document requirements, and the two-year home country residence requirement," along with any other criteria that the Attorney General chose to waive "in the public interest."[95] This innocuous final note exposed much of the conditionality that underlay humanitarian policies like the Chinese Student Protection Act. In comments made by Congressmen, Chinese student representatives, and the public at large, it became increasingly evident that the safeguards afforded to Chinese students relied greatly on their image as a "model minority." This not only posed a stark contrast against the treatment of Haitian and El Salvadoran refugees around the same time but also reinforced many Chinese students' belief in the need to exhibit any qualities that would raise their perceived value to the United States.

From the beginning, many senators and U.S. representatives made sure to insert remarks about the economic benefits of retaining Chinese students alongside their concerns for the safety of Chinese nationals in general. For instance, Senator Paul Simon of Illinois noted that allowing Chinese students to remain in America would be "a great blessing to this nation" since the U.S.

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[94] "Status of Chinese Students." C-SPAN video, 2:39:00. January 25, 1990. https://www.c-span.org/video/?10773-1/status-chinese-students.

[95] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992*, H.R.2712, 102nd Congress, 2nd session, introduced in Senate June 4, 1991, https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/senate-bill/1216/text?r=85&s=3.

would "end up with some outstanding engineers and scientists."[96] His presumptive impression of Chinese students as top STEM talents highlighted Congress's constant focus on maximizing immigrant utility while also exemplifying the stereotyping that Chinese-Americans would experience for decades to come. In a related train of logic, Senator Slade Gorton briskly argued that Chinese students as a collective "would probably increase the gross national product of the United States by about one percent" if they all became permanent residents.[97] To him and many others, this made Chinese students "exactly the kind of people we would like to have as Americans."[98] This line of economically-based reasoning would prove to be an enduring refrain in many humanitarian appeals on behalf of the Chinese.

U.S. legislators' unswerving emphasis on what they deemed to be the national interest did not escape Chinese student activists, who did their best to leverage this to their advantage. Lianchao Han of Yale's Association of Chinese Students and Scholars cautioned Congress members against stalling on the CSPA lest they "drive a highly educated and desirable class of immigrants to seek protection elsewhere."[99] Haiching Zhao, a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard, likewise predicted that "China faces the potential permanent loss of these thousands of its best educated citizens — to the long-run benefit of the United States."[100] In their testimonies, many Chinese students expressed an implicit understanding that the best way to win over the U.S. government was to stress their high economic value over any purely humanitarian pleas. This

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[96] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Chinese students in America and human rights in China: hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Affairs of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 101st Congress, 2nd session, Jan. 23,1990, 29.
[97] Ibid, 9.
[98] Ibid.
[99] U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Immigration status of Chinese nationals currently in the United States: hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 101st Congress, 1st session, July 20, 1989, 148.
[100] Ibid, 160.

awareness bled into other areas of their lives as well: because of their advanced degrees, Chinese students were uniquely positioned to thrive in the United States, and they swiftly realized that this success would earn them a significant amount of respectability in the eyes of other Americans.

Indeed, the general public displayed considerable sympathy for the plight of Chinese students, and this sympathy arose in part from the perception that Chinese students were "good immigrants." Countless letters of support poured into the White House. Some read, "Please help Chinese students in this country live a comfortable life even if they never can return home" or sent comparable messages that lacked the typical concerns for how refugees might burden Americans.[101] Others asked specifically for "extended visas, work permits, etc." to be provided for Chinese students.[102] One resident of Wisconsin who pushed for the rationale of maintaining America's economic advantage even wrote most plainly that "these students are the cream of the crop… most of them are in the 'hard' sciences… areas in which we are in short supply."[103] With the American people on Chinese students' side, passage of the Chinese Student Protection Act proceeded by a voice vote, an indication of little to no congressional opposition.[104]

This differed drastically from the treatment of Haitian and El Salvadoran refugees around the same time, who usually did not come from highly skilled backgrounds and were consequently never offered blanket access to permanent residence. In fact, President Bush justified his refusal to accommodate more Haitian refugees by claiming that they only alleged

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[101] Lei Zhang, "Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992: Student Immigration and the Transpacific Neoliberal Model Minority," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 452. http://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2021.0035.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992*, H.R.2712, 102nd Congress, 2nd session, introduced in Senate June 4, 1991, https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/senate-bill/1216/actions?r=85&s=3.

political persecution in order to access U.S. economic opportunities.[105] This reticence was nowhere to be found when it came to the subject of Chinese students in America, most of whom would not have become targets of the CCP as long as they had not written op-eds or given interviews about the Tiananmen Square protests.[106] When Chinese students appealed to the economic dimension of their situation, they were instead lauded as ideal immigrants precisely because of their class privilege and racialized image as model minorities.

Aware of this disparity in public perception, many Chinese student lobbyists sought to distance themselves from other refugees. For example, they actively opposed efforts to include measures ensuring temporary legal status for Haitians in the CSPA out of fear that President Bush might veto the entire law.[107] Xiao Geng, president of the Independent Federation of Chinese Students and Scholars (IFCSS) in 1993, also rejected any comparisons between Chinese students and "the boatloads of Chinese who have been smuggled in from Fujian province over the last two years."[108] Similarly, another scholar wrote in *Press Freedom Herald*, a Chinese newspaper in Los Angeles, that Chinese students posed a "contrast to thousands of illegal immigrants flooding into the U.S. each year" because they were mostly "well-educated talents."[109] In trying to reap the greatest possible benefits from U.S. institutions, Chinese students often embraced the neoliberal individualism of the nineties out of a belief that this "every-group-for-itself" mentality would yield the highest odds of survival and success for themselves.

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[105] Maria C. Garcia, *The Refugee Challenge in Post-Cold War America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 52.
[106] Lei Zhang, "Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992: Student Immigration and the Transpacific Neoliberal Model Minority," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 450. http://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2021.0035.
[107] Ibid, 457.
[108] L. A. Chuang, "Refuge Program in Response to Tiananmen — Chinese students in U.S. can now seek green cards," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 2, 1993.
[109] Lei Zhang, "Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992: Student Immigration and the Transpacific Neoliberal Model Minority," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 24, no. 3 (2021): 448. http://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2021.0035.

The eventual passage of the Chinese Student Protection Act seemed to confirm this premise. Placing heightened focus on their economic contribution to the national interest had indeed produced better results for Chinese students than most refugee groups' humanitarian pleas. With their legal status in the U.S. secured, many of the 54,000 Chinese people who profited from the CSPA ironically seized the opportunity to visit family members in the very country they supposedly required protection against.[110] The fact that most Americans did not bat an eye at this merely reinforced the notion that the United States cared primarily for Chinese students' earning potential above all else. Thus, policies like the Chinese Student Protection Act sent the enduring message that making oneself as useful as possible to the state would bring greater respect, opportunity, and prosperity.

Houstonian Responses to New Chinese Students

As policies in the U.S. and P.R.C. changed to facilitate increased immigration of Chinese students, Americans unsurprisingly took an interest in the transformed demographics around them. Due to lawmakers' deliberate formation of the incoming Chinese cohort, many people in the U.S. understandably formed distinct impressions of what a student from China was typically like. These perceptions, along with the previous existence of model minority stereotypes, would go on to form a persistent cycle with the actual experiences of Chinese students: as U.S. policies and people levied higher expectations upon Chinese in the country, Chinese scholars had to meet these requirements in order to survive, which then reinforced their public image as the model minority. In Houston, where my interviewees from the next chapter immigrated, various newspaper articles revealed glimpses of the broader community's impressions of Chinese

[110] Ibid, 454.

students, and these impressions often formed the basis for how said Chinese students were ultimately treated.

At Rice University, Director of Academic Advising Patricia Martin noted in 1989 that the "campus has, over the past few years, seen a significant increase of Chinese graduate students… most of [whom] are in engineering and sciences."[111] The *Rice Thresher,* a student newspaper that reported her testimony, further remarked that the Chinese scholars who came to American universities were usually "the most academically advanced."[112] These comments echoed observations from across U.S. colleges, and the latter quotation especially helps to explain why the Chinese student immigrants I interviewed felt they were given a positive reception upon entry into the United States. Before many of them ever even stepped foot in Houston, their future colleagues already anticipated that they would be a boon to their universities.

In the broader Houston community, reports about Chinese students remained scarce until the Tiananmen Square protests began to escalate. As students back in China marched for democracy reform in 1989, their counterparts in the United States joined them in solidarity. At its height, the movement in Houston garnered anywhere from 500 to 800 student demonstrators according to the *Houston Chronicle*.[113] Despite these activists' impassioned calls before the embassy, however, their portrayal by the press exposed the depth of the "model-minority" imagery's impacts.

The *Houston Chronicle* in particular referred to Chinese student protestors as "cheerful, friendly, and well-mannered."[114] Two weeks later, in an article about the Tiananmen Square

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[111] Greg Kahn, "Chinese students speak of disaster at home," *Rice Thresher,* July 14, 1989.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Stephen Johnson, "China in turmoil - A world outraged - Students in Houston, other cities protest crackdown," *Houston Chronicle*, June 5, 1989.
[114] Carlos Byars, "Houston protestors join calls for Chinese reforms," *Houston Chronicle*, May 21, 1989.

massacre, the newspaper offered background knowledge on the mainstream view of Chinese students by writing that Americans "often thought of [them] as perfect citizens for coping with their masters no matter how cruel or oppressive."[115] Moreover, when describing one student activist at the University of Houston, the *Chronicle* stated, "He is a simple man with simple needs."[116] Such examples illustrated the already prevalent assumptions that Americans held about Chinese student immigrants. They were supposed to be "civil" and inhumanly capable of flourishing regardless of hardship. Policymakers who crafted laws with this underlying belief therefore generated circumstances whereby Chinese students had to fulfill such high expectations in order to legally stay in the country at all.

These seemingly positive feelings for Chinese students were also highly conditional. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely unfounded concerns about Chinese spies in American universities had engendered broad suspicion of STEM students from China.[117] No longer were they the brave, model-minority freedom fighters of the early nineties. This shift became quite evident at the University of Houston after an event flyer reading "Chinese Nuclear Espionage????????" sparked controversy in 2001.[118] As explained in the context of other policy decisions, the U.S. constantly gave indications that Chinese students' wellbeing in America would rely heavily on their perceived benefits and costs to the national interest.

Chinese students in Houston and across the United States were well aware of this fact. For instance, when asked about concerns he had during the earlier Tiananmen Square days, one anonymous engineering student at Rice confessed that "I was very scared about America's

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[115] Stephen Johnson, "China in turmoil - A world outraged - Students in Houston, other cities protest crackdown," *Houston Chronicle*, June 5, 1989.
[116] Barbara Karkabi, "Speaking out - Chinese protests push UH student into politics," *Houston Chronicle*, June 16, 1989.
[117] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 25-26.
[118] Eric Berger, "Nuclear espionage talk spurs a controversy on UH campus," *Houston Chronicle*, October 3, 2001.

reaction to what happened in China because if America got to *[sic]* upset, then the students are the ones who will get hurt."[119] On some level, Chinese students understood that their status in the U.S. depended on the needs and desires of the government and the people around them, a realization that led them to closely align themselves with the powerful rather than the powerless.

Summary

Throughout the United States' 250-year history, immigration policy has consistently played an important role in molding the American population to fit more closely with an imagined ideal. Educational exchange of top students from China offers us just one example of this process at work. In spite of escalating animosity against Chinese nationals during earlier centuries, students always presented as the exception to this rule. The heightened prevalence of well-educated Asians in the U.S. then contributed to the creation of the model minority myth, which eventually encouraged the federal government to open greater avenues of immigration from Asian countries like China during the late twentieth century. This history provides a context for many of the later policies that allowed Chinese students to come to America in far greater numbers than ever before.

In the post-Cultural Revolution P.R.C., a desire for economic opportunities that were previously unavailable under Chairman Mao also laid the groundwork for many Chinese people's eagerness to see the West. Once Deng Xiaoping initiated reforms that prioritized scholarly exchange in STEM as a key tool for modernization, such exploration became much more feasible specifically for China's best and brightest science students. These policies directly incentivized intensive study of some subjects over others, and they likewise shaped the characteristics of China's emigrating population for decades to come.

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[119] Greg Kahn, "Chinese students speak of disaster at home," *Rice Thresher*, July 14, 1989.

On the American side, the Immigration Act of 1990 established a clear preference for skilled immigrants via its creation of H-1B visas, which were utilized disproportionately by Chinese STEM students and undoubtedly influenced many Chinese nationals' decisions to remain in the U.S. However, the development of the law simultaneously racialized Chinese student immigrants and pitted them against other groups both foreign and native. It imposed significant expectations on "model-minority" immigrants that would go on to affect the way that Chinese students handled the challenges of living in the United States. A similar effect can be seen in the conception of the Chinese Student Protection Act, which garnered support partly due to Chinese students' image as model immigrants who would become an economic boon to the United States. In their advocacy for this measure, congressmen and student activists alike divided Chinese scholars from other refugees. The success of this effort promoted the lasting idea that Chinese students' survival depended on the U.S. government's goodwill, which could best be maintained by working to maximize their usefulness to the national interest.

These policy decisions (along with various others) combined to set the conditions under which Chinese students toiled during the eighties and nineties. In chapter 2, I examine the myriad of challenges that arose from the U.S. immigration system as well as the individual responses of six eventual Chinese student immigrants.

Chapter 2: The Lives and Struggles of the New Model Minority

The Model Minority Myth

Beginning with Deng Xiaoping's reform of China in 1977, Chinese students quickly became a focus of numerous policy decisions that allowed and even encouraged their immigration to the United States. On the side of United States policies, the Immigration Act of 1990 for the first time set aside 65,000 H-1B visas for skilled workers, making eventual permanent residence a more distinct possibility for thousands of Chinese students with advanced degrees.[120] Furthermore, the Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992 opened a uniquely fast-tracked pathway to permanent residence for many Chinese people — one that did not exist for other less privileged immigrant groups. These significant structural changes help to explain the dramatic swell in Chinese student migration to the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s, but they do not acknowledge the new and unique challenges posed to individual immigrant lives. Nor do they address the impact of individual immigrant lives on popular discourse related to Chinese and Asian Americans in general.

Of particular import is the influence of this mass influx on the model minority myth. As described by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou in *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, the uptick of Asian (and especially Chinese) immigrants during the 1980s and 1990s included a large proportion of college-level students who brought with them a specific "success frame," which Lee and Zhou define as "attaining an advanced degree and working in one of four high-status professional fields: medicine, law, engineering, or science."[121] The ability to survive and flourish in such occupations necessitates specific qualities that coincide directly with the persistent

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[120] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[121] Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015), 18.

stereotype of the model minority: diligence, self-reliance, a well-educated background, and a "quiet dignity" that endures through the long and arduous visa-to-green-card process in this country.[122] Although the model minority myth existed decades before the 1980s, I argue that the spike in immigration of highly educated Chinese students played a critical role in strengthening such perceptions. Certainly, the six immigrants I have interviewed for this project each possessed some if not all of the traits listed above, and census data from 1990 suggests that they are at least a representative sample in their level of educational attainment as well as their chosen fields of study.

At this point, there are some who might suggest that Chinese-Americans like my interviewees have succeeded because their culture somehow primed them to value education and hard work more than other minorities in America. The implication of such a statement is that other racial groups could do just as well if they would only emulate the ethos of Chinese-Americans. However, this type of narrative paints an incomplete picture. There is no denying that Chinese immigrants from the eighties and nineties toiled much longer and harder than the average American in their earliest days here, but they were also subject to stringent immigration hurdles that weeded out all but the smartest and luckiest. At every stop on the pathway to citizenship — from student visa to Optional Practical Training (OPT) to H-1B to green card — the possibility of deportation loomed ever larger. As such, the resultant population of highly educated Chinese-Americans from this era contained only those who were willing to suffer years upon years of stress *and* could successfully clear every obstacle to citizenship. It is not the case that all Chinese simply share the same dedication to educational excellence, but it is the case that

[122] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 243.

those permitted to stay by the U.S. government had to possess such characteristics as hard work and self-reliance.

Leaving China in the 1980s

Despite the relative thawing of international relations between the U.S. and China in the post-Cold War era, moving to the United States as a Chinese student nonetheless entailed a harrowing series of selective pressure tests. Especially in the early 1980s, the privilege of studying abroad remained restricted to those few individuals able to obtain government sponsorship for their research. In other words, most of these students attended programs at the doctorate level and possessed a nearly impeccable academic record. The vast majority of these initial scholars (around 60%) also came to the U.S. on J-1 exchange visas rather than the F-1 student visa that is more commonly known today.[123] Half of them were over forty years old, and less than a quarter were women.[124]

Qiming Li was one such individual. After testing into a special physics program that only accepted about 100 applicants, he eventually traveled to the United States in 1983 on a J-1 visa in order to receive his PhD. He described the idea of studying abroad in his era with disbelief: "At that time, going abroad for studies was something no one would dream of. Only a few people that have overseas connections with relatives would do that. But there was no other way to go to the United States. We knew little of the outside at that time."[125]

Indeed, other interviewees such as Jenny He recalled being unable to immigrate during this earlier period due to a lack of family relatives abroad, which was once mandatory for a Chinese passport. In He's situation, she waited more than five years after taking the GRE and

[123] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 15.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.

TOEFL before receiving eligibility to even apply for a passport.[126] Already in the 1980s, Chinese immigration to the United States required numerous criteria that were unequally distributed among the population: academic excellence in higher education, government sponsorship, and overseas relatives.

In the case of Qiming Li, however, clearing these hurdles paved the way for access to additional resources. For instance, he noted that his physics program arranged for its participants to undergo three to four months of English training, which the Chinese government fully sponsored. When describing the process of applying for his visa and traveling to the United States, Qiming Li also remarked that "the government did pretty much everything. They got us the passport, gave us five hundred dollars, said go there and study."[127] Moreover, once Qiming Li arrived in the United States, his program provided him with a community of peers who ate and worked together. It even paired him with a local American student who helped to familiarize him with the new university campus.[128]

Government-sponsored support, though difficult to come by, made the student transition from China to the United States much smoother in the 1980s, especially as compared to the nineties. Given that the PRC during this era was still testing the waters of its new relationship with the West, the government naturally kept a high interest in the success of the students it sent abroad. More so than later F-1 students, J-1 scholars like Qiming Li were viewed as representatives who directly reflected the potential of their country's best and brightest. Thus, the select few students who met the threshold for studying abroad could at least count on a slight safety net. With the help of just five hundred dollars and a close-knit community, Qiming Li felt

[126] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.
[127] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2022.
[128] Ibid.

that "daily life… was not really much of a challenge."[129] Undoubtedly, this admission included at least some degree of characteristically Chinese modesty, but his later testimony about frequent weekend outings at the park nonetheless demonstrates that he possessed considerably more free time than many of his counterparts during the nineties.[130]

However, Qiming Li's government sponsorship had its caveats. Typically, a J-1 visa required scholars to return to their home country for a period of at least two years upon receipt of their U.S. degree.[131] As circumstance would have it, Qiming Li graduated from his program in the summer of 1989, shortly after the Tiananmen Square protests began. He described the news of China's crackdown as a turning point for him and many others:

> "You remember the famous June '89 events. That pretty much changed the course for eighty to ninety percent of people here. After that, I think a lot of people realized China is still the same China in terms of how they want to control the political systems … Most of my friends basically decided at that point that they wanted to stay in the U.S. I would say of the people who came through my program, probably only ten to twenty percent went back… And we heard horrible stories too when people go back."[132]

As mentioned in Chapter 1, President George H.W. Bush's implementation of Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) just two days after the Tiananmen Square massacre allowed more than 80,000 Chinese nationals, regardless of student status or prior activism, to remain in the United States through 1994.[133] For some individuals like Qiming Li, the Tiananmen Square crackdown and swift U.S. response demonstrated a stark contrast between China and the West when it came to the value of political freedom — one that quickly added another dimension to the economic appeal of living in the United States. For others who had written articles or given

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[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Waiver of the Exchange Visitor Two-Year Home-Country Physical Presence Requirement" (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2022), https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/study/exchange/waiver-of-the-exchange-visitor.html.
[132] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[133] U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, by Jill H. Wilson, RS20844 (2012), 4.

television interviews criticizing China's actions, the DED was considered a necessary measure for their physical safety from the Chinese Communist Party's possible retaliation. And for many of the less vocal students, the governmental attention and protection after Tiananmen Square offered an opportunity to see if activists could perhaps persuade the U.S. to streamline the immigration process for people from China.

In fact, the 1992 Chinese Student Protection Act provided exactly that: permanent residence for any Chinese national residing in the U.S. since April 11, 1990 who had not returned to China since then for longer than 90 days.[134] Chapter 1 has described the political dynamics that led to and resulted from this choice; this chapter will now briefly examine the material impacts of this policy decision on immigrants themselves. In the case of Qiming Li, for instance, the Chinese Student Protection Act effectively waived his J-1 visa's two-year home residence requirement. As such, he was able to pursue two post-docs at Louisiana State University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology immediately upon completion of his PhD. According to his interview testimony, Qiming Li merely had to pay back the five hundred dollars that the Chinese government used to sponsor him before smoothly switching from a J-1 visa to the H visa. He considered this to be a relatively small burden in comparison to the benefits of staying in the United States.[135]

Qiming Li's experience of moving abroad in 1983 matches the experiences of many other Chinese students who came to the U.S. in the 1980s. His participation in the initial post-Mao exchange of U.S. and Chinese scholars necessitated the highest of academic standards and put him on the road to one of a rare few J-1 visas offered. His program, though highly selective,

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[134] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992*, S.1216, 102nd Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate June 4, 1991, https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/senate-bill/1216/text?r=85&s=3.
[135] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.

afforded him certain advantages that the later wave of immigration lacked. And the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 played a significant role in his changing opinions of the U.S. and China while also facilitating a faster pathway to eventual citizenship.

Leaving China in the 1990s

Within a few years of the experimental stage in U.S.-China educational exchange, China set forth its 1984 Provisional Regulations on Self-Funded Students Studying Abroad.[136] No longer would Chinese students require a specialized government sponsorship in order to study in the West. This broadened access to the U.S. somewhat — the proportion of people seeking degrees lower than a doctorate gradually increased, as did the percentage of women traveling on student visas.[137]

That said, the number of people in China wishing to go to the U.S. has always exceeded the number of available opportunities, and the 1990s posed no exception to this rule. Thus, the U.S. and Chinese governments each found their own ways to restrict migration only to those Chinese students who exhibited the best "model citizen" qualities at the time. For instance, most prospective Chinese immigrants from the nineties still concentrated in STEM-related fields just as their counterparts in the eighties had. Both China and the U.S. continued to place an outsized emphasis on science and technology for years after the Cold War thawed, and their educational exchange naturally reflected this value. One 1991 report found that approximately two-thirds of mainland Chinese students in the U.S. were focused on either science or technology.[138]

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[136] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 19.
[137] Ibid, 132.
[138] Patricia M. Needle, "US-PRC Exchanges: A University of Minnesota Report," *China Exchange News* 19, no. 1 (1991): 24-28.

In addition to this, the conditions to study abroad during the 1990s remained extremely prohibitive even for China's brightest STEM students, not to mention the general populace. After all, admission to an American university was and still remains exceedingly difficult for international students, and hinging approval for a passport and visa on this condition inevitably parsed down the pool of eligible student migrants considerably. Against these odds, Wenxia Wang, Hanming Wang (no relation to Wenxia Wang), Julie Li (no relation to Qiming Li), Jenny He, and Xuemin Chen nonetheless found their way to the University of Houston.

Wenxia Wang came to Houston seeking a master's degree for electrical engineering in 1993. She attributed her decision to go abroad as part of a broader "fashion for young people," which she says stemmed from the gradual opening of China.[139] She also acknowledged that this trend mostly seized those who were "highly educated among the Chinese," which encompassed only a small group of people since China's "college admission rate was… in the lower percentage."[140] At the earliest stages of the immigration process, 1990s-era Chinese students like Wenxia Wang already realized that the opportunity to travel to the U.S. still remained quite selective. The educational level required to emigrate meant that those who entered the U.S. from China were often already primed for a higher social class than the average American or even the average immigrant.[141]

At the same time, Chinese emigrants during this time did not necessarily tend to hail from higher income brackets, a marked contrast against earlier eras. This was in part due to China's reinstatement of the traditional Gao Kao, or national college entrance exam.[142] Originating in the

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[139] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Peter Kaufman and Todd Schoepflin, "Social Class, Inequality, & Poverty," in *A Sociology Experiment*, eds. Shamus Khan, Patrick Sharkey, and Gwen Sharp (New York, NY: panOpen, 2021), 5-6.
[142] Ezra F. Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 205.

Tang Dynasty, its use had fallen out of favor under Chairman Mao, who characterized intellectuals as enemies of the common people. Under Deng Xiaoping, this test returned as a sign that China's long history of meritocratic education would once again be embraced. Indeed, one of the Gao Kao's impacts was to revive social mobility in China, and pursuit of a Western post-graduate education similarly contributed to this.[143] Many stories about the West and the United States during the nineties especially appealed to those in China who sought greater economic opportunity. As Wenxia Wang recalled, the alleged difference in income that she heard about between China and the United States was close to unbelievable in her mind:

> "Back then, I made — it was like sixty-some Chinese yuan… [or] 10 to 20 U.S. dollars per month. And then I remember somebody told me at work: if you go to the U.S., even people who's working in the kitchen… make 800 US dollars. So, that's a huge difference, and you wonder, 'What kind of world is that going to look like?'"[144]

Regardless of the truth in such a story, it left a lasting impression and spurred Wang's desire to seek new opportunities abroad. However, she hedged in her responses when asked about her initial reasons for wanting to study in the United States. As Wang recalled, her original desire was simply to "see the difference economically."[145] She admitted that the narrow constraints of this idea arose in part due to the nature of the visa she sought:

> "When you go to the [F-1] visa application interview, if you show any tendency of being immigrant, you will get rejected. At the time, that was the case. So, in other words, I think the seed planted in each people's mind by the U.S. policy is actually, 'You're going to come over, but you're going to be a non-immigrant.'"[146]

The fact that the F-1 is a non-immigrant visa added yet another barrier to U.S. entry, one that many found quite arbitrary. If a student, however capable they may be, committed the

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[143] Zachary M. Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 47.
[144] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.

unfortunate political faux pas of revealing their honest hopes to become an American, the chance for a visa would immediately disappear. Luckily for Wang, friends warned her of this rule before her interview.

Aside from the visa application interview, finances also presented a significant difficulty to prospective students. In the nineties, the Chinese embassy required visa applicants to prove that they could independently cover their own expenses for at least twelve months — a gargantuan task for lower- and middle-class Chinese students, especially given the Chinese-to-U.S. exchange rate at the time.[147] Typically, this meant that prospective student migrants needed to secure scholarships, which often came in the form of an on-campus position as a teaching assistant (TA) or research assistant (RA). In many cases, students required both of these jobs in order to demonstrate sufficient funding. According to Hanming Wang, "If you don't have enough support by scholarship, TA, or RA, [your visa] gets rejected. 90% chance is you'll be rejected."[148]

With the great number of underprivileged international students in this exact position, these positions were not easy to come by. Jenny He spoke about how she initially planned to work towards a master's degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Houston, but the program she was admitted under did not have any available fellowships or teaching assistantships.[149] As a result, she did not expect to receive a visa and felt surprised when the official approved her application. When asked about why she may have been able to break the norm, He speculated that her background as a mother may have actually helped, but it ultimately came down to luck:

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[147] Chad C. Haddal, *Foreign Students in the United States: Policies and Legislation* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL31146.pdf.
[148] Hanming Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[149] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.

> "One of the things they mentioned about is they don't want you to have immigration tendency. When I went there, I think it's kind of a little push by my parents because I have [my daughter] one year and a half. I think I was not that desperate to come over here… I don't really know why they gave me the visa though."[150]

With or without proof of future funding upon arrival in the United States, students like Hanming Wang and Jenny He still had to contend with heavy costs before ever leaving China. Jenny He recalled having to borrow 20,000 yuan from her parents in order to obtain a passport, along with additional funds to travel from Nanjing to Shanghai for the slim chance of a visa.[151] Likewise, Hanming Wang and his wife, Julie Li, each borrowed around 1,000 U.S. dollars from their parents for the overseas plane ticket.[152] This was after Wang had already undergone the nerve-wracking task of queueing at the embassy from midnight onwards in the hopes of "winning the lottery" from a highly limited number of available student visas.[153]

At this point, the harrowing process of obtaining a visa presented yet another challenge left completely out of students' hands: luck. Given that the U.S. usually issued just over 10,000 F-1 visas to Chinese students during this time, mere admission to an American university could not guarantee receipt of a visa.[154] This made the application process quite competitive: for example, as already mentioned, the embassy closest to Hanming Wang's home restricted the number of visas offered every day, which caused applicants to queue outside at midnight when the count reset. Even then, it took Wang a few tries before he gained an audience with one of the officials. Some students also visited multiple embassies at different locations in order to maximize their chances of success. Jenny He described a friend who, after failing to obtain a visa

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[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Julie Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[153] Hanming Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[154] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Non-Immigrant Visa Statistics" (Washington, DC: Department of State, 1997-1999).

in Shanghai, inexplicably succeeded once he traveled eight hundred miles to Beijing.[155] For countless others, however, multiple attempts all returned fruitless results, and rejection truly meant the end of their aspirations for an overseas education.

Before any of my interviewees ever set foot in the United States, the Chinese and U.S. governments had started to shape the population of eligible student immigrants. China sought to send only its top students as representatives of the country's potential, while the United States sought out those who were perceived as being most capable of contributing to the American economy. The visa application process reflected this: success frequently required persistence, financial assistance from family and friends, and academics of a high enough caliber to gain admission and scholarships from an American university. Even then, prospective students sometimes had to rely on a healthy dose of luck. Already, this next wave of Chinese student immigrants had begun to take on the reputation of the model minority.

Life on an American University Campus

Unfortunately, obtaining a visa was just the beginning of Chinese student migrants' struggles; the challenges of moving across the globe to a completely foreign country awaited. Continued visa concerns, financial limitations, language barriers, and the stress of these factors combined all made studying in the United States a laborious and thoroughly exhausting endeavor. For anyone who did not exhibit the so-called "model minority" qualities of hard work and resilience, this journey could very well appear to be more hassle than its possible benefits were worth.

When asked about her most primary concern as a student at the University of Houston, Wenxia Wang expressed no hesitation in her response. "Maintaining that legal status is always

[155] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.

something in the back of your mind," she stated.[156] This was easier said than done. For most Chinese students during the eighties and nineties, retaining the F-1 visa entailed much more than simply maintaining regular academic standards, although this was certainly one of the obligations. More specifically, the F-1 visa required international students to uphold their full-time student status and thereby barred them from working any off-campus jobs.[157] Instead, the law restricted international students to insufficiently paid teaching assistant and research positions at the university.

In her interview, Wenxia Wang noted how these roles were mostly occupied by international students precisely because they offered very little pay or industry experience. "U.S. students — U.S. citizens or green card holders — they have the flexibility to go find jobs elsewhere, industry jobs," she remarked.[158] As such, Wenxia Wang worked as both a TA and RA in order to make ends meet, and she recounted many long evenings spent working on campus until around 10PM. Even so, each of her jobs earned her about $800 per month, which went towards tuition, rent, utilities, food, and support for family members back home. In fact, Wenxia Wang vividly remembered moving often with her husband whenever landlords increased the price of extending their lease.[159]

Other interviewees like Hanming Wang spoke about staying in their university labs until as late as midnight, even on holidays. His wife, Julie Li, remarked that they had very little free time since "we spent most of our time in the lab with our labmates."[160] Hanming Wang and Julie Li also had to deal with the added pressure of raising their children on a meager university

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[156] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[157] Chad C. Haddal, *Foreign Students in the United States: Policies and Legislation* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/RL31146.pdf.
[158] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Julie Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.

salary. “Our burden was very heavy,” said Julie Li. “We had to live in a cheap apartment. We spent less money on food. And we bought a very old, used car. We had to save any penny we can.”[161] It was perhaps the greatest of ironies that those in the U.S. who had the greatest need and desire to work — future immigrants that the United States frequently lauded as potential contributors to the economy — were barred from doing exactly that.

Given the budding economic development in China at this time, many Chinese students simply did not have enough funds from home to survive only off of university-sponsored jobs. Forced to either bleed money or take up illegal outside work, these students lived with the constant fear that their financial situations or the U.S. government might force them out of the country one way or another. Indeed, it was not uncommon for immigration authorities to drop in on restaurants or other businesses to find and deport international students caught working unlawfully in violation of their F-1 visas.

Despite the looming fear of losing legal status and the exhaustion of constantly working to evade financial ruin, none of my interviewees listed long hours as the greatest challenge of studying in the United States. Wenxia Wang went so far as to say, “Even when I look back now, I don’t think we had a hard time. We had to work very hard, but working hard is not equal to a hard time.”[162] Other interviewees similarly expressed emotions ranging from modest dismissal to pride when asked about their university work schedules, but none of them appeared to look back on their struggles with frustration. Instead, they primarily attributed their diligence to necessity or a sense of “discipline” learned from China. Most of them stressed “focus[ing] on what you can do”[163] rather than any criticism of the U.S. immigration system or their employers, who were

[161] Ibid.
[162] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[163] Ibid.

described as "need[ing] to survive."[164] This attitude mirrored the U.S. and China's broader emphasis on contributing to modernization during the nineties as well as the persistent American inclination towards individualism. Although they acknowledged the influence of their background in China on their ability to survive, most of my interviewees nonetheless attributed their eventual success primarily to the virtue of hard work.

This is not to say that life as an international student was without its challenges. When asked about the greatest disadvantages they felt in their years of schooling here, five of my six interviewees spoke first about the difficulty of adjusting to English as a second language. Their descriptions reflected an unexpected feature of the Chinese immigrant population during this time: despite higher levels of education overall, 72% of foreign-born and non-citizen Chinese people reported that they did not speak English very well compared to 65% before 1980.[165] To this day, "Chinese immigrants are less likely to be proficient in English… than the overall U.S. foreign-born population," and my interviewees experiences demonstrated these trends in action.[166]

Like many other Chinese international students, Hanming Wang and Julie Li only began learning English in high school. Jenny He said the same and further noted that most English instructors in China taught their materials with a British accent, which made it difficult for her to understand American professors at first.[167] Her husband, Xuemin Chen, also initially struggled to communicate in his new role as a post-doctoral fellow, stating that "we can read, we can write, but we can't speak."[168]

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[164] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[165] U.S. Census Bureau, *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States* (Washington, DC: Department of Commerce's Economics and Statistics Administration, 1990).
[166] Jeanne Batalova and Carlos Echevarria-Estrada, "Chinese Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, accessed February 2, 2021, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states-2018.
[167] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.
[168] Xuemin Chen, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 13, 2022.

This early lack of English caused much more than surface-level communication issues though; it compounded the challenges that Chinese international students underwent in just about every aspect of life. For example, Wenxia Wang relearned her coursework by the book if she could not understand the lectures. Her research took twice as long as it otherwise should have. Helping fellow students with their homework as a teaching assistant likewise produced substantial frustrations for everyone. As a result, Wang explained that she spent every ounce of her free time watching American sitcoms in a determined effort to both improve her English-speaking abilities and learn more about American cultural norms.[169]

Most of my interviewees recounted various stories related to the culture shock of moving from China to the U.S. Some of the differences were described lightheartedly — Xuemin Chen laughed about not knowing what a "body shop" was,[170] while Jenny He commented on how much less dense the population of Houston was when compared to her hometown of Nanjing.[171] Other changes had a bigger impact on my interviewees' lives. Qiming Li noted that "in China, we never experienced religion" and spoke at length about various friends who eventually became Christians in the United States.[172] Jenny He similarly detailed her own introduction to Christianity: as soon as she set foot in Houston, a couple from a Chinese church helped to drive her from the airport and even arranged for her to temporarily stay at a studio apartment with two of its other members. This first-time encounter eventually led her to join a Chinese church, which provided an invaluable community for her.[173] Indeed, my interviewees all expressed their

[169] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[170] Xuemin Chen, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 13, 2022.
[171] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.
[172] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[173] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.

initial impressions of the U.S. and American people in overwhelmingly positive terms, with over half of them describing Americans as "friendly" and "open."[174]

Of course, such characterization was by no means universal. Lisong Liu, author of *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship*, noted in his research that many Chinese students from the mid-1990s onward vocalized more critical views of the United States — both its foreign policy and its citizens' treatment of student migrants. Consequently, this xenophobia and the coinciding rise in China's economic conditions motivated many students to consider returning to China, a departure from earlier eras of immigration.[175] However, the individuals I interviewed all chose to remain in the U.S. to try their luck at a new life and eventual citizenship. It therefore stands to reason that those who decided to stay in America did so in part because they enjoyed more positive experiences, while those who did not wish to endure discrimination left for home. Once again, the mid-1990s saw more indirect limits on which Chinese students would eventually become "model Americans."

In spite of the countless hurdles they faced, my interviewees steadfastly recounted their University of Houston days with a consistent streak of matter-of-fact pragmatism. Such sentiments were common among Chinese student immigrants of this generation, and they reflected both an embrace of American individualism and the de-emphasis of systemic obstacles to success during the 1990s. In fact, structural racism did not even bear consideration to Wenxia Wang until much later, when she had "the luxury of dealing with anything beyond just [making] a living."[176] Thus, the mindset of self-sufficiency and independence became a survival

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[174] Xuemin Chen, Jenny He, Qiming Li, Julie Li, and Hanming Wang, interviews by author, December 7, 2021 - January 13, 2022.
[175] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 30.
[176] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

mechanism during a time when outsiders could not afford to rely on the justness or good will of the systems around them.

Life as an H-1B Skilled Worker

Earning a degree on the F-1 visa marked one milestone in the long journey for U.S. citizenship, but it far from signified the end of the road. Only after attaining gainful employment through the H-1B visa could most Chinese students finally begin to hope for a green card. However, this stage of the immigration game posed an even more extensive set of impediments than the F-1 visa.

First, the difficulty of securing an H-1B sponsorship combined with its prioritization of businesses over employees both fostered a working culture that consistently and ruthlessly exploited immigrants. Moreover, even if workers such as my interviewees were willing to weather such abuses, there was still no guarantee that they could navigate the excessively bureaucratic process of procuring a green card within the allotted six years. As such, many more Chinese students exited the road to becoming an American at this point. The six individuals I interviewed, though eventually successful, all knew of various peers who had come short of the elusive green card and ultimately returned to China.

For those pursuing careers in STEM — by far the most conventional route for Chinese students in this era — a year of Optional Practical Training (OPT) usually bridged the gap between one's F-1 status and the official job that would land an H-1B clearance. Much like an internship, these twelve months served as a trial period. If, at the end of the OPT, one was still without a work sponsorship, international students typically had one of two choices: they could either reapply for the F-1 visa and return to school for another advanced degree, or they could

return home. In this way, the U.S. again restricted the number and quality of Chinese student immigrants permitted to remain in the country.

Wenxia Wang and her husband, Shaoyu Wang, represented two of the different paths in this process. After failing to find a job in chemical engineering, Shaoyu Wang returned to the University of Houston on a second F-1 visa. Two years later, he received his master's degree in computer science and struck gold in the mad scramble for an H-1B sponsorship. This kind of second attempt was not uncommon, but it did present a multiplying of one's challenges: an additional year of schooling meant another year spent bleeding instead of earning money. Fortunately for Shaoyu, this expenditure was made possible by the fact that his wife, Wenxia, had completed a year of OPT in electrical engineering directly after finishing her education and was already solidly on the road to more lasting employment.[177]

On the surface, this next step after graduation appears to be a mere matter of finding work just like anyone else. But the complications that came with the H-1B visa only made remaining in the United States even more stressful. First and foremost, the Immigration Act of 1990 required the Secretary of Labor to certify that "there are not sufficient workers who are able, willing, [or] qualified" for any job sought out by immigrant workers.[178] As Xuemin Chen explained, this usually meant that companies which had already found a qualified foreigner for their unfilled position nonetheless had to advertise the role to the public again.[179] The application for an H-1B visa could begin only after a business sufficiently proved that no equally qualified citizens or green card holders wanted the open job in question. In Wenxia Wang's experience, this meant that Chinese students found the best luck in roles for which they were overqualified

[177] Ibid.
[178] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[179] Xuemin Chen, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 13, 2022.

— roles that Americans with an equivalent degree felt to be beneath them.[180] Julie Li echoed this sentiment, saying "Without the [master's] degree, it's hard to find a job over here."[181] Yet again, the U.S. immigration system had found a way to require more hard work and greater talent from any Chinese student immigrant who desired a chance at one day becoming an American.

In addition to the (time-consuming and often nominal) sense of competition that this particular requirement fostered, employers under the 1990 Immigration Act had to demonstrate that they would pay foreigners a "prevailing wage" before they could receive an allotted H-1B. According to the Department of Labor, the prevailing wage was defined as "the average wage paid to similarly employed workers in a specific occupation in the area of intended employment."[182] Practices like this one were meant to follow the Immigration and Nationality Act, which "require[d] that the hiring of a foreign worker will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of U.S. workers comparably employed."[183] In other words, the U.S. government during the eighties and nineties happily followed its long tradition of demonstrating prioritization of citizens over foreigners. Furthermore, while the prevailing wage rule could be seen in one light as protecting immigrant employees from potential exploitation, it also tended to foster the xenophobic assumption that all foreign workers could and would work for less unless the federal government intervened.

In fact, the H-1B visa's very design made it ripe for exploitation. Unlike the F-1 visa, the H-1B is not attached to any specific person. Instead, the H-1B operates as a work permit requested by a company for a particular role that has been proven to necessitate a foreign worker.

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[180] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[181] Julie Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[182] U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, *Prevailing Wage Information and Resources* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2022).
[183] Ibid.

Obtaining this approval could frequently take months thanks to the bureaucratic excesses of U.S. immigration procedures. Additionally, the number of foreign workers in need of a skilled worker visa always exceeded the number of available visas of this type, especially since the annually allotted number of H-1B visas from 1990 to 1998 was only 65,000.[184] As such, the process became highly selective, and many foreign workers became keenly aware that their legal status rested precariously in their employers' hands.

For example, Jenny He remarked in her interview that "I think [how you are treated] has to do with your manager… And I think small companies will probably take more advantage of [visa holders]."[185] More specifically, she recalled hearing about "some managers delaying green card applications."[186] The fact that something as significant as one's ability to stay in the country could lie in someone else's control created endless worries and exploitative conditions. Wenxia Wang, whose first job was at a small private electronics company, detailed her experience with frustration:

> "I think being a foreigner on a work visa… is a huge disadvantage for us. I did a very good job the first year, but… my annual review was average. What I sensed was… once you're on a work visa, in order to stay in the U.S. for a longer time, you need to get on the green card process. So, that means you have to stay in the job for several years. You cannot move. For a private owner to know a particular employee [needs] to stay here for several years… You are basically an easy target for people to take advantage of, and I believe that's what I ran into."[187]

Given that salary raises and bonuses were directly tied to her annual review, Wenxia Wang understandably felt that she was underpaid for the work that she did while on the H-1B visa. Julie Li similarly remembered hearing "that usually people on H-1B are paid less than U.S.

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[184] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[185] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.
[186] Ibid.
[187] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

citizens or green card [holders],” but she couldn’t tell for sure because American customs on asking about others’ salaries differed from what she knew in China.[188] Nonetheless, these two women’s work lives showed at least one of the ways that employers could work around the prevailing wage rule.

The other half of Wenxia Wang’s story also reveals a key rationale behind many Chinese student immigrants’ diligence. Because she needed her job more than the average American worker in order to seek a green card, Wenxia Wang felt compelled to “outperform peers” as a way to minimize the chance of getting laid off, fired, or deported.[189] She reasonably believed that the months-long hassle of the H-1B application “greatly restrict[ed] when you can change jobs” as well, so switching to another company to avoid exploitation was not necessarily feasible.[190] Hanming Wang likewise commented that there was a perceived need to “stand out compared to other applicants” when looking for a job because companies “don’t have reason to hire a student who needs visa support” if the quality of their work does not exceed that of an American citizen.[191] In these testimonials, there is a clear indication that the hard work characterizing this sector of the “model minority” occurred at least partially out of necessity. On the other hand, those who could not or would not endure the indignity of being constantly undervalued inevitably failed to make the eventual cut for citizenship.

However, even those who “did everything right” and tolerated their exploitation without complaint could not be assured of their safety. After all, the U.S. government did not initially create the H-1B as a method of offering foreigners a pathway to citizenship. Rather, it devised the H-1B as a means to give businesses more flexibility in their hiring. As a result, the

[188] Julie Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[189] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Hanming Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.

companies that sponsored my interviewees technically had the right to revoke their H-1B status at any time if necessary. This was especially the case during times of economic hardship, when businesses let employees go in order to protect their profit margins but were expected to protect U.S. citizens first when possible. Wenxia Wang's husband, Shaoyu, went through this when his company outsourced its work overseas.[192] With his H1-B sponsorship essentially disappearing overnight, Shaoyu Wang hopped briefly between contract jobs across the country, all while dealing with the immense pressure of needing to feed his family *and* maintain his legal status until he could gain another stabler H-1B sponsorship. Anyone with less resolve might have easily given up at this point in the process.

To make matters worse, the timeline for transitioning from the H-1B visa to a green card was a long one. Due to the limited allotment of green cards every year, it took each of my interviewees at least three years to make it off of the waitlist.[193] The stress of this system was further exacerbated by the fact that H-1B visas typically expired after three years.[194] Employers could renew them once for up to two years and a second time for one additional year (which served as yet another reason for immigrants to keep their managers happy), but six years was often still not enough time to win the lottery.[195] At this point, prospective immigrants usually had three choices: they could start over with a new H-1B under a new company, move to a neighboring country like Canada (as Wenxia Wang and her family very nearly did),[196] or simply return home to China after nearly a decade of unappreciated labor. One last time, the United

[192] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[193] Xuemin Chen, Jenny He, Qiming Li, Julie Li, Hanming Wang, and Wenxia Wang, interviews by author, April 10, 2021 - January 13, 2022.
[194] U.S. Congress, Senate, *Immigration Act of 1990*, S.358, 101st Congress, 1st session, introduced in Senate February 7, 1989, https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/358/text?r=5&s=10.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

States federal government had the opportunity to select its newest batch of Chinese-Americans, this time through somewhat random chance.

Moreover, green card opportunities were not distributed equally among all who sought them. For instance, Xuemin Chen mentioned that as an academic, he had the choice to apply for his green card under a national interest waiver, which would have only taken around half a year. He declined because his wife's employers had access to corporate lawyers who could compile his family's documents more easily.[197] Still, the availability of this option demonstrated that the United States did not necessarily need to keep such a long backlog of green card applications; it simply decided to prioritize some immigrants over others for the sake of national interest.

As a final note, we should consider that many Chinese students from this time period found certain jobs to be completely barred from them. After Qiming Li completed his PhD, he almost received an offer to work for IBM until his prospective employers found out that he was from China.[198] A decade later, Jenny He found that certain high-tech companies did not hire people without green cards, while others required a U.S. passport from anyone wishing to access certain confidential information.[199] Their frustrations belied the largely positive and even sympathetic attitudes that many Chinese immigrants held towards the United States. Such anecdotes also uncovered the fact that American goodwill towards "good immigrants" only lasted to the extent that the model minority proved itself more beneficial than not.

This all coincided with numerous diplomatic incidents as well: one 1994 CBS report speculated about Chinese students and migrants being possible spies,[200] while the 1999 Cox

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[197] Xuemin Chen, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 13, 2022.
[198] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[199] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.
[200] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 25.

Report accused China of stealing American nuclear technology (and consequently led to a set of largely unfounded charges against Taiwanese-American scientist Wen Ho Lee).[201] These escalations set the backdrop for the evident distrust that the U.S. held towards its Chinese population, and they helped to explain another reason why many students from China gained a reputation for "keeping their heads down." Surviving in America clearly posed enough of a challenge for those merely doing their jobs like Wen Ho Lee. In the face of already fraught political tensions, Chinese students often felt that drawing more attention could pose a risk to their legal status or otherwise put them in a similar position to the wrongfully persecuted Chinese-Americans they had seen in the news.

Relationship to Other Americans

Despite the many hardships endured by my interviewees as they sought to become permanent U.S. residents, they expressed very little resentment towards the potential sources of their adversities. When asked if she experienced any discrimination during her early years in the United States, Wenxia Wang tellingly responded:

> "As a foreigner, there's certain restrictions you have to work with, like you can't work how Americans can. But I look at those as certain rules or laws you have to respect for the country that you are in… I don't believe that belongs to the category of discrimination."[202]

Wang acknowledged that the U.S. government did not treat her the same way it treats its own citizens, but she hesitated to label such action with the negative connotations that a word like "discrimination" carries. For her, the selective and bureaucratic nature of U.S. immigration policy was simply a fact of life, and its fairness or unfairness did not bear consideration in the face of her school and work responsibilities. She said as much upon elaboration, noting that "in

[201] U.S. Congress, House, *U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1999).
[202] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

order for you to survive and do well in the environment, you don't want to emphasize the things that are not your advantage… Because of that, I think I looked beyond a lot of things."[203] In other words, Wang was aware of the unequal standard she was held to but felt that overlooking such differences was the only option that would allow her to achieve the goal of a green card. Her testimony again shows how many of the qualities associated with "model minorities" — especially diligence and "quiet dignity," as termed by Ellen Wu — became necessary tools for survival in the United States.[204]

Qiming Li responded in a similar manner when recounting the way that IBM declined to hire him after discovering his Chinese citizenship. In slight contrast to Wang, he called it "indirect discrimination" but nevertheless brushed the incident aside, saying, "You know, that's just part of the government policy."[205] Li was also careful to distinguish between the American government and American people, adding, "From the people, all I felt was that I was welcomed."[206] For him (and many others), this was an important distinction: the U.S. government was a remote and largely inaccessible body that set rules for its own interests, but the individuals around him were part of his day-to-day life as well as the community he wanted to one day join. The power behind the U.S. immigration system was a background force that one needed to live with, while ordinary Americans merely lived the life that Li and others wished to see and embody.

Even so, some of my interviewees remarked on the connection they saw between governmental dynamics and the social atmosphere around them. Hanming Wang mentioned that

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[203] Ibid.
[204] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 243.
[205] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[206] Ibid.

his positive relationships with other Americans in school likely had much in common with the "good time between China and the U.S."[207] Julie Li likewise observed that most people in her first lab were "very friendly," though more recent tensions between the United States and China have added "a little bit of pressure."[208] This cognizance of international relations and their impacts permeated these prospective immigrants' lives but remained secondary to other financial, linguistic, legal, and interpersonal concerns. Julie Li plainly expressed this sentiment, saying, "There were so many things I had to take care of that I didn't care about politics much."[209] Wenxia Wang similarly stated that when it came to subjects such as racism, she "never really paid much attention" until she moved to the suburbs and no longer had to focus solely on maintaining legal status and sufficient funds in the U.S.[210]

That said, my interviewees still commented on the interactions they had with other Americans while making a living, and their recollections tell of a struggle between the knowledge of their different treatment and the urge to assimilate. Hanming Wang, for example, felt that others at work treated him just fine, but he recognized that this was not necessarily out of pure benevolence. "Of course, we worked very hard! That's why we were treated kind of okay," he said. "But you know, we set our expectation not that high, so I feel we were treated pretty good."[211] In his words, Wang conveyed both an expectation of potentially unequal treatment and an understanding that his coworkers' attitudes toward him were directly tied to his performance on the job. Additionally, his repeated use of the word "we" indicates that this was an experience he shared with other Chinese student immigrants. Indeed, Wang and other

[207] Hanming Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[208] Julie Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[211] Hanming Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.

interviewees like Jenny He both articulated that company policies against workplace discrimination could account the treatment they received, for which they were grateful. This optimistic frame of mind once again reflected the sentiment first communicated by Wenxia Wang: that it was best not to dwell on challenges with any hint of negativity for the sake of survival.

For some, this went a step farther towards identification with the Americans they sought to join. When asked if she endured any racism in the United States, Jenny He's response displayed apprehension with such a term and sympathy with those who may have treated her differently: "I don't say they are racist, but they are not exposed. They spend all their time in Texas; they get comfortable with the way they think. They probably will have some prejudice like we all have."[212] He's clarification demonstrates a desire to interpret America and its people as charitably as possible. When held in conjunction with her other positive views of the United States, it further suggests a wish to align her experiences with a vision of America as a welcoming land of prosperity. As with many of my other interviewees, her negative encounters were brushed aside and rationalized in light of the other opportunities she wanted and needed to focus her limited energy on.

Similarly, Wenxia Wang also offered many caveats to her belief that she was underpaid in her first job. "I'm not trying to condemn the private owners," she added, "You have a very stable job; you ought to appreciate these entrepreneurs."[213] Implicit in her statement was a sense of admiration for the business savvy of the very people who had undercut her. In her estimation, the unfair aspects of her employment would be water under the bridge once she got her green

[212] Jenny He, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 12, 2022.
[213] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.

card and therefore well worth the eventual reward. The American elite, then, was an aspiration to be sought after.

In their interactions with non-immigrant Americans, many of my interviewees revealed the extent to which their need to survive and to seek a green card impacted their day-to-day lives. In the style of nineties-era individualism, they often avoided keeping any "mindset" that might get in the way of this mission. As a result, they created distinctions between the parts of life they could and could not control. This involved separating the U.S. government's sweeping immigration policies from regular relationships with colleagues, keeping expectations of equal treatment low, and rationalizing unfair or discriminatory incidents. Chinese student immigrants' tolerance of these conditions was borne not out of any innate or culturally bound nature but out of a belief that such fortitude was necessary in order to achieve the highly specific and difficult aim of permanent residence and a better future for their children.

Houston As a Complex Destination and Home

Another dimension of the journey that my subjects made lies in their particular decision to come to Houston, Texas. As a city that straddles both the South and the Sun Belt, Houston's history and economic circumstances set it up to become a uniquely cosmopolitan hub at the turn of the twentieth century. In particular, its booming oil industry jumpstarted an era of unprecedented economic growth that took off during the 1970s and drew a large population of skilled immigrants into the city. Along with the phenomena of suburbanization and white flight, this contributed to Houston's status as a nominally diverse but still highly segregated city. It was in this environment that many Chinese student immigrants set about building their American dreams.

For much of its history, Houston remained a quintessentially southern city with a legacy heavily steeped in slavery and Jim Crow segregation. In earlier years, Chinese people had featured very little in the racial division and development of the city since America's policy of Chinese exclusion severely limited their numbers. From 1880 to 1940, the entire state of Texas reported no more than a few hundred Chinese inhabitants on the census, with the Chinese population dwindling so low by 1940 that the census briefly removed them as a separate line item in Texas demographic data.[214] The few Chinese people who lived in Texas before this time primarily worked in agriculture, small businesses, restaurants, or the railway industry.[215] This would change dramatically after the onset and conclusion of World War II.

The discovery of oil at Spindletop had already occurred in 1901, but the country's mobilization for various wars beginning in the 1940s put Houston on the map as a key supplier of oil both nationally and internationally at a critical time. During World War II, Houston's previous concentration in agriculture and oil began transitioning towards a focus on oil, petrochemicals, and natural gas.[216] Moreover, the University of Houston pioneered a program to provide soldiers with an industrial education, which directly contributed to the later growth of the school's engineering program.[217] These two developments played an outsized role in turning Houston into an oil hub for skilled immigrants once the Cold War set in. As evidence of this transformation, many of the country's major oil companies had established regional headquarters in Houston by the 1970s, and white-collared professionals represented around half of the

[214] Edward J. M. Rhoads, "The Chinese in Texas," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (1977): 8.
[215] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 87.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Brian Allen, *Paramaters: A Salute to UH Engineering* (Houston, TX: University of Houston, Cullen College of Engineering, Office of Communications, 2002), 8.

metropolitan workforce.[218] Compared to the rest of the country, Houston also enjoyed an above-average population growth rate for decades until the 1983 oil bust. But even this economic dip lasted only until 1990, at which point Houston returned to being the "Energy Capital of the World."[219]

It was against this backdrop that many Chinese student immigrants arrived in Houston. After Qiming Li finished his two post-docs in the late eighties and early nineties, he returned to Houston to work as a physicist for Schlumberger, a major oilfields services company headquartered in the city.[220] Julie Li and Hanming Wang knew even earlier that Houston would be a good destination for them; having worked for the oil industry in China, they viewed the U.S. as the place where most of their field's technology had developed and Houston as "the center" of all things oil-related.[221] Once they received their master's degrees, they too joined Schlumberger as engineers.

Others chose the University of Houston for its engineering programs and international outreach. Both Jenny He and Wenxia Wang depicted the international student office as a key factor that helped them to apply and receive visa resources after their admission.[222] Even though they didn't work directly in the oil industry, they acknowledged its impact on the city's expanding tech sector, where both women eventually found their first jobs. In fact, Houston's overall population grew by about 50% between 1980 and 2000.[223] More specifically, the proportion of foreign-born residents in Harris County reached 14% by 1990 and 22% by 2000,

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[218] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 88.
[219] Ibid, 186-187.
[220] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[221] Julie Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.
[222] Jenny He and Wenxia Wang, interviews by author, April 10, 2021 - January 12, 2022.
[223] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 200.

with many newcomers arriving in order to take advantage of new job opportunities in the "Golden Buckle of the Sun Belt."[224]

In their earlier years as students, my interviewees lived in Houston's downtown core. The places where they stayed usually came recommended to them by fellow Chinese students who knew which apartment complexes were cheap enough to afford while still being close to the university. Many of my subjects described their first neighborhoods as "poor" and "sometimes dangerous."[225] What they left unspoken was the racial composition of the downtown area. Because the University of Houston is located in the city's Third Ward area, its surrounding neighborhoods were (and still remain) predominantly African-American.[226]

As Uzma Quraishi elucidates in her book, *Redefining the Immigrant South*, celebrations of Houston's diversity frequently concealed the de facto segregation that dominated the city. Despite the fact that the Houston metropolitan area became majority-minority in 2000 (48% white, 30% Latinx, 16% African-American, 5% Asian, and 1% multiracial), it remained racially divided based on urban and suburban residential patterns.[227] This is shown in the demographic makeup of the city of Houston alone: despite representing 48% of the standard metropolitan statistical area in 2000, white people comprised only 30% of Houston at the city level.[228] Without including any surrounding suburbs, Houston as a city was and still is primarily black and Latinx. Its neighborhoods also displayed less integration than most of the newer surrounding

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[224] Corrie MacLaggan, "Share of Foreign-Born Texans Growing," *Texas Tribune*, January 2, 2014, https://www.texastribune.org/2014/01/02/increasing-share-foreign-born-residents-texas/.
[225] Julie Li and Wenxia Wang, interviews by author, April 10 - December 7, 2021.
[226] U.S. Census Bureau, "State & County QuickFacts: Houston, Texas, 2000," accessed February 27, 2022. http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Third-Ward-Houston-TX.html.
[227] Michael O. Emerson et al. *Houston Region Grows More Racially/Ethnically Diverse, With Small Declines in Segregation: A Joint Report Analyzing Census Data from 1990, 2000, and 2010* (Houston, TX: Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, 2012), https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/105196.
[228] U.S. Census Bureau, "City of Houston, Population by Race/Ethnicity, 1980–2010"; "Census 2010 Redistricting Data," accessed February 27, 2022.

suburbs as a result of historic divisions and higher poverty rates, both of which correlate strongly with segregation.

This is the context that my interviewees lived through when they first moved to the United States: an underfunded and historically southern city still grappling with the persistent remnants of segregation. As such, many of them moved into the suburbs as soon as they had secured their first well-paying jobs upon graduation. Their relocation mirrored a national trend that cut across racial lines. By 1999, American suburbanization had expanded such that 54% of white people, 51% of Asians, 44% of Latinx people, and 31% of black people lived in suburbs.[229] However, these numbers still reveal unequal racial distributions of suburbanization, and they do not reflect the fact that different racial groups may live in different suburbs.

For instance, Qiming Li, Hanming Wang, and Julie Li all moved to the suburb of Sugar Land once they began working at Schlumberger. One of the reasons Qiming Li gave for this choice was that the suburb had a very high proportion of Asians: even though the Houston metropolitan area as a whole was only 5% Asian in 2000, people of Asian descent comprised nearly 24% of Sugar Land.[230] This trend arose partially because of Sugar Land's proximity to Houston Chinatown and partially because of the area's high-performing schools, both of which Li listed as compelling considerations.[231] Sugar Land's reputation for having a robust Asian community quickly drew in many others, and Asians have thus consistently been Sugar Land's fastest growing racial group since 1980.[232]

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[229] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 207.
[230] U.S. Census Bureau, "State & County QuickFacts: Sugar Land City, Texas, 2000," accessed February 27, 2022. https://www.infoplease.com/us/census/texas/sugar-land.
[231] Qiming Li (physicist) in discussion with the author, December 2021.
[232] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 209.

By contrast, Wenxia Wang, Jenny He, and Xuemin Chen all lived in the much newer suburb of Spring, Texas since Wang and He's jobs at Compaq (later bought out by Hewlett-Packard) were too far from Sugar Land. Spring was similarly known for its excellent schools, but it differed drastically from Sugar Land in that it was over 80% white and only 1% Asian in 2000.[233] Consequently, Chinese immigrants' experiences in Spring varied greatly from their counterparts in Sugar Land. Wang, for example, recalled having only superficial relationships with her neighbors, a few of whom had children that called her by a racial slur on at least one occasion. For her and others, closer communities had to be sought out on weekends in Chinatown or at Chinese language schools for the kids.[234] This experience aligns with what Quraishi found when interviewing South Asian immigrants of Houston, who spoke about only exchanging "front yard pleasantries" with their white neighbors.[235]

Even so, many of my interviewees still depicted Houston very positively. Qiming Li considered his suburb to be very multicultural,[236] while Xuemin Chen called Houston as a whole "friendly to immigrants" and "diverse."[237] Chen further noted the city's Nigerian enclave and large Chinatown, notable among U.S. Chinatowns for its fusion of many different Asian backgrounds, as evidence of Houston's multicultural virtues.[238] His wife, Jenny He, and Wenxia Wang likewise echoed these sentiments. In some ways, their opinions reflected what they expected from an American city. As long as there was room in Houston to carve out some semblance of community and provide their children with a quality education, many Chinese

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[233] U.S. Census Bureau, "State & County QuickFacts: Spring, Texas, 2000," accessed February 27, 2022. http://censusviewer.com/city/TX/Spring.
[234] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[235] Uzma Quraishi, *Redefining the Immigrant South: Indian and Pakistani Immigration to Houston During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 210.
[236] Qiming Li, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 31, 2021.
[237] Xuemin Chen, interview by author, online (Zoom), January 13, 2022.
[238] Ibid.

student immigrants from this era were relatively content with their new homes. After nearly a decade of toiling at school and at work in order to fight for a green card, Chinese student immigrants often didn't have the energy or inclination to fight against systemic segregation or discrimination in the suburbs. Their later circumstances surpassed their initial conditions, and for many immigrants that was enough.

Summary

Educational requirements, language barriers, financial hardships, employer exploitation, and countless visa roadblocks — these were just some of the most significant challenges that faced Chinese student immigrants in the U.S. during the eighties and nineties. People like my interviewees represent the specific segment of Chinese people who managed against all odds to survive and thrive in these conditions. Policies from both China and the U.S. directly shaped the social class structure of those immigrating; such laws were also at the root of student migrants' struggles and experiences, which then necessitated an emphasis on characteristics such as hard work, self-reliance, and resilience. Thus, the model minority myth can be said to arise not out of superior cultural values but out of necessity and selection bias.

At the same time, Chinese student immigrants interacted with other Americans and the city of Houston in unique ways as a result of their experiences. In their mission to realize the full fruits of their education, they tolerated and rationalized much of the discrimination they endured because it was considered the best alternative to their previous lives. Their transition from a primarily black and Latinx downtown area to the wealthier and predominantly white suburbs also played a small contributing role in Houston's continued segregation. Even in the suburbs, however, many Chinese immigrants dealt with racism and a dearth of neighborhood bonding opportunities. Still, they considered themselves lucky and instead focused on building their own

communities or providing their children with the best education possible. In some ways, they bought into the rhetoric of the American Dream — but not for themselves. In Hanming Wang's words, "We are the first generation, so we don't have much choice. But the second generation has much more freedom."[239] In spite of their overall satisfaction, Chinese student immigrants from the eighties and nineties have remained aware of the constraints that bound them, and they maintain the hope that their labor has laid the groundwork for their children to live in a more just and prosperous society.

[239] Hanming Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), December 7, 2021.

Conclusion

When my parents, Wenxia and Shaoyu Wang, first entered the United States in 1993, they believed themselves to be mere followers of a novel trend among Chinese students. They and the rest of my interviewees anticipated little more than the abstract promise of a better life that they could pass on to their children if only they worked hard, lived frugally, and quietly waited their turn. This thesis has attempted to provide a more detailed historical explanation for their arrival as well as a much-needed account of the trials endured by Chinese student immigrants across the country.

The sharp increase in Chinese students coming to the U.S. certainly represented far more than a fad spread by word of mouth, which is often how individual immigrants view their journeys. Changes in China such as the reinstatement of college entrance examinations and the revival of STEM-centered exchange scholar programs made these student migrations possible in the first place. CCP leaders like Deng Xiaoping even encouraged it in the aftermath of an economically devastating Cultural Revolution, vocally lauding students in science and technology as the keys to modernization. The United States government then further incentivized Chinese students over other immigrants through such measures as the Immigration Act of 1990 and the H-1B visa for skilled workers in particular. Two years later, the Chinese Student Protection Act would also streamline the path to permanent residence for Chinese nationals not only for humanitarian reasons but more critically for economic purposes. Together, all of these policy decisions produced a ballooning population of prospective Chinese immigrants who were primarily well-educated, high-achieving, and STEM-focused.

This group profile alone would have been enough to reinforce the model minority myth that has affected Asian Americans for decades. The myriad challenges experienced by Chinese

students added another dimension to the stereotype though. In order to eventually earn their place as Americans, my interviewees first needed to make their way out of China, which was an exceedingly selective process in its own right. From there, they navigated a complex U.S. visa system, all the way from F-1 or J-1 to OPT to H-1B to green card. Throughout their time in America, they juggled financial woes that arose from labor restrictions, barriers to the English language, workplace exploitation of their tenuous legal status, culture shocks, and the pure luck of the visa lottery, to name just a few of their trials. Only after Chinese students survived all of this could they receive the opportunity to naturalize.

Those who could not or would not embrace the model minority characteristics of diligence and resilience simply did not make it in America. For instance, Liu Lisong notes in his research that return migration grew increasingly popular by the late 1990s and early 2000s for those who did not care for the "low[er] social status" they occupied in the United States.[240] Many Chinese students also had plenty of family members and friends who did not possess the requisite grades to study in America, or they knew coworkers who were unlucky in the green card lottery.[241] In this way, the U.S. once again reduced the populace of Chinese student immigrants down to those future citizens who would best serve the national interest. Given the disproportionate representation of Chinese people among Asian-Americans (more than 20% in 2000 and continuously climbing), perceptions of Chinese students understandably crept into the imagined idea of Asians in general as the model minority.[242] These public expectations, seen not just in Houston but throughout the United States, have proceeded to generate a cycle whereby

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[240] Lisong Liu, *Chinese Student Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 30.
[241] Wenxia Wang, interview by author, online (Zoom), April 10, 2021.
[242] U.S. Census Bureau, "Census 2000: Chinese Largest Asian Group in the United States," accessed March 18, 2022, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/census_2000/cb02-cn59.html.

each successive generation of Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants similarly finds themselves pigeon-holed into the narrow stereotype of quiet perfection.

Considering the model minority myth under a framework of selection bias and survivalism does much to combat the notion that cultural differences can account for the effects of systemic racism. The fact that Chinese-Americans needed traits such as hard work and academic success in order to avoid deportation does not imply that Chinese people as a whole share cultural values superior to other minorities in the United States. We should not discount the monumental achievement of Chinese-American students who successfully seized their American Dreams, but we cannot use their stories to indict other minority groups that were subjected to a wholly different set of parameters by the United States government. Therein lies the insidious danger of the model minority myth.

Moreover, the assimilationist bend of the model minority myth obscures the continued discrimination that Chinese students and Chinese-Americans face no matter how strictly they conform to the expected "success frame."[243] In fact, Chinese international students in the United States today have encountered increasingly prohibitive visa restrictions as a result of frosty diplomatic relations between the U.S. and China, which have steadily worsened over the course of both a trade war under President Trump and a global pandemic.

In 2018, for instance, the Trump administration implemented a new policy reducing the duration of visas from five years to one year for all Chinese graduate students intending to study aviation, robotics, or advanced manufacturing.[244] In 2020, former President Trump similarly

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[243] Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015), 18.
[244] Jeffery Mervis, "More Restrictive U.S. Policy on Chinese Graduate Student Visas Raises Alarm," *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, June 11, 2018, https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2018/06/more-restrictive-us-policy-chinese-graduate-student-visas-raises-alarm.

imposed regulations that eliminated the H1-B lottery process, significantly increased salary requirements for H1-B visas, and restricted H1-B applicants to "jobs in the same field as their college degrees."[245] Given the clear China-to-U.S. pipeline that exists in STEM fields, the impacts of these changes have been predictably far-reaching and have even drawn concerns from China's foreign ministry spokesperson, who called such restrictions "outright political persecution and racial discrimination."[246]

As of 2020, "Chinese students make up the largest group of foreign students at American colleges and universities, with about 370,000 enrolled."[247] A substantial proportion of these students are here in pursuit of master's degrees and PhDs, and for those pursuing such advanced degrees in STEM especially, "the annual intention-to-stay rates never dropped below 80 percent" from 2000 to 2017.[248] However, federal policy whims under different presidential administrations now threaten to curtail the research aspirations and immigration prospects of Chinese students in America. As Professor Ella Atkins at the University of Michigan recalled to the New York Times, at least one of her colleagues from another university worried that his application for a federal research grant could be denied because he was a Chinese citizen.[249] Another PhD student in the field of computer science, Le Fang, likewise expressed frustration about how the new U.S. guidelines could endanger many of his friends' attempts at renewing their visas for no particularly valid reason. "I quite understand the security concern of the

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[245] Evan Burke, "Trump-Era Policies Toward Chinese STEM Talent: A Need for Better Balance," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 25, 2021, https://www.carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/25/trump-era-policies-toward-chinese-stem-talent-need-for-better-balance-pub-84137.
[246] Associated Press, "China Denounces US Visa Revocations as Racial Discrimination," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/china-denounces-us-visa-revocations-as-racial-discrimination/2020/09/10/1ffd0f64-f34e-11ea-8025-5d3489768ac8_story.html.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Evan Burke, "Trump-Era Policies Toward Chinese STEM Talent: A Need for Better Balance," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 25, 2021, https://www.carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/25/trump-era-policies-toward-chinese-stem-talent-need-for-better-balance-pub-84137.
[249] Alexandra Yoon-Hendricks, "Visa Restrictions for Chinese Students Alarm Academia," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/25/us/politics/visa-restrictions-chinese-students.html.

possible restriction… [but] most of us never talk about politics and never work with mainland people," he remarked.[250]

From the beginning of U.S. history up to the present day, Chinese students and Asian-Americans in general have found themselves unfairly targeted by both the U.S. government and the general public in times of tumult. These stories merely highlight yet another aspect of the model minority myth: it not only represents an inaccurate portrayal but also fails to provide the Asian-American community with a genuine sense of belonging. The depiction of Asian-Americans as a model minority remains conditioned upon the political needs of the majority, and no advanced degrees or any amount of hard work will ever grant complete acceptance to immigrants like my parents. For that, we can only look within our own communities and perhaps start by understanding our untold histories.

[250] Ibid.

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