

Immigration and Disunity: Impact of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 on San Francisco's Chinese-American Community 1965-1980

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Received 24 July., 2026; Revised 04 Aug., 2026; Accepted 06 Aug., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.
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RQ: How did the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 affect the unity of San Francisco's Chinese-American community between 1965 and 1980?

I. Introduction

Growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown during the late 1960s, Bill Lee was a Chinese-American teenager who found himself navigating a neighborhood filled with youth gangs and street rivalries. Bill had two close friends with whom he grew up, Cal and Vic, both Chinese-Americans like himself. One afternoon, while

Bill was walking with his two close friends on Clay Street, they suddenly encountered members of the Wah Ching gang. One of the gang members stepped forward and shouted, "What the fuck are you doing in Chinatown!"¹ Then, punches began flying between the two groups. Bill and his friends were receiving a brutal beating and were outnumbered, until suddenly, Sifu, their kung fu instructor, happened to be driving and saw his students in trouble. Jumping out of his car, he rushed into the fight to defend them. The confrontation ended abruptly when one of the Wah Ching members collapsed, vomiting blood after a powerful punch to the chest. As additional gang members arrived carrying guns, Bill's friends scrambled into Sifu's car and fled the scene. This violent encounter led members of Bill's friend group, including Cal and Vic, to join a gang soon afterward.²

This research paper examines the question: How did the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 affect the unity of San Francisco's Chinese-American community between 1965 and 1980? This question is important because the Immigration Act of 1965 is commonly remembered as a positive reform that expanded opportunity and ended discrimination in immigration.³ However, its consequences within specific immigrant communities are more complex. By examining San Francisco's Chinese community, this paper explores how a single immigration policy change transformed the unity and social structure of a minority community. To answer this question, the paper follows a cause-and-effect structure across three major chunks. The first major chunk, The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and Demographic Effects, analyzes the legislation itself and the immediate effects it produced in the scale, age, and composition of Chinese immigration, laying the foundation for later chunks. The second major chunk, Drawbacks, analyzes how demographic effects created serious strains, including language barriers, labor exploitation, poverty, and youth violence, which led to increasing disunity within the community. The final major chunk, Paradox of Revitalization, explores how the influx of immigrants sustained Chinatown's survival while also deepening internal divisions between the groups. All together, these chunks demonstrate that although the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 reshaped San Francisco's Chinese community by enabling large-scale immigration, the resulting demographic changes created and intensified social strains within Chinatown, including youth violence, conflicts between American-born and newly arrived Chinese immigrants, and labor exploitation, ultimately deepening divisions within the Chinese community.

In order to understand how the Immigration and Nationality Act reshaped San Francisco's Chinese community, one must understand the history of U.S. immigration policy and the structure of Chinese American communities before 1965. Since the end of the 19th century, immigration law had favored immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, restricting or excluding people from Asia. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 established the first federal law to ban immigration based on race and nationality, preventing Chinese laborers from entering the United States. Subsequent immigration policies, such as the Immigration Act of 1924, reinforced these restrictions through the national origins quota system, which limited immigration based on a country's existing population in the United States and favored European immigrants while restricting immigration from Asia. In addition to immigration restrictions, Chinese immigrants also faced racial discrimination and exclusion from jobs and neighborhoods. As a result, many Chinese Americans were confined to tight ethnic communities, relying on community institutions for protection, employment, and social support. Because of immigration restrictions, these communities became isolated and bachelor societies, consisting predominantly of working male immigrants who were unable to bring their wives and families to the United States.⁴ Within Chinatown, community leadership and organization were largely controlled by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, also known as the Chinese Six Companies. The Chinese Six Companies acted as a governing body that dealt with disputes, represented Chinese residents politically, and maintained social order. By the mid-20th century, Chinatown faced economic and population decline due to decades of immigration restrictions. At the same time, political changes occurred in the United States. The United States' involvement in the Cold War, beginning in 1945, led American leaders to address democratic ideals, such as racial equality. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s also challenged segregation and inequality, inspiring activists to question the morality of the United States' immigration law. These pressures led to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished the national origins quota system and introduced a new preference system that prioritized family reunification and skilled professionals. Although lawmakers initially believed the act would produce only minor demographic changes, it ultimately transformed immigration patterns, opening the door to large numbers of immigrants from China and reshaping communities such as San Francisco's Chinatown.

¹ Bill Lee, *Chinese Playground : a Memoir* (Rhapsody Press, 1999), 80, digital file.

² Lee, *Chinese Playground*, 80.

³ Charles B. Keely, "Effects of the Immigration Act of 1965 on Selected Population Characteristics of Immigrants to the United States," *Demography* 8, no. 2 (1971): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060606>.

⁴ Bonnie Tsui, *American Chinatown : a People's History of Five Neighborhoods* (Free Press, 2014), 38.

II. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and Demographic Effects

By removing the national origins quota system that had long restricted Chinese immigration, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened the door to large-scale migration from China. Prior to the passage of the Immigration Act, national origins quotas and exclusion laws severely limited immigration from non-Western European nations, including China. After the passage of the Act, however, the foundation of those discriminatory restrictions was fundamentally restructured. In Section 202 of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the United States declared the elimination of discriminatory or special treatment quotas, ensuring that race, sex, nationality, place of birth, and place of residence could no longer legally determine who was permitted to immigrate to the United States.⁵ The demographic effects of the new Act were reflected in the census data of San Francisco, recorded by the Bay Area Census: Chinese Americans comprised approximately 5% of the city's population in 1960, rising to 8% in 1970 and 12% by 1980.⁶ While other social and economic factors may have contributed to this demographic growth, the timing and scale of the increase most logically correspond with the passage of the Act itself. The elimination of the discriminatory quota system, in turn, removed the primary barrier to the large-scale entry of Chinese immigrants, creating a lawful entry into the United States. The rapid demographic expansion from the late 1960s to the 1980s is therefore not a coincidence, but the effects of a fundamental shift in immigration policy.

In addition, the Immigration Act's emphasis on occupational preference and family reunification rather than race or nationality led to a process of "chain migration." Section 203 of the Act created a preference system that ranked applicants for admission. Under the third most preferred category, the Act stated that up to ten percent of visas were allocated to professionals and individuals with exceptional ability in fields such as science and the arts. The sixth preferred category also reserved another ten percent for workers who would fill labor shortages in the United States.⁷ Beyond occupational priorities, preference categories one, two, four, and five designated a large portion of visas to family members of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents, including unmarried sons and daughters, spouses and children of permanent residents, married children of citizens, and siblings of adult citizens.⁸ By structuring immigration under a system of preferences, the Act created a pattern of entry: individuals admitted through occupational preferences could later sponsor relatives, and those relatives could in turn sponsor additional family members. This cumulative process became known as chain migration, a self-reinforcing cycle of preferential immigrant entry; as more immigrants settled in the United States, the rate of immigration accelerated. In essence, Section 203 of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 did not simply regulate entry but also institutionalized chain migration over time.

With the policy change in the new immigration law, chain migration brought more young Chinese immigrants, women, skilled professionals, and also unemployed individuals, creating demographic pressure that set the conditions for social conflict within the immigrant community. Immigration statistics from 1966-1967 compiled by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, the federal agency responsible for administering immigration policy prior to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, reveal the scale of this demographic shift. Because these statistics represented national immigration patterns, rather than being specific to San Francisco, they may not have perfectly reflected the exact proportions of San Francisco. However, given that San Francisco was one of the largest destinations for Chinese immigrants, national patterns were likely similar – if not amplified in the city. Of the 25,096 Chinese immigrants recorded, the gender distribution was nearly equal: 12,811 male and 12,285 female. In terms of age, around fifty percent of arrivals were children or teenagers, forty percent were between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine, and only eight and a half percent were over sixty years old.⁹ Meanwhile, occupational statistics demonstrated that while some immigrants entered under professional or skilled worker preferences, a large proportion were recorded as housewives or without listed occupations.¹⁰ These

⁵ Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, H.R. 89, 89th Cong., 1st Sess. § 236 (Oct. 3, 1965). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf>.

⁶ "San Francisco," Bay Area Census, https://census.bayareametro.gov/historical-data/19young70/san_francisco.

⁷ Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, H.R. 89, 89th Cong., 1st Sess. § 236 (Oct. 3, 1965). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf>.

⁸ Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, H.R. 89, 89th Cong., 1st Sess. § 236 (Oct. 3, 1965). <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-Pg911.pdf>.

⁹ Report of the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee, *Report of the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee* (San Francisco, 1970), <https://archive.org/details/reportofsanfranc1969sanf/page/24/mode/2up?>.

¹⁰ Report of the San Francisco Chinese Community Citizens' Survey and Fact Finding Committee, *Report of the San Francisco*.

demographics suggested that chain migration was not driven solely by the need for professionals, but also by family sponsorship networks that brought individuals without the requirement of employment. The arrival of these various groups increased the size and diversity of Chinese immigrant communities, placing pressure on limited community resources in dense neighborhoods like San Francisco's Chinatown and creating the conditions in which competition and social tensions could emerge.

III. Drawbacks

Following the 1965 Immigration Act, the arrival of many poor immigrant families via chain migration intensified language and economic differences that marginalized many young Chinese immigrants, contributing to the formation of youth gangs and violence that undermined unity within San Francisco's Chinatown. One example of these barriers was a 1968 *San Francisco Chronicle* article highlighting Reverend Harry Chuck, a Presbyterian minister who, although not Chinese himself, worked closely with Chinatown youth through community and church programs. In Chuck's account, he noted that the language barrier and the inability to learn English were crucial problems for poor Chinese immigrant youth. The struggling poor youth, whose numbers had increased immensely with each wave of immigrants, were unable to catch up with American students and ultimately dropped out, intensifying the gap.¹¹ Another insight into the marginalization appeared in the recollections of Ben Fong-Torres, a journalist who documented youth violence that emerged in Chinatown during this period. He described how many children of newly arrived immigrants, unable to learn English, dropped out and joined street gangs. Those street gangs fought each other in violent conflicts, involving extortion, shootings, and battles with police officers and community leaders.¹² Together, these accounts exposed structural tensions within Chinatown that were perpetuated by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The isolation from American society due to language and economic barriers placed immigrant youth into a social space where gangs became the source of identity and belonging. Therefore, the demographic transformation caused by the Immigration Act indirectly fostered youth marginalization, which weakened unity within the Chinese community.

However, these gangs were far from peaceful, engaging in violent conflicts that threatened the safety of the neighborhood and the stability of the community itself. The outward image of violence also created additional challenges, as it created negative stereotypes about Chinatown and drew scrutiny from the broader public. Thus, youth gang violence not only intensified crime within the neighborhood but also threatened the stability of Chinatown internally and externally.

In addition to violence, demographic effects also intensified the divide between American-born Chinese and foreign-born Chinese, turning shared ethnicity into internal conflict. American-born Chinese, also known as ABCs, were the children of previous generations of immigrants who had settled and assimilated into America. Those "fresh off the boat" (FOBs), on the other hand, were foreign-born Chinese immigrants who came to the United States through an immigration pathway. As immigration of youths increased due to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, tensions between these two groups began to grow. In *Chinese Playground*, a 1999 memoir by San Francisco Chinatown native Bill Lee, Bill highlighted the tensions between the new Hong Kong and existing families in the late 1960s. Bill recalled ABCs calling the newcomers "Fuckin' China Bugs!" and "Ching Chongs!"¹³ In response, the FOBs called the ABCs "Tow Gee" and "Juk Sing," meaning spoiled hollow brats.¹⁴ Fights frequently occurred between these two groups, with ABCs often being jumped and beaten up, as many of the new immigrants had grown up in the harsher street environments of Hong Kong and Macao.¹⁵ A similar divide was observed by community leaders in Chinatown. Sabina Chen, director of San Francisco's Chinese Culture Center, explained that tensions between ABCs and FOBs were rooted in deeper issues of language, immigration status, and cultural identity. These differences created huge generational divides within a community whose members identified as ethnically Chinese.¹⁶ Together, these accounts revealed the destabilizing

¹¹ Mike Mills, "Hong Kong Immigrants," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco), March 18, 1968, https://sfchronicle.newsbank.com/doc/image/v2:142051F45F422A02@NGPA-CASFC-151444BB4E6D2090@2439934-1513FCBB4F260E2C@1-1513FCBB4F260E2C@?search_terms=Hong+Kong+Immigrants&date_from=1968&date_to=1968&text=Hong+Kong+Immigrants&content_added=&pub%5B0%5D=142051F45F422A02&pdate=1968-03-18.

¹² Ben Fong Torres, interview, in *The Chinese in America : a Narrative History*, by Iris Chang (Penguin Books, 2004), digital file.

¹³ Lee, *Chinese Playground*, 64.

¹⁴ Lee, *Chinese Playground*, 64.

¹⁵ Lee, *Chinese Playground*, 64.

¹⁶ Tsui, *American Chinatown*, 41.

social effects of the demographic transformation brought by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. With the large increase in youth immigration, tensions became far more visible compared to the period before 1965, as newly arrived immigrants entered neighborhoods already occupied by ABCs. While some cultural differences existed earlier, the small number of immigrants who entered before the Act prevented these divisions from becoming widespread within the community. Lee's memoir revealed how divisions among Chinese youths manifested in violence, conflicts, and insults, while Chen's account illustrated broader community concerns about identity, culture, and belonging.

While earlier tensions in the San Francisco Chinese community emerged through youth violence and conflicts between ABCs and FOBs, the demographic changes brought by the Immigration Act also caused economic strain within Chinese communities. The influx of poor immigrants expanded Chinatown's labor supply, leaving workers with few alternatives and enabling labor exploitation that laid the groundwork for class conflicts. As immigration restrictions were lifted, the Chinese population in the United States grew rapidly. Census data revealed that after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the ethnic Chinese population in the United States doubled in size every decade.¹⁷ Due to the large number of newly arrived immigrants, many Chinese people found themselves forced into low-paying jobs despite possessing professional skills. Reports on Chinese working conditions revealed that immigrants who previously held skilled occupations experienced downward mobility, performing repetitive and labor-intensive tasks in factories. Chinese businessmen took advantage of the new immigrants and cut salaries despite increasing work hours. Moreover, workers who were ill or unfit were quickly replaced, worsening working conditions.¹⁸ The large supply of immigrant labor allowed employers to quickly replace workers who protested or demanded better treatment, weakening workers' ability to negotiate for fair wages or benefits. Facing language barriers and a desperate need to survive in the overcrowded conditions of Chinatown, many skilled immigrants were forced to accept lower-paying factory jobs. These conditions allowed Chinese business owners to profit from the situation, as they could rely on a vulnerable workforce with few employment alternatives. Because these factories within Chinatown were also owned by Chinese Americans, the exploitation of newly arrived immigrants set the stage for conflict between business owners and immigrant laborers.

As the worker imbalance between Chinese business owners and Chinese working-class immigrants grew, divisions within the San Francisco Chinese-American community became increasingly visible. In a 1967 *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper, Mrs. Sharon Chew, a thirty-eight-year-old mother and garment factory worker, testified about conditions inside Chinatown's garment factories. Chew did not give her real name because as she feared the consequences of her boss finding out about her testimony. According to Chew, "wage and hours orders issued by the commission [were] mere scraps of paper as far as the Chinatown garment factory proprietors [were] concerned."¹⁹ Workers were often paid less than one dollar per hour while working significantly more hours than officially recorded. Moreover, in 1969, the San Francisco Human Rights Commission discovered that Chinese women at garment factories received no overtime pay, no vacation, no sick leave, and no health benefits. In an interview by the commission, one worker remarked, "It's really amazing how the Chinese exploit themselves."²⁰ Similarly, tensions were also observed in other Chinese-American communities shaped by post-1965 immigration. Reflecting on the frustration of poor working conditions in broad terms, a garment worker and New York Chinatown organizer observed that "The Chinese were becoming racist against themselves."²¹ These testimonies revealed the growing divide between Chinese immigrant workers and Chinese business owners within Chinatown. Workers' awareness that their bosses were taking advantage of them revealed how economic exploitation had become an internal conflict within the Chinese community. As these labor practices intensified, Chinatown became increasingly divided between those who held economic power and the newly arrived immigrant workers whose labor fueled their wealth.

¹⁷ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America : a Narrative History* (Penguin Books, 2004).

¹⁸ Chang, *The Chinese*, 255.

¹⁹ Harry Johansen, "Sad Toil Behind Draped Windows," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 2, 1967, https://sfchronicle.newsbank.com/doc/image/v2%3A142051F45F422A02%40NGPA-CASFC-1513F019C5C3FB07%402439674-1513E8C25E6371A6%402-1513E8C25E6371A6%40?search_terms=Chinatown%2Bworking%2Bconditions&text=Chinatown%20working%20conditions%20&date_from=1950&date_to=1970&content_added=&pub%255B0%255D=142051F45F422A02&pdate=1967-07-02.

²⁰ Chang, *The Chinese*, 267.

²¹ Wing Lam, interview, in *American Chinatown : a People's History of Five Neighborhoods*, by Bonnie Tsui (Free Press, 2014), 47, digital file.

IV. Paradox of Revitalization

While the influx of immigrants following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 intensified internal divisions within the Chinese-American community, it also created the appearance of renewed vitality in Chinatown. Before the Immigration Act, strict immigration restrictions limited the arrival of Chinese immigrants into the United States. As a result, many Chinatowns across the United States faced uncertainty about their long-term survival. Earlier generations of Chinese immigrants remained in Chinatown because language barriers and social discrimination made it difficult to assimilate into broader American society. However, as younger generations of Chinese Americans achieved economic mobility, many moved out of Chinatown in search of better housing and opportunities. Without a steady influx of newcomers to replace them, the population of Chinatown risked shrinking, threatening the neighborhood's ability to sustain businesses, cultural traditions, and community organizations.²² The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 changed the direction of Chinatown's decline by allowing thousands of new Chinese immigrants to enter the United States each year, many of whom settled in San Francisco's Chinatown. San Francisco Chinatown community organizer Tan Chow noted that "as far as the life of Chinatown is concerned, a continuing influx of people will sustain a Chinatown."²³ Chow further observed that while second-generation Chinese Americans often moved out as they became more affluent, the arrival of new immigrants replenished the population and preserved Chinatown's cultural life.²⁴ Therefore, the large influx of Chinese immigrants after 1965 appeared to resolve the problem of Chinatown's potential decline by replenishing its population and sustaining its cultural institutions. However, the conditions created by the new wave of immigration made the sustainability of Chinatown far more complex.

The revitalization of Chinatown after 1965 depended on conditions that placed heavy burdens on the very immigrants who sustained the neighborhood, creating a moral dilemma that contributed to growing disunity within the Chinese-American community. Although the influx of immigrants preserved Chinatown's population and cultural life, many newcomers were forced to endure overcrowded housing, poverty, and limited economic opportunities. In a 1968 *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper article titled "The Threat of Chinatown," journalist Scott Blakey commented on the threat that new immigrants posed. After the 1965 Immigration Act, between 12,000 and 15,000 Chinese immigrants arrived annually in the San Francisco area, many settling in Chinatown. Because the majority of these families had little or no income, while rents remained high, overcrowding and competition within the community intensified.²⁵ These conditions contributed to many of the drawbacks of the Immigration Act, including labor exploitation, economic inequality, and youth violence. Reflecting on the dilemma in *American Chinatown*, Phil Choy, a long-time resident of Chinatown, also explained that poor living conditions were not simply a choice for residents but a reality of the neighborhood: "It is still basically a slum area beyond the facade of some of the festivities and so on. It's kind of ironic—the new immigrants are the ones who are sustaining Chinatown, and we want to improve life for them, but if there isn't a continuing influx of the less affluent, then the Chinatown itself becomes merely ornamental."²⁶ Combined, Blakey and Chow illustrated the difficult dilemma Chinatown had to face after the 1965 Immigration Act. Blakey's description of overcrowding and poverty showed that the influx of low-income immigrants contributed to many of the aforementioned sources of disunity, while Chow revealed the irony that these same immigrants were essential to sustaining Chinatown's cultural identity. If living conditions were improved by limiting the number of low-income immigrants, Chinatown would lose the immigrant population that maintained its cultural identity, transforming the neighborhood into a symbolic or "ornamental" space rather than a living community. Yet maintaining Chinatown as an immigrant destination required tolerating the poverty and overcrowding that created tensions within the community. Therefore, Chinatown's survival after 1965 presented no clear solution as either path risked deepening divisions within the Chinese-American community.

²² "San Francisco Chinese American Historic Context Statement (Draft 1)," sfplanning, last modified June 21, 2021, <https://sfplanning.org/sites/default/files/documents/preserv/ChineseAmericanHCS/ChineseAmericanHCS-draft.pdf>.

²³ Tan Chow, interview, in *American Chinatown : a People's History of Five Neighborhoods*, by Bonnie Tsui (Free Press, 2014), 23, digital file.

²⁴ Chow, interview, in *American Chinatown*, 23.

²⁵ Scott Blakey, "The Threat to Chinatown," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco), November 4, 1968, https://sfchronicle.newsbank.com/doc/image/v2:142051F45F422A02@NGPA-CASFC-151498F088761B6D@2440165-15120ECE5A19B48B@1-15120ECE5A19B48B@?search_terms=chinese+immigration&date_from=1965&date_to=1970&text=chinese+immigration&content_added=&pub%5B0%5D=142051F45F422A02&pdate=1968-11-04.

²⁶ Phil Choy, interview, in *American Chinatown : a People's History of Five Neighborhoods*, by Bonnie Tsui (Free Press, 2014), 23, digital file.

V. Conclusion

By abolishing the national origins quota system and establishing a preference system based on family reunification and skilled professions, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed for large-scale immigration from China and other parts of Asia. The increase in Chinese immigrants seemingly revitalized Chinatown by replenishing its population and sustaining cultural institutions at a time when Chinese Americans were leaving the neighborhood in search of greater opportunities. However, the demographic effects of the Act also created social tensions that undermined the unity of the Chinese-American community during the late 1960s and 1970s. Poor Chinese immigrants faced pressures over housing, employment, and education. Language barriers and economic hardship contributed to gang violence that destabilized the neighborhood, while cultural differences between ABCs and FOBs created identity conflicts that divided the Chinese community. Economic strains further deepened divisions as newly arrived immigrants relied on low-wage labor to survive, leading to labor exploitation and unsafe working conditions. Ultimately, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 reshaped San Francisco's Chinese-American community in ways that policymakers never anticipated.²⁷ The divisions it created became problems that community organizations and public institutions struggled to address. In some cases, these challenges were ignored, allowing many of these tensions to persist and shape the San Francisco Chinese-American community today.

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²⁷ Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America : A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021).

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