

# 1 Introduction

Lisa Zheng is a thirty-eight-year-old immigrant from rural Fujian, China. She came to the United States in 2004 and married her husband not long thereafter. With the help of their parents, they started a large buffet-style restaurant in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 2006. Now, they employ fourteen restaurant workers: five Mexicans, three local whites, and six Chinese immigrants. The employment agency they use to find Chinese workers and the company from which they order their restaurant's menus are both located in Manhattan's Chinatown. The mayor considers theirs to be the best Chinese restaurant in town and dines there frequently, all the while reminding them not to hire undocumented immigrants.

Guan Chen, a thirty-five-year-old immigrant from rural Fujian province, came to the United States in 2000. In 2009, with the help of a friend, he and his wife started a takeout restaurant near a GM factory in Dayton, Ohio, and worked hard to endure through the 2008 global financial crisis. Like the Zhengs, they also rely on Chinatown businesses for such things as restaurant equipment, menus, and job recruiting. Guan still uses an accountant from New York and often returns there for personal reasons, such as weddings and medical appointments.

Chinese immigration to the United States has a long history. The 1880 US census counted 105,465 Chinese in the United States,<sup>1</sup> and in subsequent decades, several major cities such as San Francisco, New York, and Chicago became the major destinations for Chinese immigrants. In fact, many previous scholars have used Chinatowns in various American cities as research sites for the study of Chinese immigrants.<sup>2</sup> The heavy concentration of studies on Chinatowns reflects the fact that historically, Chinatowns in the United States have been the main residential and work locations for many earlier Chinese low-skilled immigrants, who often found work in Chinese restaurants, laundromats, dry-cleaners, grocery stores, and Chinese souvenir shops.

However, in the past two decades there has been a fundamental shift in the settlement trends for low-skilled Chinese immigrants towards non-traditional destinations and rural areas, driven by the expansion of Chinese restaurants in the United States.<sup>3</sup> By some accounts, the number of Chinese restaurants has reached more than 40,000, greater than the numbers for McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's combined.

A 2014 *New Yorker* article noted that there is one Chinese restaurant in Old Forge, New York, which has a population of only 756.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Pekin Noodle Parlor in Bur, Montana, boasts of being one of the nation's oldest Chinese restaurants, having been in operation for more than a century.<sup>5</sup> The immigrant business owners mentioned at the beginning of this chapter are just two examples of entrepreneurs who have not located in expected places with large concentrations of Chinese immigrants, but in faraway places such as Dayton, Ohio, and Corpus Christi, Texas. The stories of Lisa and Guan draw our attention because they are very different from the typical story of Chinese restaurants located in America's Chinatowns, where significant numbers of Chinese immigrants concentrate. Instead, the two locations are far from any concentration of Chinese immigrants or Asian immigrants in general.

The moment we learn the spatial locations of these restaurants, a whole set of questions arises as far as managing the restaurant work. How do they recruit workers? How do they manage to get restaurant supplies? How do they handle their daily lives (such as housing, seeing a doctor, religious life, raising children) in an environment where there are few other Chinese immigrants? A careful reading of these two stories gives us a hint. For example, both Lisa and Guan use employment agencies in NYC's Chinatown to hire restaurant workers, thus maintaining a continuing economic linkage with NYC's Chinese community. Moreover, they also order Chinese restaurant menus from printing companies in Chinatown. In Lisa's case, it is also interesting to observe that she also employs five Mexican workers and three local white workers. Thus, her enterprise is also building some connections between Chinese immigrant workers and other members of the community, an experience that is certain to facilitate the immigrants' adaptation to their new environment.

To understand the resettlement process of Chinese immigrants to new locations, we need to first understand the expansion of the Chinese restaurant industry. The growth in numbers of Chinese restaurants has been taking place at a spectacular speed. The industry has spread all across the United States in both rural and urban areas and large and small towns. This rapid growth and expansion did not happen accidentally, but rather as a result of multiple forces operating in concert. This book tells the story about this shift in migration patterns among low-skilled Chinese immigrants, from traditional settlement in large cities in the United States to rural and small-town locations in America's heartland. It is a story about immigrants who venture into these faraway places to open new restaurants, but also a story of workers who are willing to leave friends and social networks in New York City to find employment in these restaurants.

For scholars of immigration, this shift in spatial settlement patterns is somewhat unexpected and perhaps even counter-intuitive.

Conventional wisdom about migration often informs us that migrants tend to settle in locations where earlier immigrants had settled.<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that historically, some Chinese immigrants were making a living in some of the locations that we consider new immigrant destinations today. Examples are James Loewen's (1971) study of Mississippi Chinese and Huping Ling's (2004) portrait of Chinese in St. Louis during the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> They provide important insights helping us understand socioeconomic pathways and race relations in new immigrant destinations historically. Today's spatial dispersion of Chinese immigrants is qualitatively different, as reflected in the demographic scope of this dispersion, the involvement of different institutions, and social and economic networks maintained with New York City's Chinatown.

Broadly speaking, this new pattern of spatial diffusion of immigrants is not limited to the case of Chinese immigrants alone but is occurring among other immigrants in the United States as well. For example, in 1990, 34.5 percent of all recent immigrants in the United States settled in California, as compared to only 18.95 percent in 2010. For Mexican immigrants, the story is even more striking. In 1990, 60.66 percent of recent Mexican immigrants went to California, whereas only 27 percent of recent Mexican immigrants settled in California in 2010. A similar pattern is observed for Asian immigrants as well, as 37 percent of recent Asian immigrants could be found in California in 1990 as compared to only 25 percent by 2010. These findings are based on data from the decennial US Census.

Using data from the American Community Survey for 2001–2017, I make a more detailed analysis of broad spatial patterns pertaining to recently arrived low-skilled Chinese immigrants. I rely on the diversity index, a measure of spatial pattern of immigrant settlement in fifty states and the District of Columbia. The diversity index equals 0 when all Chinese immigrants reside in one state and equals 100 when Chinese immigrants evenly distribute across all states. I report diversity index values for three years (2001, 2007, and 2017). The diversity index for Chinese immigrant restaurant workers was 59 in 2001 and

rose to 68 in 2008. It rose further to 75 in 2017. When we broaden the scope to include all low-skilled workers (immigrants with education less than or equal to high school), we observe similar patterns (with a diversity index of 57 in 2001, 64 in 2008, and 66 in 2017), with a slightly lower diversity trend as compared to restaurant workers.

This new pattern of the spatial diffusion of immigrants is important for several reasons. First, as compared to traditional destinations, the new destinations do not have immigrant organizations and religious institutions with personnel who speak immigrants' native languages. These two major institutions have been known to facilitate the immigrant assimilation process for many decades. In addition, immigrants who pursue the American dream in new destinations often lose access to immigrant social networks that are critical for adaptation in American society. Second, immigration scholars are also concerned that immigrants in new destinations often confront uncertain prospects regarding race relations, given that local residents in new destinations have little experience with immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Finally, since this spatial diffusion is taking place at a time of rising use of technology and social media, it provides some new opportunities to identify emerging empirical patterns and develop new theories to understand the spatial settlement of immigrants. As I will demonstrate later in this book, just as in the case of transnationalism that connects immigrant origins and destinations, the rising popularity of new technology (including new social media platforms) allows immigrants and entrepreneurs in new destinations to maintain linkages with immigrant organizations and churches in ways that were unthinkable only a few years ago.

Not surprisingly, the dramatic shift in settlement patterns has stimulated increasing research in this direction. Massey and Capoferro suggested four explanations for this diversification of settlement patterns. The first factor focuses on the effect of the Legalization Program from the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 that resulted in the saturation of the labor market, especially in California. IRCA allowed nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants to

receive permanent resident status in the United States. The second factor is the passing of Proposition 187 in 1994, which made California a less welcoming environment for immigrants.<sup>9</sup> The third factor is the “selective hardening of the border” that deflects immigrants to other destinations. However, immigrants also have a choice to move to other states once they cross the border. Nevertheless, they seem to settle in new destinations, at least for a while. The final factor is the changing geography of labor demand as a result of the restructuring of production. Significant factors include the deunionization of the workforce, subcontracting of labor (outsourcing), and the relocation of plants to non-metropolitan areas to avoid unions. As a result of this restructuring, jobs become less attractive to native workers and immigrants become a reliable and flexible substitute workforce.<sup>10</sup> Several studies provided evidence that is consistent with this perception.<sup>11</sup> In the case of California, Light’s recent work points to the role of the increasingly expensive local housing market in California, which is less affordable for recent immigrants.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, previous studies have clearly documented the patterns of geographic diversification among recent immigrants and have advanced several explanations for these trends. Much of this work centers on the experience of Mexican and Latin American immigrants (with the notable exception of Flippen and Kim’s contribution).<sup>13</sup> In fiscal year 2007, 41 percent of immigrants came from Latin American countries and 34 percent came from Asian countries.<sup>14</sup> It is important to see if there is a story, perhaps a different story, of geographic diversification for Asian immigrants. Building on this body of recent literature, this book focuses on the geographic diversification of recent Chinese immigrants.

I contribute to the current literature in three ways. First, I study the relocation of both employers (Chinese restaurant owners) and employees. In particular, I aim to identify the underlying forces that drive the diffusion of low-skilled immigrants to non-traditional destinations. In sociology, there has been a long tradition of studying immigrant spatial settlement.<sup>15</sup> However, this spatial assimilation

model tends to look at spatial assimilation within a more or less confined environment, often in a city or major metropolitan area. In the context of immigrants moving to new destinations (often in different states), we need to broaden our theoretical scope to move beyond the vision of one single city or metropolitan area. Second, in the traditional spatial assimilation model, this residential settlement is assumed to be determined mainly by individual-level factors such as income, occupation, and race, among others. I suggest that the extant literature often directly engages in comparisons of immigrants in traditional and new destinations without a clear understanding of how and why this transition to new destinations has happened in the first place. Given the long distances to some of the new destinations and the challenges immigrants often face, I must consider other important players in this settlement process. In our case, these are Chinatown employment agencies and Chinatown buses. Third, I will explore the consequences of settlement in new destinations for employers, employees, and for the future of the immigrant labor market in the United States.

## THE BASIC ARGUMENT OF THE BOOK

Figure 1.1 summarizes the logic and key components of our conceptual framework. The starting point for this framework is the diffusion of Chinese immigrant-owned businesses (mainly Chinese restaurants). The logical flow starts from left to right and the direction of arrows points to the logical link between factors. Sometimes, the logical link has one direction; at other times the logical links can go both ways and the factors reinforce each other. For example, the transportation network facilitates formation of a national labor market, and the national labor market further demands improvement of the transportation infrastructure.

I argue that this process was initially driven by the saturation of the Chinese restaurant market in New York City, which has been a