

# **BECOMING AN AMERICAN: THE CHINESE**

**THE FOURTH IN A SERIES OF EXAMINATIONS  
OF ASSIMILATION AND LANGUAGE  
LEARNING PATTERNS AMONG IMMIGRANTS**

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## History

With a population of over 1.3 billion people and a size of roughly 3.7 million square miles, China is the most populous country in the world and the fourth largest in area. China borders 14 countries including Russia and Mongolia to the north, Kazakhstan to the west, North Korea to the East, and India and Vietnam to the southeast and southwest respectively. The most common language by far is Mandarin Chinese, which is the official language and spoken by about 70 percent of the population. Behind that are related dialects such as Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Minbei, Minnan, Xiang, Gan, and Hakka. Besides these variations of Chinese, minority languages that are spoken include Thai, Mongolian, Korean and Tibetan.

From antiquity until the birth of modern China in 1912, Chinese history is characterized by dynastic rule. The first dynasty is widely considered to be the Xia Dynasty back in the Bronze Age, which was followed by the Shang from the 18th to 12th century B.C. It ended with a despotic rule that was overthrown by the Zhou tribe, which ruled under a decentralized system reminiscent of feudalism. The Zhou Dynasty's decline began when the Zhou ruler was killed by barbarians in 771 B.C., at which point the country became progressively more fragmented with the independent states constantly warring with each other.

This ended with the founding of the first unified Chinese state by the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C., which standardized the Chinese language and established the position of Emperor. Its strict rule would not last long though; in 206 B.C. it was overthrown by the Han Dynasty, which expanded the empire by invading Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia and Central Asia. After the Han finally collapsed in 220 A.D., China would remain fractured for over three centuries, a violent period distinguished by the era of the Three Kingdoms of Shu, Wei, and Wu. China would be reunited in 580 A.D. under the Sui Dynasty, but it was the Tang and Song Dynasties after it that oversaw the nation's rise to prosperity. Culture and trade flourished, breakthroughs were made in the religious philosophy of Confucianism, and China's territory expanded beyond that of the Han Dynasty.

This era ended when the Mongols, led by Kublai Kahn, invaded in 1271. They emerged victorious in 1279 and set up the Yuan Dynasty as a part of the greater Mongol Empire. The conflict was devastating, reducing China's population of 120 million to approximately half that by the turn of the century. During its relatively short rule the Yuan Dynasty centralized and reformed the political system, cut taxes and took serious measures to help the poor, implemented paper money as the primary currency, and cultivated agriculture and the silk trade. However ethnic discrimination also existed; most important political positions were held by Mongols. This fostered resentment that eventually led to open rebellion when flooding devastated China's agricultural economy. The Mongols were overthrown in 1368 by peasant leader Zhu Yuanzhang, who founded the Ming Dynasty.

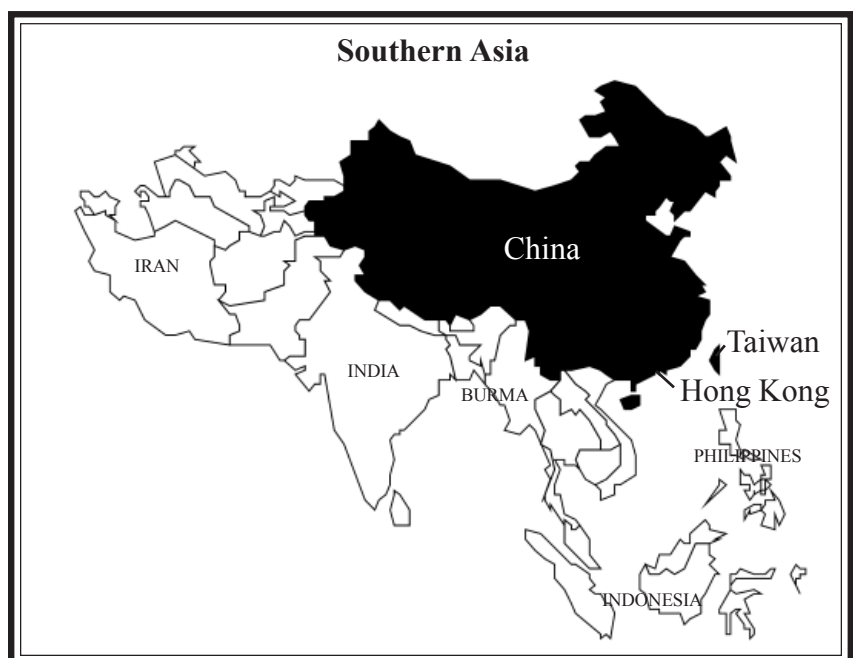
The Ming Dynasty ruled for nearly three centuries and rebuilt Chinese power. It was during this time that China's capital was relocated to Beijing. In the past military service had been considered an inferior profession, but under the Ming Dynasty being a soldier was a prestigious position. The Great Wall of China, one of the world's great wonders, was built for protection against another invasion. Though merchants were not respected, some trade contact was made with Europe and Africa, as well as Japan through the Portuguese. In 1618 the Manchurian Tribes, collectively known as the Manchu, began a war in northern China that would eventually replace the Ming Dynasty with the Qing Dynasty in 1644. This would be China's last ruling dynasty. Its stability was severely undermined by a series of bloody civil wars in the 19th century and the secession of Korea and Taiwan after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894. The Qing line

died out with the death of Emperor Guangxu under house arrest in 1908 and the abdication of Empress Dowager Longyu in 1912. Dynastic rule in China was replaced by the Republic of China.

The provisional President and leader of the Nationalist Party (the Kuomintang, or KMT), Sun Yat-Sen, envisioned the development of China into a democratic nation state. However, stability did not return quickly. In 1915 rule shifted to former general Yuan Shikai, who declared himself Emperor only to revert the country to a Republic within a year before he died in 1916. The new Government was weak and looked on as power was divided amongst individual warlords. China was finally reunified by the KMT in the late 1920's, led by Chiang Kai-shek. However there was internal conflict between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with the KMT seeking to suppress the CCP. Furthermore, Japanese aggression posed serious problems in the 1930's when Japan seized Manchuria and began making inroads into northern and coastal China. At first Chiang Kai-shek was more concerned with stamping out the Chinese Communist Party, but this changed when Manchurian warlord Zhang Xueliang took it on himself to kidnap Chiang and pressure him to ally with the CCP against the Japanese. The result was the second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, a significant part of World War II.

Though Japan was ultimately defeated, the tensions between the KMT and CCP led to a resumption of civil war. In 1949, the CCP emerged victorious. Their leader Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China (PRC) and ruled mainland China via dictatorship, whereas the Nationalists and Chiang Kai-shek were forced to retreat to Taiwan. After this, the early years of PRC rule were not successful. In an attempt to create a self-sufficient, industrialized and socialist communal state, Mao Zedong executed an economic program called the Great Leap Forward from 1958-1961. While this modernized China's economy and created a productive steel industry, it did not lead to prosperity and botched agricultural innovations led to widespread famine, leading to millions of deaths. The Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, meanwhile, saw fresh attempts to crush dissent and suppress capitalist beliefs while the economy got even worse.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao in 1976, things began to drastically improve in China. Much needed reforms greatly relaxed government control compared to before, and China began transitioning from a planned economy to an economy that has become progressively more capitalistic and modernized. However, political freedom is still restricted in China. The Communist Party is officially the only legitimate political party in China, democratic rights such as free speech are suppressed, and the brutal suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 drew worldwide condemnation. Paradoxically, the China of today is a state that remains politically repressive while becoming more and more economically free and prosperous.



## **Immigration History**

The history of Chinese immigration to the United States is almost as long as the nation's history, though it is pockmarked with many of the same lowlights faced by other immigrant groups. When examined more thoroughly, Chinese immigration can be segmented into three major waves – from the early 19th century to the early 20th century, from 1949 to 1980 and post-1980. Framed by existing law, these three periods each brought different types of immigrants in search of different goals in the United States.

Though Chinese natives began settling on the west coast as early as 1820, the first large wave of immigration from China began with the California gold rush in the late-1840s. Though the earliest immigrants were skilled laborers, merchants and fisherman, they were rapidly eclipsed in number by miners looking to work the land in search of precious metals. Between 1851-1860 there were more than 40,000 Chinese immigrants living in the United States, hundreds of times more than the number of just a decade earlier.

For the next several decades, Chinese immigration to the United States continued to boom. More than 64,000 Chinese settled in the United States between 1861 and 1870, and the number more than doubled to 123,000 in the following decade. Most of these immigrants settled in the west, where they worked in low-paying jobs in the mines, agriculture, or building infrastructure, such as the transcontinental railroad.

Like many other newcomers to the United States, the Chinese tended to cluster together, living in areas dubbed “Chinatowns.” As such, few learned English or adopted American customs. Suspicions about Chinese immigrants, and a lack of communication between the Chinese community and the locals, led to a series of draconian laws that curtailed Chinese immigration.

In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years and prohibited Chinese immigrants already in the United States from obtaining citizenship. The act was renewed in 1892 and extended indefinitely in 1902. Individuals of Chinese descent already in the United States were hit with special taxes and restrictive laws. By 1924, all immigrants from China – as well as the rest of Asia - were banned from entering the United States or owning land.

Given the difficulties faced by individuals of Chinese origin in the United States, their numbers began to decline. Whereas people of Chinese origin had made up more than 1-in-500 Americans at the time of the 1880 Census, this number had declined to less than 1-in-1000 by 1940. The restriction on Chinese immigration was lifted in 1943 by the Magnuson Act. The measure ended the prohibition on Chinese naturalization and repealed the ban on Chinese immigration, although it limited Chinese visas to only 105 per year.

The second wave of immigrants from China differed greatly from the first wave. This wave, which began after the conclusion of World War II, consisted mostly of college students and educated professionals from Taiwan. The Immigration Act of 1965 further enhanced immigration and naturalization by removing the existing quotas. However, due to the frosty relations between the two nations, few immigrants came from mainland China to the United States until the People's Republic of China removed emigration restrictions in 1977. It took until 1970 for the percentage of Americans of Chinese origin to reach the same level it had been at in 1880 (0.21 percent).

The third wave of Chinese immigration kicked off in the 1980s and continues to the present day. The immigrants who have arrived most recently represent a combination of those in the previous waves – low-

skilled individuals looking to earn money to send back to China along with a significant number of college students and highly-skilled professionals. These distinct groups have both re-energized the ethnic enclaves of Chinatowns and enhanced assimilation and English acquisition rates among Chinese immigrants.

This most recent wave has been most notable for its size. Between 1970 and 1980, there were more than 237,000 immigrants from China and Hong Kong. Between 1980 and 1990, this figure nearly doubled. In the ensuing decade, it surpassed 500,000. By 2004, those of Chinese origin represented more than 1 percent of all Americans, and stand as the largest group of Asian Americans.

**U.S. residents of Chinese origin,  
1840-2000**

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Population</u> | <u>Pct.</u> |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 1850        | 4,018             | 0.02%       |
| 1860        | 34,933            | 0.11%       |
| 1870        | 64,199            | 0.17%       |
| 1880        | 105,465           | 0.21%       |
| 1890        | 107,488           | 0.17%       |
| 1900        | 118,746           | 0.16%       |
| 1910        | 94,414            | 0.10%       |
| 1920        | 85,202            | 0.08%       |
| 1930        | 102,159           | 0.08%       |
| 1940        | 106,334           | 0.08%       |
| 1950        | 150,005           | 0.10%       |
| 1960        | 237,292           | 0.13%       |
| 1970        | 436,062           | 0.21%       |
| 1980        | 812,178           | 0.36%       |
| 1990        | 1,645,472         | 0.66%       |
| 2000        | 2,432,585         | 0.86%       |

*Source: Census 1840-2000*

***Hong Kong and Taiwan***

The world's fourth largest country is made up of 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities, and two special administrative regions. Two of the most well known entities to most Americans are Taiwan, considered a province, and Hong Kong, considered a special administrative region.

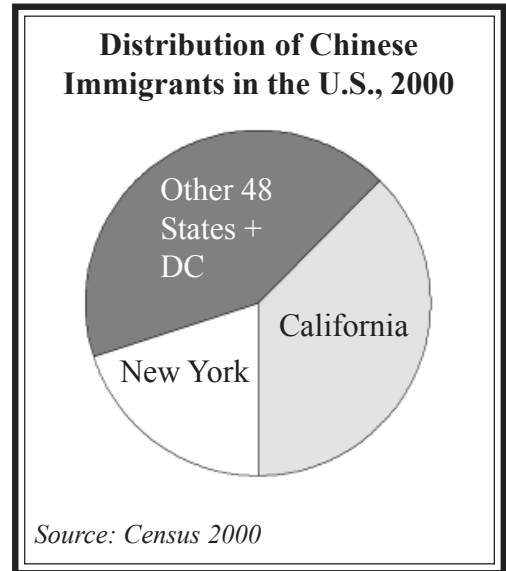
An island off the coast of Mainland China, Taiwan is home to 23 million people in an area roughly the size of Maryland. Lost to Japan in the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, it reverted to Chinese rule after World War II. When the Chinese Communist Party rose to power in 1949, two million Chinese nationalists moved to Taiwan and established a new government, the Republic of China, using China's 1946 constitution. Since that time, Taiwan has grown in economic power and is considered one of the "economic tigers" of East Asia.

One of the most densely populated places on earth today, Hong Kong was originally ceded by China to the British at the end of the First Opium War in 1842. From there, it went on to become a major trading port and colony of the British Empire. Though occupied by Japan during World War II, it reverted to British control at the war's conclusion, when it became a haven for Chinese looking to leave the mainland. The economy quickly rebounded, first in the manufacturing and textile industries. More recently, the island became a major financial center for Asia and the world. Under the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 Hong Kong's sovereignty shifted to China in 1997, under the conditions that it would be managed as a special administrative region while retaining its laws and most of its autonomy for fifty years.

## Settlement Patterns

Chinese immigration has long centered around two locations – California and New York. Though there has been some diffusion of the population in recent years, most notably to the southern states, the nation’s two most populous states continue to be home to the lion’s share of Chinese immigrants and those of Chinese descent.

According to the 2000 Census, there were 1.5 million people in the United States who were born in China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan). More than one-third, or 570,000 lived in California, where the first and most prominent Chinatown still thrives in San Francisco. Other locations in California that remain popular for China-born Americans include Alameda County directly across San Francisco Bay, Santa Clara County and Los Angeles County.



Another 300,000 Chinese immigrants were living in New York at the time of the 2000 Census. Chinese immigrants established a presence in New York City as early as 1880 and the city now boasts the largest population of ethnic Chinese of any city outside of Asia. In addition to the original and well known Chinatown in Manhattan, other hotbeds of Chinese life and commerce have sprung up in Queens and Brooklyn.

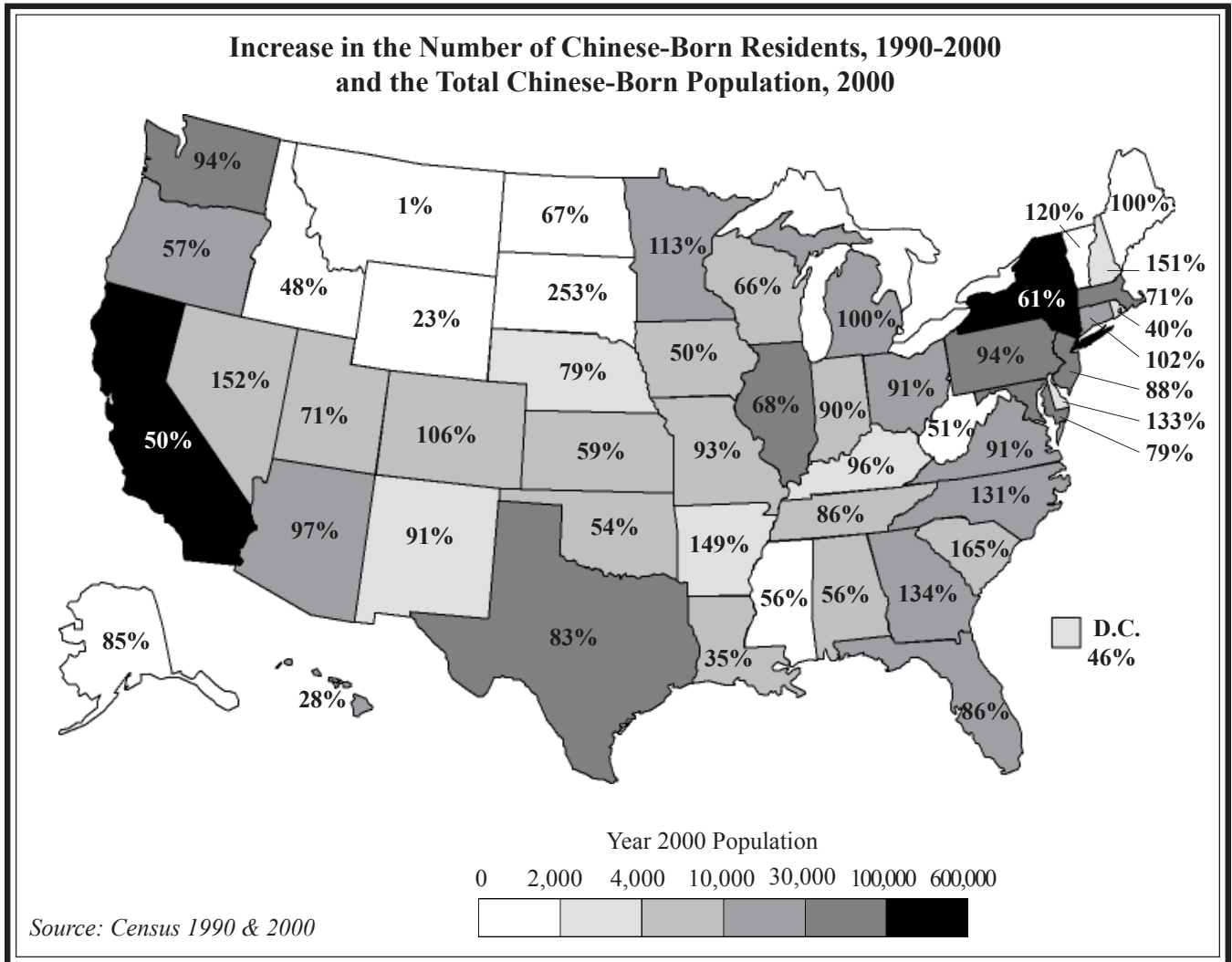
Texas is home to the third largest number of Chinese immigrants, although the Chinese population of 69,654 is less than one-fourth that of New York and less than one-seventh that of California. New Jersey is the fourth most common home, followed by Massachusetts, Illinois, Washington, Maryland and Pennsylvania. In all, the top 10 states for Chinese immigrants are home to 81.8 percent of the China-born population in the United States, as shown in the table below.

**States with the Greatest Number of Chinese-born Residents, 2000**

| State                   | Chinese-born     | Pct.          |
|-------------------------|------------------|---------------|
| California              | 570,487          | 37.57%        |
| New York                | 301,735          | 19.87%        |
| Texas                   | 69,654           | 4.59%         |
| New Jersey              | 66,424           | 4.37%         |
| Massachusetts           | 54,450           | 3.59%         |
| Illinois                | 50,705           | 3.34%         |
| Washington              | 35,146           | 2.31%         |
| Maryland                | 33,509           | 2.21%         |
| Pennsylvania            | 31,735           | 2.09%         |
| Florida                 | 28,271           | 1.86%         |
| <i>Total, 10 states</i> | <i>1,242,116</i> | <i>81.79%</i> |
| Remaining states        | 276,536          | 18.21%        |

*Source: Census 2000*

However, the 81.8 percent of the population represented by 10 states is a decrease from the 1990 figure. Ten years earlier, almost 84 percent of the population lived in the top 10 states. Between 1990 and 2000, the Chinese-born population increased in every state in the union, including 14 states where the population doubled. Several of the large increases were concentrated in the southeastern United States, where the Chinese immigrant population rose by 165 percent in South Carolina, 134 percent in Georgia and 131 percent in North Carolina. However, the southeast was hardly alone, as the Chinese-born population doubled in places as different as Nevada and New Hampshire, Minnesota and Maine, Connecticut and Colorado. The 10 year increases, along with the current population figures, are noted on the map below.



Statistics on first generation Chinese-Americans only offer a slice of the size of the Chinese community in the United States. According to the 2008 American Community Survey, the United States is home to more than 3.0 million Americans of Chinese ancestry. More than 1.15 million Americans of Chinese descent live in California, with another 550,000 in New York. The population of nine additional states – Texas, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois, Washington, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Hawaii and Virginia, each include more than 50,000 individuals of Chinese ancestry.

## Language Use

Spoken at home by more than 2.0 million Americans at the time of the 2000 Census, Chinese is the third most common language in United States households, trailing only English and Spanish. It is the third most common language spoken in California, New York, and Washington and ranks among the top 10 languages spoken in all but three states (where it ranks 11th) and more than 800 counties.

California has maintained its spot as the state with the highest number of Chinese speakers, and barring a seismic shift in the population, will continue to hold that position for generations to come. Of the 630,806 American residents speaking Chinese at home in 1980, more than 250,000, or 40 percent, lived in California. Approximately 125,000, or 20 percent, lived in New York. The remaining 48 states and the District of Columbia were home to fewer than 250,000 Chinese speakers combined, or less than the single state of California.

Between 1980 and 2000, the number of Chinese speakers more than tripled, but the distribution remained relatively the same. Of the 2.0 million Chinese speakers recorded in 2000, more than 40 percent lived in California and more than 17 percent lived in New York. With the Chinese-speaking populations of New York and Texas excluded, California again had more Chinese speakers than the remaining 47 states and the District of Columbia combined. Eleven of the twelve states with the largest Chinese-speaking populations were identical in 1980 and 2000, the sole exception being the replacement of Ohio with Virginia.

### States with the Greatest Number of Residents Speaking Chinese at Home, 2000, 1990 and 1980, with Ranks

|               | <u>2000</u> | <u>Rk</u> | <u>1990</u> | <u>Rk</u> | <u>1980</u> | <u>Rk</u> |
|---------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|
| California    | 815,386     | 1         | 575,447     | 1         | 257,687     | 1         |
| New York      | 374,627     | 2         | 247,334     | 2         | 125,904     | 2         |
| Texas         | 91,500      | 3         | 52,220      | 3         | 21,796      | 4         |
| New Jersey    | 84,345      | 4         | 47,334      | 4         | 18,110      | 7         |
| Massachusetts | 71,412      | 5         | 43,248      | 5         | 21,133      | 5         |
| Illinois      | 65,251      | 6         | 41,807      | 6         | 23,544      | 3         |
| Washington    | 48,459      | 7         | 26,378      | 7         | 14,111      | 8         |
| Pennsylvania  | 42,790      | 8         | 24,857      | 9         | 11,708      | 10        |
| Maryland      | 41,883      | 9         | 24,508      | 10        | 11,747      | 9         |
| Florida       | 35,071      | 10        | 20,839      | 11        | 8,756       | 12        |
| Virginia      | 29,837      | 11        | 18,037      | 12        | 7,865       | 14        |
| Hawaii        | 29,363      | 12        | 26,366      | 8         | 20,066      | 6         |
| Michigan      | 26,955      | 13        | 15,378      | 14        | 8,616       | 13        |
| Ohio          | 25,704      | 14        | 15,475      | 13        | 8,795       | 11        |

*Source: Census 1980, 1990 & 2000*

Every state and the District of Columbia experienced an increase in the Chinese speaking population between 1980 and 2000 (as well as between 1990 and 2000), with all but five states doubling their number of Chinese speakers. Fourteen states saw their Chinese-speaking populations rise by more than 300 percent, with three southeastern states – North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia – experiencing increases of 421 percent, 454 percent and 539 percent, respectively.



Though recent immigration and settlement patterns have scattered foreign language speakers and reduced their concentrations in the top states, the geographic concentration of Chinese speakers is more extreme than that of any other of the most widely spoken languages in the United States. Nearly 60 percent of Chinese speakers live in just two states – California and New York – making it more likely that they can live, work, shop and interact without having to use English. Provision of government materials such as voting forms and driver’s license exams in Chinese makes it even less likely that immigrants will make the effort to learn English, much like an English speaker living in China would be less likely to learn Chinese if s/he could do everything in English.

It is interesting to note that Arabic speakers and Japanese speakers, who have the lowest geographic concentrations in the two top states, also have the lowest levels of limited English proficiency among America’s most widely spoken language groups.

**Percentage of the Population Speaking a Given Language at Home that Live in the Two States with the Highest Population, 1990-2000**

| <b>Language</b> | <b>1990</b> | <b>2000</b> |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Chinese         | 62.4        | 58.9        |
| Tagalog         | 61.7        | 56.6        |
| Vietnamese      | 57.4        | 52.5        |
| Russian         | 51.0        | 47.7        |
| Spanish         | 51.4        | 47.3        |
| Korean          | 47.3        | 44.8        |
| Japanese        | 50.8        | 44.1        |
| Arabic          | 33.2        | 29.0        |

*Source: Census 1990 & 2000*

The geographic concentration of Chinese speakers is even more significant at the county level than it is at the state level. More than 80 percent of the 375,000 Chinese speakers in New York live in just three counties (Queens, Kings, New York). More than 70 percent of California’s 815,000 Chinese speakers live in just four counties (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Santa Clara, Alameda). In fact, there are more speakers of Chinese in each of four counties (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Queens, Kings) than there are in each of the 48 states and the District of Columbia. These same seven counties are home to more than 43 percent of all the Chinese speakers in the United States.

***Mandarin, Cantonese, and More: The Dialects of Chinese***

Though there are many forms of Chinese, the two most well known are Mandarin, which is the official language of China, and Yue (Cantonese) .

In written form, Chinese dialects have much in common and it is possible for speakers of any dialect to understand another’s writing. With some exceptions, Mandarin and Cantonese use the same characters to describe the same things. The real barrier between them lies with the spoken word. Since most Chinese learn Mandarin, most Cantonese speakers can understand it, but many Mandarin speakers are confused by Cantonese. This is because they are both tonal languages, meaning that the same sound may mean different things depending on the tone in which it is said. Mandarin Chinese has only four tones whereas Cantonese has at least six, and both languages also possess different vowels and consonants.

Mandarin Chinese is the most common dialect for mainland China and Taiwan, and its use has been growing in Hong Kong as well. With more than 850 million speakers, it is the most widely spoken language in the world. Cantonese is mostly spoken in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces as well as Hong Kong, where it is currently dominant. It is the exportation of Hong Kong’s culture and trade which has solidified Cantonese’s place as the dominant secondary dialect. Cantonese is spoken by more than 70 million people worldwide.

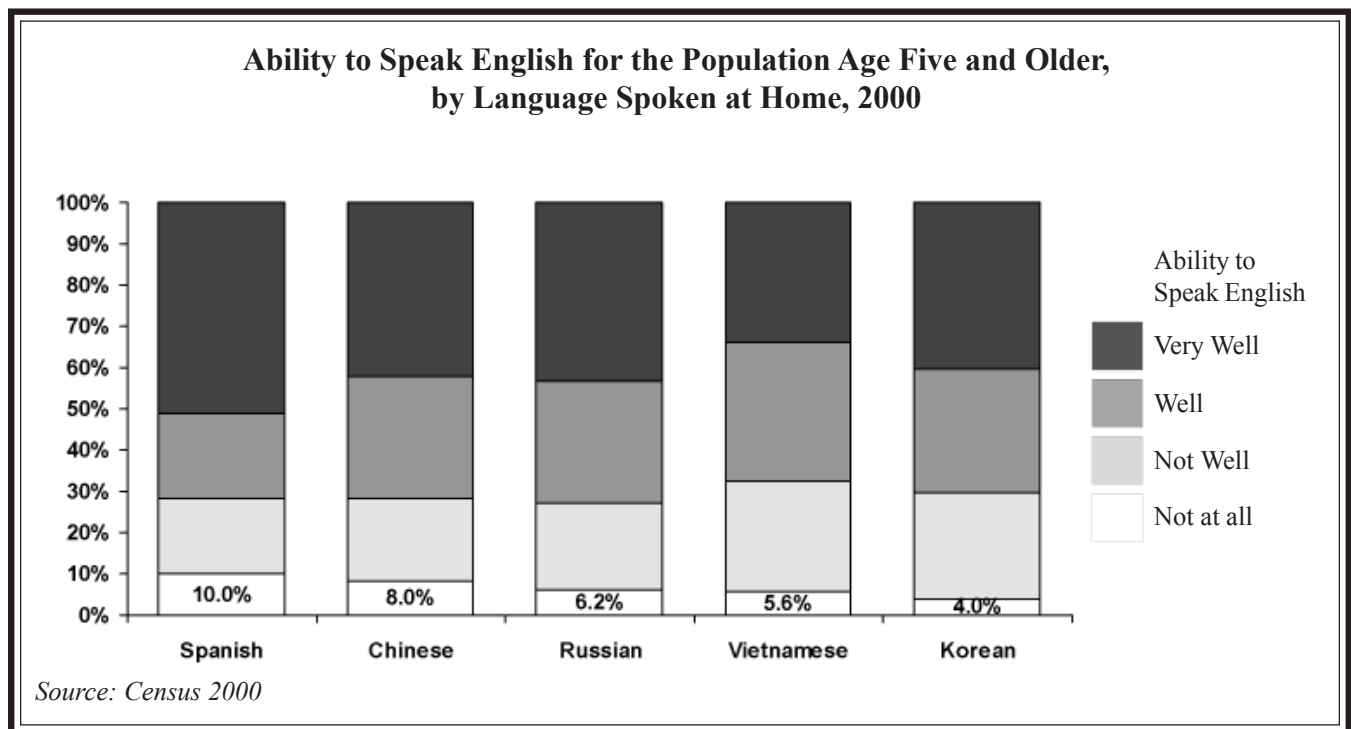
In this report, the number of Chinese speakers refers to the total speakers of all the dialects of Chinese, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Wu (Shangainese), Xiang (Hunanese), Hakka, and others.

## English Acquisition

The recent immigration history of Chinese natives to the United States leads to a very wide spectrum of education history and English acquisition. On one end, we find many highly educated, highly skilled Chinese immigrants who can easily switch from their native language to English. On the other end, there are hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants who left rural areas of China with little education and almost no English fluency. For many of these lesser skilled immigrants, their careers and their existence remain almost entirely inside Chinese enclaves, which lessens their need to acquire English and severely limits their opportunities in the United States.

Overall, the English proficiency levels of Chinese immigrants match up fairly well with those of other languages spoken by a large number of immigrants to the United States. Census 2000 found that 71.8 percent of Chinese immigrants spoke English “very well” or “well.” This figure was slightly higher than that of Vietnamese (67.6 percent) and Koreans (70.4 percent), but on par with those of Spanish speakers (71.7 percent) and Russian speakers (72.8 percent). Of the 2.02 million Americans who speak Chinese at home, it is safe to assume that 1.4 million of them can interact with other Americans in the common language of English.

Unfortunately, the same examination of English speaking ability shows a sobering statistic – more than eight percent of those who speak Chinese at home speak no English at all. Of the five languages compared, Chinese speakers were the second most likely to speak no English, and given the large size of the Chinese speaking population, this translates to more than 160,000 individuals who are unable to work, shop or survive outside of their native community.



Where the English proficiency statistics are most revealing is within the state of New York. As mentioned earlier, New York City boasts the largest population of ethnic Chinese of any city outside of Asia. While this density has led to flourishing Chinese communities, it has clearly stunted the English acquisition of those who choose to settle in these areas.

Nationwide, 71.8 percent of those who spoke Chinese at home spoke English “very well” or “well,” with 20.2 percent speaking English “not well” and an additional 8.0 percent speaking English “not at all.” In New York, the corresponding figures were 59.8, 25.3 and 14.9. In fact, despite having less than half the Chinese speakers of California, the Empire State had nearly an equal number of Chinese speakers who spoke no English.

With 1-in-7 Chinese speakers in New York speaking English “not at all,” this greatly skews the national figures. If New York were to be excluded, English proficiency rates of Chinese speakers in the United States would be greatly improved.

| <b>Geography</b>       | <b>“Very well” or “well”</b> | <b>Pct.</b> | <b>“Not well”</b> | <b>Pct.</b> | <b>“Not at all”</b> | <b>Pct.</b> |
|------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| <i>United States</i>   | 1,451,020                    | 71.8        | 405,595           | 20.2        | 162,525             | 8.0         |
| New York               | 223,860                      | 59.8        | 94,810            | 25.3        | 55,960              | 14.9        |
| Other 49 States + D.C. | 1,227,160                    | 74.5        | 310,785           | 18.9        | 106,565             | 6.5         |

*Source: Census 2000*

The idea that states with larger statewide populations of Chinese speakers will have lower English acquisition rates does not hold up. California, with the largest Chinese speaking contingent, albeit one spread across multiple areas of the state, features English acquisition rates roughly equivalent to that of the nation as a whole.

Texas, home to the third-largest population of Chinese speakers, has remarkable English proficiency rates, with more than 4-in-5 Chinese speakers rating their English ability as “very well” or “well” and fewer than 1-in-25 saying that they speak no English at all. New Jersey, both the home of the fourth-largest Chinese speaking population and a neighbor to New York, had English proficiency rates among Chinese speakers that were markedly different than its northern neighbor.

| <b>Geography</b>        | <b>“Very well” or “well”</b> | <b>Pct.</b> | <b>“Not well”</b> | <b>Pct.</b> | <b>“Not at all”</b> | <b>Pct.</b> |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| U.S.A.                  | 1,451,020                    | 71.8        | 405,595           | 20.2        | 162,525             | 8.0         |
| California              | 572,720                      | 70.2        | 178,440           | 21.9        | 64,225              | 7.9         |
| New York                | 223,860                      | 59.8        | 94,810            | 25.3        | 55,960              | 14.9        |
| Texas                   | 75,290                       | 82.3        | 12,830            | 14.0        | 3,375               | 3.7         |
| New Jersey              | 69,415                       | 82.3        | 11,595            | 13.8        | 3,335               | 4.0         |
| Massachusetts           | 52,355                       | 73.3        | 13,105            | 18.4        | 5,950               | 8.3         |
| Illinois                | 49,790                       | 76.3        | 10,915            | 16.7        | 4,550               | 7.0         |
| <i>Remaining States</i> | 407,590                      | 78.9        | 83,900            | 16.2        | 25,130              | 4.9         |

*Source: Census 2000*

## Conclusion

The assimilation and English fluency of Americans of Chinese descent will play an important role in our society and economy for generations to come. With a population of more than 3.0 million and a long history of immigration that has grown significantly in recent years, the Chinese are a vital part of America's diverse fabric, one whose stitches must be aligned with those of other ethnicities.

As with many major immigrant groups, the Chinese population is not homogenous. Highly educated professionals work alongside Americans of all walks of life, different only by their ability to switch from English to their native Mandarin or Cantonese. These immigrants and their descendants are well on their way to adding more success stories to the history of Chinese immigration to the United States.

The picture is not as rosy for those included in the other extreme. This group of immigrants, who mostly hail from rural areas, generally arrive with less education, fewer financial means and an extremely limited grasp of the English language. Once in the United States, they tend to settle in areas with high concentrations of individuals of Chinese descent, often referred to as "Chinatowns."

America's Chinatowns represent both positive and negative forces on the nation's landscape. On one hand, they provide comfort, jobs and economic development for their residents, draw in tourists and are a source of community pride. On the other, they clearly hinder English acquisition, leaving residents unable to partake in the larger, more diverse American society. In many cases, these Chinatowns are so vast that Chinese speakers have no reason to venture outside this zone, and therefore have few interactions with English speakers. This is the epitome of an "English-optional" existence.

While translation help will definitely be necessary in these areas, which often include many elderly Chinese, the worst thing a government agency can do is to offer unfettered and perpetual interpretation services in Chinese, thereby reducing the need to learn English to zero. Should the cache of translated materials continue to grow as it has, the government will be shooting itself in the foot, carrying on a sad tradition of generations failing to learn English.

It is perhaps best to consider pairing government services, such as unemployment, welfare, and Social Security with opportunities to learn English, with the effort directed toward places with a high concentration of Chinese speakers. Coordinating these experiences would guarantee that, to the extent that Chinese immigrants interact with the government, they are being introduced to English language learning opportunities. These interactions are best accomplished by individuals of Chinese descent themselves, who would be in an ideal role to serve as both temporary translators and advocates for improving English long-term.

One potential resource that cannot be overlooked is the value of the many individuals of Chinese descent who have risen to prominence in the last twenty years. Beginning in 1996, Americans have elected the first governor of Chinese descent, Washington's Gary Locke, the first Congressman of Chinese descent, David Wu, and recently elected the first Congresswoman of Chinese descent, Judy Chu. Elaine Chao served as the Secretary of Labor during the Bush Administration, while Locke and Steven Chu serve in the Obama cabinet. These notable politicians, combined with a growing number of Chinese athletes, actors, and literary figures, should be included in any campaign to improve English acquisition in the Chinese community.

The limited English issues in the Chinese community are deeply rooted and will not be solved in a short span of years, or even a generation. But absent an aggressive program that promotes English proficiency, the Chinese population could be doomed to wield a clout far less powerful than their presence in the United States would otherwise allow.

***Becoming an American: The Chinese***  
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## **Fighting for our Common Language**

Since our founding by former Senator S.I. Hayakawa in 1983, the U.S. English Foundation has been disseminating information on English teaching methods, sponsoring educational programs, developing English instructional materials, representing the interests of Official English advocates before state and federal courts and promoting opportunities for people living in the United States to learn English. Building on the tenet that learning English quickly is the best way for English learners to advance economically, academically and socially, we have worked toward our mission in classrooms, courtrooms and with political and civic leaders in all 50 states.

Unique among organizations of its type, the U.S. English Foundation has put effort into supporting programs which successfully teach English to immigrants, removing language barriers and leading to economic opportunities. During the 1990s, we teamed up with the Villa Maria Center in Erie, Pa., turning America's newest residents into taxpaying members of the American workforce. In the past decade, we have made grants to local English language teaching programs, allowing small ventures to increase their scope and reach a larger population. Furthermore, we have utilized the value of the Internet, partnering with a worldwide company to provide an English language learning program free on our website.

The U.S. English Foundation is America's watchdog for the protection of official English laws, with decades of experience defending our common language in America's courts. Taking on tough battles in both state and federal courts, we have successfully defended hard-earned victories, most recently in Utah, Alaska and Iowa.

In an effort to shed light on some of the issues surrounding language learning and American language learners, the U.S. English Foundation commenced a briefing series in 2005, publishing original research studies on the subject. Using Census data and other metrics, we have produced analyses of linguistic integration, language distribution and language knowledge among Americans. In 2008, we began an examination of language proficiency and assimilation among some of the largest immigrant groups to the United States. *Being an American: The Chinese*, is the fourth in this series, which earlier covered issues facing the Vietnamese, Russian and Korean populations.

For more information about the U.S. English Foundation and our projects, call 202-833-0100.