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ROOTS MARRIAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF U.S. MULTICULTURALISM

Chapter 4: Crafting Chinese American Identities.
chapter 2, such portrayals of identity are disturbing in the sense that they imply that one cannot form a complete identity without going to China, and that the identity that one has discovered through going there is somehow final. Thus, in some respects these identity narratives illustrate the ways that Chinese Americans are able to move beyond these limitations to craft identities that are attached to China yet are not derived solely from their ties to China. In other respects, however, the narratives also show how these productions require the negotiation of identity politics on multiple levels. American-born Chinese Americans in the Roots program find themselves caught within a politics of U.S. multiculturalism that both excludes them from cultural citizenship in the United States and associates them, willingly or not, with their ancestral homeland. Their relationship to China and their understandings of Chinese culture in the context of the United States are therefore complex and often somewhat ambivalent. China is simultaneously an unknown entity filtered through an orientalist lens and a place to which Chinese Americans are involuntarily and inextricably attached.

However, it is through the construction of alternative genealogies and family narratives that are localized in Chinese American experiences, that participants in the Roots program are able to begin to negotiate viable identities within these constraints. In constructing family histories and personal narratives, they carve out a “place” for American-born Chinese Americans such as themselves within a politics of cultural citizenship focusing on newer, more mobile immigrants. As I discuss in chapter 2, the “places” that they create draw simultaneously on historical connections to ancestral villages in China, contemporary relations with friends and relatives, and transnational popular culture flows originating in Asia. Their production, though, relies on the transnational mobility of Chinese Americans, which ironically is facilitated by the very states that are trying to shape their identities in restrictive ways. Thus, the Chinese state’s sponsorship of their roots-searching activities and the ability to travel afforded them by their U.S. citizenship creates the road map for their mobility.

At first glance it may appear that by traveling to China, Chinese Americans have recovered their ancestral roots in the traditional romanticized sense. Most become more conscious and proud of their Chinese heritage, and some even become involved in the Chinese American community or travel to China to study or do business. Later in this chapter I discuss the process of reethnicization in which Chinese Americans selectively adopt parts of their Chinese heritage and consciously incorporate them into their lives. However, it is important to acknowledge the flexibility with which they create

"**tional**” practices of previous generations. So, while some exercises such as tracing genealogies, making traditional foods, or learning to speak Chinese may appear to replicate those of older generations, the meanings assigned to the practices may differ greatly. Recognition of these differences is essential, because one of the controlling processes (Nader 1997) that disempowers American-born generations within the politics of U.S. multiculturalism is its emphasis on traditional cultural knowledge as a marker of cultural authenticity and legitimacy. Multiculturalism in the United States, in its reliance on symbolic representations of diversity, only serves to oversimplify and essentialize the diversity of racial/ethnic groups in the United States. Distinctions of class, gender, and intraethnic/racial diversity are often glossed over within these superficial representations that often lump people together into broad, undifferentiated categories such as “Asian,” “Chicano/Latino,” “African American,” or “Native American.” As I discuss below, when cultural authenticity is measured in these terms, American-born Chinese Americans who know little about China are left with little to display. At the same time they may be unable to identify with these representations of their culture, and they may even begin to feel inadequate in comparison to them.

In a more specific sense, categories that encompass a range of identifications may also be inadequate to express the diversity within them. As Aihwa Ong (1999) notes in her analysis of cultural citizenship, it may be premature to suggest the formation of a shared Asian American panethnic identity. The Cambodian refugees and upper-class Hong Kong immigrants she studies, both of whom fall under the category of “Asian American,” were inserted into U.S. racial politics on opposite ends of the black-white spectrum that defines U.S. racial politics. They share little in terms of class status and cultural practices. Similarly, the experiences of participants in the Roots program tell us that even pan-Chinese or pan-Chinese American forms of identification may not adequately represent the identities of those subsumed within them, particularly American-born Chinese generations. As I discuss below, although Roots participants gained knowledge about China and Chinese culture while visiting China, they often found these forms of Chinese identity inadequate to describe their own experiences. Instead, the identities expressed in Roots narratives were often formed in relation, or sometimes in contrast, to other ways of being Chinese. Thus the genericized forms of Chinese arts and “high culture” presented to the Chinese Americans in China actually served to make them feel less Chinese. Similarly, Roots participants continually made distinctions between themselves as American-born Cantonese Americans from peasant origins and
newer, often wealthier immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

participants therefore selectively negotiated these categorizations. Ultimately, their identification as a person of Cantonese descent from a specific village or region, for example, may coexist with other levels of identification as Asian American, Chinese American, or just plain American. It also is accompanied by other forms of identification based on class, gender, or the specifics of their own family history in relation to broader Chinese American history, such as having emigrated through Southeast Asia or Latin America.

In the following sections I discuss these contexts and how Chinese Americans negotiate them. I begin with a discussion of the place of China in the Chinese American imagination and how this relationship is changing with increasing global flows. I then proceed to discuss the inadequacies of U.S. multiculturalism for creating a context within which American-born Chinese Americans can create places for themselves as people of color in the United States. Next, I describe the identity narratives as told by Roots participants during the interviews I conducted after the completion of the Roots program. These narratives reflect in greater depth the processes of identity construction and narration described above, because most begin with a discussion of the participant's lack of knowledge about China and end with statements about feeling more comfortable with their Chinese American identities. Finally, I end with an analysis of a roundtable group discussion by interns on the issues of Chinese cultural authenticity and their strategies for remaking these traditions in their own ways. In doing so I do not suggest that they have in any way settled on identities that are fixed and final. One participant in the roundtable discussion summed it up nicely:

I think that for me I'm looking at it more as a Chinese American now, not necessarily as an ABC, or as a Chinese, but as a Chinese American. I'm very comfortable sort of knowing my personal family history, knowing about Exclusion Laws, knowing factual things, teaching, and researching on that... And that's my community, that's the stuff that I do, and definitely [the Roots program] is important, Asian American studies, my friends, family. All those things are definitely Chinese American. And I'm still trying to figure out exactly what does that mean. I don't want to make it that, well we pull some Chinese stuff, we pull some American stuff. It's a lot more complex, and I don't even know how to approach it, it's a much bigger thing and I think that's why... even though it's hard to describe what it is, I'm growing comfortable in saying I know what Chinese American culture is, but don't ask me to define it.

While American-born Chinese Americans may to differing degrees identify with China as an exotic tourist site, geopolitical identity, historical region, or place of origin, most have had little firsthand contact with China or mainland Chinese people. Most American-born Chinese have not been to China and do not speak Chinese fluently, if at all. Prior to their involvement in the Roots program many of the people I interviewed had little knowledge about China or their family history. During the era of the Exclusion Acts (1882–1943) and beyond, many Chinese families avoided talking about family history for fear that their "paper son" status would be discovered. In addition, during the Communist period the majority in the Chinese American community seldom acknowledged connections with mainland China, and the Taiwanese government gained a foothold in Chinatown politics. Even for the children of post-1965 immigrants, China remains at least a generation away. For these Chinese Americans, their family history frames their images of "Chinese culture" and of China as an ancestral home. At the same time, it becomes difficult to distinguish between what is particular to one's own family and friends and what is true of the larger context of Chinese and Chinese American culture and society. Because Chinese Americans live in a society where there are multiple and conflicting images about China and Chinese culture, it can become difficult for them to contextualize their own families' experiences and practices within a broad picture of Chinese and Chinese American culture. Family experiences and home culture thus must be resolved with what they learn outside the home about China and other Chinese from the media, school textbooks, and popular culture. As Dutch/Indonesian scholar of Chinese descent Len Ang (1994) observed of her own situation, her preparation for her experience of visiting mainland China for the first time began long before she crossed the Hong Kong border into the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen for a tour of China. After moving to Holland from Indonesia, she and her family became reethnized as Chinese-Europeans, and in this context her parents eagerly assumed identities as Chinese and tried to learn as much as possible about China.

For American-born generations, "Chinese culture" is often learned outside the home and takes form and meaning as an entity that is consciously learned and explored. Chinese Americans grow up with preconceived notions of China, Chinese, and other Chinese Americans. Images of Chinese culture and authentic Chineseness are often media-inspired by sources outside the home. One twenty-two-year-old second-generation Chinese American said he grew up thinking he should know how to do kung fu because he
was Chinese. Growing up in the Midwest, the only Chinese were on TV, and in many ways he thinks these media images taught him how to be Chinese. For some Chinese Americans, these conceptions of their (lack of) Chineseness shape their images and attitudes toward China as a reservoir of an essentialized Chinese culture and source of family secrets that can be tapped to fill in the holes of their own incomplete and perhaps quirky understandings of their Chineseness.

**Chinese Americans and the Asia-Pacific Region**

The relationship between Chinese Americans and China emerges from historical processes that go far beyond the particulars of the individual stories of ancestors who emigrated. These broader processes shape how Chinese Americans conceive of their Chineseness. The creation of the Asia-Pacific region is a product of Eurocentric thinking and capitalist processes (Dirlik 1998). This region, then, exists not as an objective geographical entity but as a socio-historical construction. Through processes integral to its formation, the creation of the Asia-Pacific region has defined the relationships between Chinese Americans and China, and Chinese Americans and the United States. Arif Dirlik (1998) argues that Asian American history and identities have been shaped by the historical prominence of ideas of cultural difference in U.S. definitions of relations between East and West. From the beginning of U.S. history, the relationship between Asians and the United States has taken form around issues of labor and capital. However, the debates have always been framed in terms of cultural difference rather than political or economic tensions. The legal exclusion of Chinese immigrants between 1882 and 1943, then, was justified not in terms of the threat to labor competition posed by Chinese workers but in terms of irreconcilable differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Although the Chinese were integral to building the U.S. economy, they remained exotic and dangerous outsiders who needed to be controlled.

The problem faced by Asian Americans thus is one of the difficulty of comfortably claiming either Asian or American roots. Dirlik observes that “to the extent that trans-Pacific ties of Asian Americans have been recognized within the dominant culture, therefore, this recognition has served primarily to deny their ‘Americaness’—and their history” (1998: 294). In light of recent attention focused on the Asia-Pacific region, a new emphasis is being put on the potential held in those connections (284). However, for the Chinese Americans in my research, this emphasis puts them in a double bind. Although lacking strong connections to Asia, they are at the same time defined relations between Asian immigrants and the United States. While black Americans are seen as lacking a cultural heritage, Chinese Americans are viewed as having too much culture (Ebron and Tsing 1995). But at the same time, the “Asian” and “American” parts of Asian American represent two irreconcilable parts of a single identity within U.S. multiculturalism. Dirlik (1998) and others have referred to this problem as a dual or split personality, neither of which can be recognized as whole. The idea that the Asian and American parts of Asian America cannot be integrated into a cohesive singular identity makes it very difficult to conceive of processes of cultural change that blend Asian and American elements.

**When China Is Brought Closer**

Ideas of relative Chineseness become even more salient as diasporic or historically transnational (Hsu 2000; Glick Schiller 1999a, 1999b) relationships between immigrant populations and their homelands are redefined under globalization. Processes of globalization are reshaping the borders of historical diasporas, multiplying the channels through which identities can be negotiated. In many ways, increased access to China has opened up new possibilities for the formation of identities within the context of a racist U.S. society that constructs Chineseness in restrictive ways. However, while Chinese Americans may control this information, in other respects they may be controlled by it.

The increasing contact between the United States and China through trade, immigration, and popular culture constantly reminds Chinese Americans of their “motherland.” The prominent presence of the Pacific Rim in the media makes representations of Chinese culture available on a daily basis. These representations come attached to discussions of economics, international relations, illegal immigration, and campaign finance scandals. Through these transnational flows—of commodities, popular culture, and media—Chinese Americans are sometimes unwillingly reattached to their homeland. Media hype over transnational overseas Chinese business and social networks portray a Chinese diaspora driven by Confucian values and a culturally engrained business drive as a united world force to be reckoned with. China is discussed in the news media, it is found on product labels, in popular culture, and in many other dimensions of American life. Andrew Lam, a Pacific News Service commentator originally from Vietnam, satirizes the ease and extent to which Asian Americans are tied to Asia in the American imagination. He marvels at the power and influence he and his Asian
students. A corollary of these activities was involvement in Third World movements overseas. One group of Chinese Americans visited China in the 1970s to participate in Chairman Mao’s Cultural Revolution, which in their eyes paralleled the revolutionary struggles of Third World people of color in the United States. Many of these individuals combined in interesting ways their revolutionary goals in China with roots-searching experiences, and they did so through a political lens that differed from current multicultural identity politics (see Louie, 2003). An important element of these early Asian American politics involved the development of a pan-Asian American identity that focused less on roots and origins, and more on the shared struggles of Asians as minorities in the United States. “Yellow Power” did little, however, to remove essentialized notions of ancestral roots in Asia as the basis for Asian American cultural and political legitimacy. The cultural politics of diversity that activists developed in the 1970s around Third World student activism had the unintended effect of perpetuating racialized categories by referencing Native Americans, Chicanos/Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans as the only legitimate and recognized minority groups.

The production of hyphenated Americans created models of racial dynamics in the United States that worked against more nuanced understandings of processes of racialization. The hyphen linking Asian and American did not remove the ambiguity of how these racialized groups fit into U.S. society. The “Asian” part of Asian American has been produced through a broader set of discourses stemming from the history of U.S. involvement in Asia and its hegemonic definition of Asia as a region (Dirlik 1998). Asian Americans have been portrayed as perpetual foreigners who maintain deeply engrained, perpetual ties to Asia. These perceived ties have taken on new meanings in recent years as the transnational potential of connections between Asian Americans and Asia has received an increasing amount of attention. Asian Americans, especially those born in the United States who usually have fewer connections with Asia, are placed in awkward positions when they are cast in these popular and political discourses as bridge builders across the Pacific. While renewed pride in Asian roots and culture cultivated through these connections can be viewed as a basis for Asian American political empowerment, scholars such as Evelyn Hu Dehart have asked, “Can Asian Americans… claim… ‘ethnic nationalism’ without jeopardizing their cultural and political citizenship in the United States?” (1993: 3). In a similar vein, Dirlik notes that Asian American “groups have acquired a new significance in light of global economic developments, and

Roots in the Context of U.S. Identity Politics

The structure and focus of the In Search of Roots program arose out of Chinese American community-based politics. These politics originated in 1960s activism that claimed that American-rooted identities developed through a reinvolve in community issues in Chinatown, Japantown,
the localized identities that they acquired in their formative
been overwhelmed in reassertions of cultural nationalism that stress their
'essential' unity across global spaces" (1999a: 49). These racialized, essential
forms of cultural nationalism are dangerous because they emphasize cul-
tral origins over the complex national contexts that shape the varied mean-
ings of what it means to be Chinese in particular times and places.

U.S. Multicultural Politics: The Problem with Assimilation

Chinese American culture is defined within U.S. multicultural politics as a
form of inherent and immutable difference from U.S. mainstream culture
(whatever that might be). As mentioned previously, from the beginnings of
Chinese emigration the class and labor tensions that the Chinese presence
in the U.S. represented have been framed by opponents in terms of cultural
difference. The Chinese have been portrayed as unassimilable and unable to
live democratic, civilized lifestyles (Choy, Dong, and Hom 1995). They have
thus been marginalized and excluded from mainstream American culture
not only in political and economic realms but also culturally. The emphasis
on the inherent difference of Chinese people within U.S. cultural politics is
used as a basis to criticize Chinese Americans as less American, while at the
same time forcing them to reference China and Chinese culture, about
which they know little, as a basis for their identities. Although Chinese
Americans are forced to define their differences in cultural terms, the
hybrid blend that Chinese American culture has become is not recognized
by mainstream U.S. society or by Chinese Americans themselves as legiti-
imately "Chinese." Chinese Americans thus are forced to either form a
relationship with mainland China or attempt to claim a wholly "American"
identity, something that is difficult if not impossible to do in racialized U.S.
society.

Conceptions of cultural change and adaptation to U.S. culture must be
understood within the larger context of the social science, folk, and official
models that have been used to describe minority experiences in the United
States. Each of these models falls back on basic assumptions about culture
and identity. Multicultural politics in the United States are based on implicit
assumptions that one's true identity is "out there," waiting to be found
through a process of self-reflection and of finding oneself. Within the
consciousness-raising (Bondi 1993) identity politics of U.S. multicultural-
ism, assumptions about culture change, preservation, and authenticity con-
strain avenues for identity exploration and expression.

Assimilationist models originally used to understand minority experi-
change and with issues of race, yet at the same time they have provided a
framework for folk understandings of cultural change. As Omi and Winant
(1994) have observed, models of race relations for U.S. minorities have been
shaped by the legacy of Robert Park's race relations cycle, which described a
continual drive toward assimilation. Although it has become evident that
racial minorities do not melt into a uniform blend, this model of assimila-
remains influential despite the discourses of multiculturalism that have
arisen in its place. This is due in large part to the inadequacies of these
models in dealing effectively with the question of race. Within academic
models, race has been relegated to the realm of biology, subsumed under
class, or hidden by the idea of ethnicity (Omi and Winant 1994; Viswes-
waren 1996).

Both folk and academic discourses on Asian American adaptation to U.S.
culture have been subsumed under the model of assimilation to American
culture, according to Lisa Lowe (1991). Within this model, the differential
abilities of immigrant versus American-born generations to adapt to Ameri-
can ways is the main source of intergenerational conflict. Lowe argues that
this vertical, generational model of understanding both conflict and diver-
sity within the Asian American community and family should be replaced
by a horizontal model. A horizontal model would acknowledge the hetero-
genrety of the Asian American community, a first step toward strategic
political action. A particular difficulty with generational models, Lowe ob-
erves, is the relationship that they construct between authenticity and as-
simulation, and therefore with China as a place of origin. The further one is
removed from China, the more assimilated to U.S. culture one will be and
therefore the less authentically Chinese. As an illustrative example, Lowe
uses a fictional story about two Chinese American girls, each of whom
assumes that the other is more "authentically" attached to China and more
culturally Chinese. They come to find out that, contrary to their initial as-
sumptions about one another, they are both American born and neither
possesses the Chinese cultural authenticity assumed by the other.

The idea that one can be more or less authentically Chinese places Chi-
ese Americans in an ambivalent relationship with people whom they view
as being "more Chinese" (those who speak the language or have immi-
grated more recently). While on the one hand Chinese Americans, under
assimilationist models, should identify strongly with their U.S. roots, the
realities of racial politics cause them to remain perpetual foreigners. Chi-
ese Americans have always been told that "home" is in the United States
but that their "roots," and therefore a missing piece of their identity, is
cultures, and others or a single one. According to Handler, "Culture, in this view, is not itself 'multi'; rather, multiplicity and diversity arise from the aggregation of cultures. Cultures, in short, are figured as elemental. From this perspective, it is not that diversity is intrinsic to social formations, nor simply that the United States is diverse, but more specifically, that the United States consists of some unspecified number of cultural elements" (1995: 392). In addition, because there is a tendency in Western thinking to view "culture as a thing: a natural object or entity made up of objects and entities ('traits')" (Handler 1988) culture is often objectified and commodified within movements for cultural preservation.

In the Chinese American context, culture is objectified and then broken down into discrete practices, customs, and traditions, (using chopsticks, eating certain foods, celebrating certain holidays). These elements carry symbolic weight as features and traits that can be measured to indicate the authenticity of a culture. Within this context, Chineseness becomes a measurable and commodified form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Some people have more Chinese culture, while others (having lost it) have less. This sets up a situation where some lack culture and others have too much. For Chinese Americans this is a double-edged sword because they are thought of as having, in contrast to African Americans (Ebron and Tsing 1995), too much culture but at the same time they often worry about lacking culture (Lowe 1991).

Chinese American culture, when compared to authentic Chinese culture, becomes something that is impure, diluted, and devolved. Meanwhile, "Chinese tradition" and culture is rendered static; as something that has been left over or preserved. Thus, within folk Chinese American culture, Chinese Americans critically describe one another as "not being very Chinese" or "being too Chinesey." Some are accused of being jook sing (hollow bamboo); others are viewed as bananas (yellow on the outside, white on the inside). The term ABC (American-Born Chinese) carries a negative connotation, implying assimilation to the dominant American culture and the loss of Chinese culture.

Popular ideas about Chinese culture are comprised of often essentialized and static representations of "Chinese tradition" seen through an orientalized filter. These notions of tradition, customs, food, language, and history are viewed by the broader American public as being deeply historically rooted in a mainland Chinese past. At the same time, this is a past about which many American-born Chinese Americans feel they know little. Un-
the earlier discussion of fork roads and fork leaves, no room for processes of reethnicization. Many Chinese Americans consciously research and adopt practices, material culture, and beliefs that signify “Chineseness” or “Chinese Americaness” to them. Or they may mark as ethnic certain values, traits, and customs that they view as being part of their family’s core. Reethnicization often involves learning more about Chinese history and culture, or Chinese/Asian American history. It may involve becoming active in Asian American or Chinese American “community” issues, or going to China to learn to speak Chinese. Or it may consist of consciously associating with other Chinese or Asian Americans, or watching Chinese or Hong Kong movies. But in claiming Chinese culture, Chinese Americans must negotiate a politically charged atmosphere in which both the sources of this culture and the content of the parts to be “preserved” are contested by other Chinese people and by broader U.S. society. In this sense, reethnicization takes place within a context that is both in cooperation with and in resistance to state-sponsored identities.

Chinese American Identity Narratives

Although family histories are the routes through which Chinese Americans explore their identities, not all versions of history and means of exploring them are effective or relevant toward this goal. Histories are versions of the “past” created in the present within a context of power relations. The past carries heavy symbolic weight, and the creation of narratives of the past is necessary for the legitimation of interests, ranging from personal to national, in the present. But the question of the past is problematic in the Chinese American case because of the way in which the symbolism of the Chinese American tradition remains in large part embedded within notions of traditions, customs, food, language, and histories rooted in a mainland Chinese past, a past that many view with ambivalence or as irrelevant and foreign. At the same time, this history is hard to escape because of the way that historical traditions and heritages, like cultures, are viewed as bounded entities that embody a group’s cultural heritage (Segal and Handler 1995). This process of cultural innovation is driven largely through ritual exercises of solidarity that incorporate powerful symbols (Kertzer 1988). Symbols, whether of unity, protest, authority, or equality, are the language in which cultural battles are fought. The power of symbols and their ritual exercise lies in their ability to remain stable in form, yet flexible in content (the message they present). Symbols can be co-opted and reinterpreted, empowered and role in fueling and legitimizing alternative viewpoints. In this case, the heritage of Chinese Americans is bound within a Chinese culture that in the context of U.S. multiculturalism represents a grouping or element that unproblematically merges Chinese and Chinese American cultures.

Chinese American identity narratives demonstrate this merging and the processes through which they try to negotiate meanings of Chineseness and Chinese Americaness as heritage, racial category, and political identity. They reflect the process of translating meanings of family history and heritage into a contemporary social and political framework that they create as Chinese or as Asian Americans. The formation of these identities is embedded in social experiences. For many of the people that I interviewed, coming to an understanding of their Chinese American identities involves developing an awareness of class and ethnic differences between themselves as descendants of Cantonese immigrants and Chinese from other parts of the world who emigrated under different circumstances. The development of this “Cantonese consciousness” encompasses an identification with the history, language, and food of the Pearl River Delta, with Chinatown, and with other Chinese Americans as they intersect with their own family experiences.

Throughout the interviews, interns often mentioned China as being something unknown or only partially understood. Political activity in the community of Chinese Americans, Asian Americans, or women of color also played a significant role to varying degrees in the interns’ expression of their identities. But what these narratives most strongly bring out are the processes of sorting through what is particular to one’s own and one’s family’s experiences and those of a larger Chinese American community; that is, the processes of developing a sense of a Chinese American community and one’s place in it. For all of the interns mentioned, their experiences in the Roots program were a major factor in these processes.

The Chinese American participants in the Roots program conceptualized China and Chinese culture in ways that were influenced by their class and positions within U.S. society. Most were born and raised in the United States, identified strongly with the Cantonese dialect (even if they did not speak fluently, if at all), and grew up primarily in middle-class areas outside of Chinatown. These factors defined their relationship to other “Chinese” groups in the Bay Area, such as Chinatown residents and newer immigrants from Taiwan.

Susan, a third-generation intern who grew up in a Bay Area suburb, said
One of the events that influenced Susan's self-perception was her interview by a teacher about being of Cantonese descent. “I used to think that if you’re Chinese, you’re Chinese.” Growing up, she did have Asian and Chinese classmates, “but it didn’t seem like they were as ‘culturally aware’ as the ones here [at the university] do. We never talked about ‘our Chinese pasts’ as people here do. Here [at the university] it seems like it’s more on people’s minds.” Susan believes that her growing awareness of her Cantonese identity comes from the heightened distinctions made among students of Chinese descent at the university and is reinforced by her participation in the Roots program and her visit to her ancestral village. During her China trip, she related a story about how on her arrival at the university, she found that others would ask her “what kind of Chinese” she was. She recalls knowing that she was not Taiwanese but not remembering whether she was Cantonese or “Mandarin,” and having to go home to ask her mother what she was. She used to wonder why people seemed to make such big distinctions between various origins. But now she thinks that these differences are significant because they reflect how she was brought up in relation to Chinese from other backgrounds: “My grandparents’ past, when I read [about] them in the archives, [relative to] other people’s parents when they emigrated here, I don’t think had to go through as much interrogation and they weren’t here when there weren’t that many [other] Chinese... I think it affects how they were brought up and how I was brought up, so I think that’s where I made the most distinctions, how we were raised.”

A few of Susan’s anecdotes are particularly indicative of issues faced by third-generation Chinese Americans, and of their understandings of community and of stereotypes of themselves and others as Chinese Americans. These issues involve a feeling of incompleteness, of not knowing about how one’s own experiences fit in with those of other Chinese Americans, and of not having the context to differentiate “what is Chinese” and “what is American.” When Susan’s elementary school teacher assigned her class to make a family tree, Susan filled in her nuclear family’s names, as well as those of her maternal grandparents, who had English names. She knew her paternal grandmother’s name because the family would visit her, but she didn’t know her paternal grandfather or any of her great-grandparents’ names.

So I was like, my teacher will never know, and I knew they were from China so that they would have Chinese names, so I kept that [last] name and then I went to look at Chang, or whatever in the phone book, and so I just chose some. I never thought much of it. I didn’t want to turn it in blank because the teacher would probably ask me about it and I didn’t want people to think, “she doesn’t know.” I didn’t want it to be blank... it just looks bad if it’s blank.

In elementary school, Susan thought that all Chinese Americans were like she was—they spoke English at home to their parents, and their parents spoke half English and half Chinese to their parents. But then she realized that some of her friends spoke half Chinese and half English to their parents, and in high school she came to the conclusion that half of the Chinese Americans were like her and the other half like her parents. “I always thought that if they were Chinese American, they were like me, but if they were Chinese from China, they would be more in touch with their Chinese background, like speaking to their parents in Chinese.”

Susan recalls while growing up seeing public service announcements on KPIX, the local PBS station, portraying people from various “ethnic” backgrounds claiming “I’m proud to be [Chinese, Jewish, etc.].” One spot showed a Chinese American girl walking through the streets of Chinatown, proclaiming, “I’m proud to be Chinese American.” To this, Susan states “And I was thinking, how could she be Chinese American if she was in Chinatown, because I always related Chinatown to Chinese from China, and I always thought that Chinese Americans were more like me. I never really thought that they were really different from anyone else, but from those public service clips, it made it look so different... like she was Chinese from China. I didn’t really relate to them because it didn’t seem like she had the same experiences that I did.” She says she doesn’t remember when she figured out that she was Chinese, but in junior high one classmate said to her, “I bet you eat Chinese hamburgers.” She recalls just brushing off his comment, not knowing exactly how to respond because she didn’t know whether or not there really was such a thing as Chinese hamburgers.

Many of the Roots interns grew up with negative or ambivalent associations concerning mainland China. Few remembered learning much about China in school; even fewer knew much about Chinese American issues. In the images they were exposed to, China was either romanticized as an ancient and proud civilization or vilified as dark, evil, and communist in the orientalist discourses filtered through American education and the media. In essence, rather than representing a place that was familiar and comfortable to Chinese Americans, China was a foreign and unknown location to which they had an ancestral connections.

110 CHINESENESS ACROSS BORDERS
can media and through interactions with first-generation immigrants (are thought to) have better command of the language and customs of Chinese culture. Most of the Chinese Americans that I interviewed felt that their lack of knowledge about Chinese culture, language, and customs made them less authentic as Chinese. This concept was relational, because even some interns who had a fluent command of spoken Cantonese felt inadequate in terms of their facility with the written language or felt that their vocabulary was limited to a child’s household word stock. No matter how fluent they were in the spoken language, most felt inadequate with their level of proficiency, especially in the written language. Some entered school not speaking English, and this experience for them represented the first time they had to recognize themselves as Chinese. Before entering school, they never had a label for the kind of “Chinese” they were or the type of Chinese they spoke. One intern, Alexa, remembers coming home from school one day and asking her mother, in Chinese, whether she was Chinese; Tom said that he came home from school and told his parents that his classmates had asked him how to say “John” and other typical English names in Chinese, but he didn’t know how.

Carl is fourth generation on one side of the family, and fifth generation on the other. He is a graduate of San Francisco State University and active in the Chinese Historical Society. He and his cousin continued an extensive family tree based on research at the National Archives, a project that he continued long after the assignment for the Roots program had been turned in. I asked him to what degree he was conscious of being of Chinese descent as he was growing up. He observed that at the school he attended in the Richmond district of San Francisco there was a “distinct difference between those who [had] just arrived here and those who [had] been here for a few generations.” He sees this distinction as correlated with the ability to speak Chinese.

Carl was sent to the same Chinese school in San Francisco that his father attended as a child, but he lacked the Chinese-language background at home that many of his classmates had. “To me it was kind of awkward. I wasn’t afraid and I didn’t want to rebel, or block myself from being Chinese or anything, but the Chinese school I went to, now that I think of it, I should have gone to a ‘csl’ (Chinese as a second language) program. . . . I was brought up with English and didn’t know Chinese.” He remembers going to friends’ houses and being spoken to in Chinese by his friends’ parents. He often felt embarrassed. He could comprehend the basic meanings and
educated...[and had] no sense of connection to the one...[was] sort of the class difference that began to emerge.” As a student, Kim fought to add classes in Cantonese to the university's curriculum, but both administrators and students would ask why she wanted to learn Cantonese, a peasant language: “I...feel like language is a key element of culture, especially for me...Well, my case is a little bit different since I was adopted, I mean I was like a day old, so for all intents and purposes my parents are my parents, and they’re Cantonese, but biologically I’m half Cantonese and half Italian, so I don’t look completely Chinese...For me language is a way of connecting with that culture that is very important, it’s one thing that really separates the generations...you know, it separates sort of your identity.” After I last interviewed her, Kim went to Hong Kong for a year to study Cantonese.

The family roots of intern Henry Jung extend through Latin America. Henry’s mother is of Chinese descent but was born and raised in Peru, and his father's family is Chinese from Hawaii. He remembers as a youth going with his mother to shop in both the Mission district (the Chicano/Latino section of San Francisco) and in Chinatown, and he speaks Spanish at home with his grandparents. It wasn’t until he entered school and was asked by other children about his ethnic background that he was forced to distinguish between the Peruvian and Chinese parts of his family.

I asked Henry what his impressions of China were while he was growing up. He says that he didn't think about China that much. He recalls seeing pictures of Chinese kids in Chinese school books. The stories of China he heard at school conjured up images of the countryside and of isolated farms. China was ancient, with a history thousands of years old. In contrast, images of Peru were more vivid for him; Peru and Hawaii were the “old country” for his family. Even though his grandfather listened to Chinese opera at home, he thinks that in the Richmond district where he grew up, “being Chinese” wasn’t stressed, even though there was a large concentration of Chinese Americans there. He felt that he had trouble relating to Chinese Americans in Chinatown, because they seemed “more Chinese” from having grown up in the Chinatown environment.

Henry became involved in Asian American studies while attending U.C. Berkeley. He studied for a year at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and returned fluent in spoken and written Cantonese. He identifies strongly as a Chinese American of Cantonese descent (from the Zhongshan region) as well as with his Peruvian background. When I asked him what about himself he considers to be Chinese, he mentioned language, a group-oriented
tain foods, deference to authority, and his physical characteristics.

Another example of the complex forms of identity created through secondary migration is Laura Lau’s family. Laura was born in Burma, from where her family emigrated when she was a young child. Burma thus figures prominently in her interest in her ancestral roots. She knows that she spoke Burmese and some Toisanese (a dialect of Cantonese) at one time, but now she sees those languages as having been taken away from her in the process of her English-language education, which marginalized multicultural literature. When I first met Laura in 1992 as a coparticipant in the Roots program, she was a recent graduate of Lowell High School in San Francisco and was waiting to enter her first year at a private women's college in the Bay Area. When I interviewed her in 1995, she was in the process of packing for a study abroad semester in Thailand, after which she hoped to cross the border into Burma to contact relatives there. In recent years, she had become actively involved in Asian American feminist politics, and her views were marked by this perspective. I asked her how she identified prior to participating in the Roots program and becoming involved in politics in college. Although she attended Lowell High School, where Asian American students are the majority, on reflection she thinks that at the time she did not have the resources available to “inspire [her] to become more active.”

The first Asian American literature she read was in a college course and the only Asian teacher she’d had prior to that point was her Mandarin teacher in high school. She states: “[It was] almost a complete turnaround for me having teachers of color (in college)...I always felt that in English class I had to take myself out of myself and try to relate to the author, and when I write it seemed I had to take on this academic voice, something that wasn’t real to me when I took an Asian American literature course [in college] it brought the two together, my love of writing, and my cultural history and family issues.”

Laura hadn’t heard the phrase “people of color” until she began filling out college applications. Her first year in college was the first time that she’d really learned about the Asian American movement. Despite her activist/political leanings, she sees her family background as consistent with her values. She thinks that her family has given her a “real grounding of my culture... There isn’t just one way of doing a movement, marching down the street with a sign, it’s more than that, it’s your daily acts of preserving your culture... I think I owe a lot to my parents for passing down the history and preserving traditions, teaching me where I’m from.”

II4 CHINESENESS ACROSS BORDERS
On February 24, 1996, I recruited a group of Roots interns for an informal discussion session on the question of the “Chinese” in Chinese American. The issue was framed by the following questions: To what extent should knowledge of specific cultural practices, traditions, customs, or rituals and histories be used as a basis for judging one’s Chinese authenticity? To what extent should the rituals and traditions of mainland Chinese culture, past or present, be representative of contemporary Chinese American culture? What are the differences between being Chinese versus Chinese American? Why are these terms sometimes used interchangeably in the U.S. context?

I began the discussion with a number of quotes on the question of Chineseness, taken from various sources:

As soon as my feet touched China, I became Chinese.—Amy Tan, The Joy Luck Club

The Chinese have never had a concept of identity, only a concept of Chineseness, of being Chinese, and of becoming un-Chinese.—Wang Gung Wu, China and the Overseas Chinese

The idea that I have an identity crisis is too simplistic and incorrect.—Roots intern

The symbolic construction of “China” as the cultural/geographical core of “Chinese identity” forces “westernized” overseas Chinese to take up a humble position, even a position of shame and inadequacy over her own “impurity.”—Len Ang, “On Not Speaking Chinese”

After reading the quotes, I opened up the discussion. Many interns felt ambivalent about “Chinese” traditions, their knowledge of which was usually fuzzy, decontextualized, and often learned in bits and pieces and outside the home. In fact, their lack of knowledge about Chinese traditions and language made many interns feel inadequate and inauthentic. A number pointed out incidents in which they were accused of “having no culture” or “being too stupid to know their own culture.” They felt judged as “incomplete” and were envious of others who could speak the language and had more immediate connections with mainland China. One intern remarked: “In some ways I think I have this internal jealousy of people who have closer connections, who can speak the language or know more traditions, so I think that it may be part of it, but I think there’s also another part of it which is going around Chinatown and being like “oh, don’t speak to me that I don’t speak Chinese. I’m third generation, what do you want?”

But what finally emerged in the discussion was the interns’ desire to flexibly adopt Chinese customs and practices that were meaningful and familiar to them, while at the same time modifying these practices for a Chinese American context. In this way, rather than feeling that irrelevant traditions were being imposed on them as a measure of their Chineseness, they were able to take ownership of them in new ways. Their experience of having visited a rapidly changing mainland China encouraged them in this process.

One of the co-leaders of the Roots program, an educator of Chinese descent from the Philippines, made the following observation:

There are certain traditions that we still practice like the Spring Festival, the New Year . . . those are traditions. Some people celebrate Ching Ming, Chong Yung . . . I [had] never celebrated Chinese New Year in my life until I came here [to the United States]. I have never celebrated Ching Ming in my life . . . in the Philippines we celebrate All Souls Day. All I remember is my nose would be all black when I came home from the candles, but it’s not the Chinese tradition . . . [and] it’s only when I came here when I celebrate that. My wife has more traditions than I do . . . but I know about it. We go [to] pay respects on the birthdays of our parents . . . that’s how we do it. But I don’t do Ching Ming. That doesn’t make me not Chinese, or mean I don’t have that Chinese culture.

He continued by saying that while he believes that there are certain things that are Chinese, these things are “meaningless unless the individual constructs something out of that.” The intent of the Roots program is to teach interns about these customs, greetings, and other aspects of Chinese culture and for the trip to China to show them that “these are things that people do.” But he emphasized that not everyone may necessarily want to construe what they’ve seen in China as definitive Chinese customs, such as spitting and smoking. Similarly, he observed that while karaoke and driving Mercedes Benz’s are popular in China now, it is another thing to say that these should be part of Chinese or Chinese American culture.

Many of the female interns whom I interviewed in this mixed-group (male and female) setting viewed the gendered practices associated with traditional Chinese culture, such as the exclusion of female names from written genealogies, as practices that they could change in their own rework-
nings of Chinese culture in an American context. Many interns saw 
as generational naming and not washing one’s hair on New Year’s Day to be 
practices that seemed no longer relevant in modern U.S. society. The original 
meanings and functions of these traditions were often not known by the 
interns, which usually made them seem even more irrelevant. Generational 
naming was viewed as part of a patriarchal system because only males 
received these formal names when they married. Similarly, the names of 
women were traditionally excluded from genealogies, and descent was 
traced through the male line. Many interns strongly objected to the gender 
bias of these traditions. But many still expressed a desire to perpetuate such 
customs, stressing that understanding them is an important part of remem-
bering one’s Chinese American history: “To me the [generational] name 
doesn’t mean as much, but it could also be because I’m a woman, so most 
likely I won’t have my own anyway. But I also think the most important 
ing is that we remember our history, so I think that if we just remember 
that and remember how the [paper] name got changed, then I think that it’s 
sufficient for me.”

In deemphasizing the importance of generational naming but reinforcing 
the importance of genealogy as an exercise in reclaiming family history, 
interns were recasting genealogical writing in a new light. Thus, tracing 
genealogies became important both as a way of symbolizing the linkages 
between China and the United States, past and present, and a way of re-
claiming the family’s rightful identity, which had been forcibly altered to 
skirt unfair immigration laws. At the same time, interns altered not only the 
function but also the form of the genealogies. Many traced both sides of the 
family and included both men and women.11

The custom of not washing one’s hair on Chinese New Year, which 
symbolizes the avoidance of washing away prosperity,12 is one that few 
interns practiced. And they did so only after weighing the relative implica-
tions of following what is known to be a cultural superstition versus the 
social connotations of walking around for a day with dirty hair. While they 
viewed their decisions to follow or not follow these customs as a conscious 
choice, they also saw them as having no real personal consequence. Many 
customs were deemed important not because they were necessarily consist-
tent with the interns’ own belief systems but because they retained meaning 
within the context of their own families. In many cases the meaning behind 
the custom was not known.

One intern remarked that he wanted to learn how to make jin doi, the 
meat-stuffed, fried triangular dumplings made for certain occasions. He 
says that his mother makes them every year, even though he knows making 
them. I was eating them every year and I finally asked her, what’s the 
meaning of making these, what do you do? [She said] the large ones and the 
small ones represent sort of families and having offspring and longevity. . . . 
Still, part of me wants to keep [the tradition] going because I sort of like it, 
but it has no value.” Indeed, the traditional meanings of the custom are 
often secondary to the association with family:

I don’t think I do it because it doesn’t have a real value, I think it may 
not be traditional, well actually I don’t know what is traditional about 
it, but I see Chinese New Years as being a time to celebrate being 
around family, and so when [for example] . . . I bought oranges . . . it 
wasn’t because oranges represented something, it was something that 
I thought my parents would enjoy having. For me, I could have 
bought them peanuts, and it would have represented the same thing, 
but for me it was being around family . . . making jin doi, and learning 
how to make jing,13 is important, but I think I do know certain marked 
holidays for a certain reason and I try to celebrate the spirit of the 
holiday more than the tradition of the holiday.

Many interns saw the following of certain practices and the emphasis on 
certain values as being Chinese American, even though they may differ 
from the practices and values in mainland China. And although they viewed 
not following some customs as a matter of having assimilated or developed 
behind those irrational practices, they saw other behaviors as common and 
proper behavior etiquette—things that Chinese Americans should know not 
to do: “I was joking with a friend of mine, and I guess a lot of people don’t 
eat meat on Chinese New Year . . . [I asked] did you eat meat today, and he 
said, yeah, in fact we’re going out to dinner tonight. And I’m like, you don’t 
have to eat meat, you’re just assimilated. And he’s like, no I’m just evolved. 
But how would you react if you saw someone like, messing up, like putting 
sugar in their tea and pouring soy sauce over white rice?”

. . .

The content of Chinese American culture consists of far more than the 
practice of traditions deemed “Chinese” based on their association with 
traditional mainland Chinese customs. As they construct their own versions 
of Chinese American culture, Chinese Americans employ a selection of 
symbols from the Chinese past that acknowledges the Chinese past yet falls 
outside the ritual constraints of traditional Chinese culture. They empha-
size things that seem a unique part of the Chinese American experience,
such as the history of railroad laborers and the common experiences of racial oppression with other minority groups. But in emphasizing that their Chinese heritage makes them different from other "Americans," Chinese Americans find themselves in the position of deciding how much of this past they wish to claim. And regardless of the degree to which Chinese Americans are adamant in claiming the "American" part of their identity, they continue to face judgment, by both Chinese and non-Chinese, as "Chinese."

At one point during my research I encountered an Internet chat-group discussion on Chinese culture and biculturality in North America. For one first-generation Chinese American in the group, the choice between Chinese and American culture was one of "tea and paintings" versus "electricity," where Chinese culture was conceived of as ancient high art and rituals while American culture was viewed as progressive and modern. As Richard Handler (1988) points out in his study of Quebecois nationalism, the objectification of cultures for the purpose of preservation often results in "high culture" being seen as embodying the whole culture. Thinking of culture as elite traditions and the fine arts increases the sense of cultural "lack" felt by Chinese Americans and devalues their everyday practices and family traditions. One intern remarked that the Chinese Culture Center, which sponsored the Roots program, should continue in such efforts, because "culture is passed through people, not institutions [and the] high culture" they embody. Indeed, the rewriting of genealogies by the Roots interns in many ways represented their spurning of "high culture." According to David Faure (1989) the construction of genealogies originated in the gentry classes and later spread to the common people. The altering of genealogical forms by Chinese Americans thus can be read as a rejection of this "high culture" and a celebration of new Chinese American forms of culture.

Although there was no consensus among the interns, some main themes ran throughout the discussion I held in 1996 and my other fieldwork interviews with the interns. Being Chinese American was ultimately a subjective concept, created variously through experiences with family, political activism, investigations of family history, being informed about the history and current situation of Asians in the United States, visiting ancestral villages, and placing value on family. The meaning of each of these issues is left to the individual to create. The Roots program was instrumental for many, both as a way to learn about Chinese and Chinese American history, family history, and ancestral places in China and a way to recontextualize personal experiences within a larger context through understanding the meanings behind many customs and traditions that were viewed only in a piecemeal fashion at home. For many this involved a process of relearning aspects of Chinese culture that they were introduced to through the program in the process of research, spending time with other interns, and visiting China. This creation of a Chinese American identity selectively wove elements of family, history, and personal experience, to which each individual assigned his or her own meanings. The Roots program was flexible in this respect because it did not focus on a single ideological way of being Chinese American but rather on learning about one's family and group history both in China and the United States as a basis for pride and a feeling of legitimate belonging in the United States.

Thus although the Roots program didn't focus explicitly on issues of power, its format allowed for reworking various hegemonic constructions of Chineseness and Chinese Americanness, of which the interns were aware to differing degrees. For example, rather than dwelling on the state of in-betweeness that many interns said they felt, the program provided a basis from which identities could be supported independently of the dichotomized categories they felt caught between.

I provide here three statements by interns to show how their ideas about being Chinese or Asian American are varied and changing in meaning according to the particular experience. These statements are, of course, not representative of the individual's entire viewpoint, but what the statements do emphasize is the limitation of categorical, prescriptive ideas of identity that are forced on the individual, as well as the subjective nature through which the meaning of individual identity is created. Although all of the interns had participated in the Roots program, and many had exposure to Asian American studies, it becomes evident from their statements that each has had to deal very specifically with images of China and Chinese cultural authenticity.

I used to have a lot of ideas about what people had to know and what people had to do [to be Chinese]... I grew up in Chinatown and was in college in basically this really white background, and so basically I would say that anybody who knows that they're not white, then I would say, yeah, you're Chinese. . . . For me, personally, I think that Chinese American means all the things that my parents chose to pass on to me, and all the things that they chose not to pass down to me... . . . All the stuff that I choose to learn, like all the traditions and stuff like that, and also this feeling of being in between, not really being able to be fluent in the white community, and also going back to China and not really being able to be fluent there, . . . and also being very self-
conscious.— Twenty-one-year-old second-generation female who grew up in Chinatown.

[What] it all basically boils down to is that the identity issue is basically subjective; the discussion has to start with how you're going to define being Chinese. Is it just this ethnic, biological thing, or is it a cultural thing, or language, or whether you follow the customs or not? Every person has a different standard that they're living, you know, if [when] you grow up ... and all that being Chinese was is celebrating Chinese New Year every year, well for you, that's what being Chinese is, if you never had the language before, then that's not the main issue. I also [want] to point out that when we went to Hong Kong to study, a lot of us Chinese Americans were like, well you go to Hong Kong and you look like everyone else, end of this identity crisis [laughter], but it's identity crisis but all in reverse. You go there and you say you're Chinese, and they say, “you're not Chinese, you don't live here, you don't speak the language,” things like that, “you're American.” I had people there telling me I was American, I had people saying I was Chinese. Every time you talk to someone, there's a different reaction. So I'm like you can't go anywhere in the world and fit in completely.— Twenty-five-year-old second-generation male who grew up in the Richmond district

I'm questioning all this as we're talking, this question of what it means to be Chinese American. Because I realize that as you ask the question, a lot of how I view it is what I've been told by my parents or by the culture itself—it's more been defined by other people, but to leave that question open to myself, and for me to try to answer that, it seems that it's someone else's idea. I know that certain things that I do ... like lion dancing, when I take the meaning for myself, it has meaning for me, sometimes I don't interpret that to be Chinese ... It's how I express myself, in a way maybe that my ancestors did at one time.— Twenty-seven-year-old third-generation male who grew up in Marin County

One of the most vocal interns, Fred Chang, who has been actively involved in Asian American politics, wrote in his final report, “The idea that I have this identity crisis is too simplistic and incorrect.” As mentioned earlier, he had observed that on finding out that he had gone to China to visit his ancestral village, others would make statements insinuating that it was great that he had finally found himself. His statement refutes common assump-