

The Journey and Trends of Undocumented Chinese Migrants in the United States

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Abstract

In the past two years, a significant portion of the undocumented population entering the US via the Mexican American borders has been Chinese. However, their lives and experiences have gone unnoticed. This study contributed to the source material on migrant illegality that is primarily based on the experiences of Latinx migrants and single adults. It highlights the cyclic and unique struggles faced by undocumented Chinese migrants and their families, especially in how such struggles impact the youth and leave them in a fixated vicious cycle. So, adjustments to immigration policy are a necessary way to address this problem.

Keywords: Immigration, Asylum, U.S. Immigration policy, Economic impact

1. Introduction

The Citizenship Act of 2021 represented the initial efforts of the Biden administration in attempting to alleviate the current refugee crisis. While the act ended with the 117th Congress it still addressed the poor conditions that South American migrants suffered in their home countries, it marked the beginning of increased ease in gaining citizenship. This would later incentivize the waves of undocumented Chinese migrational efforts in their attempts at social mobility and improving economic conditions. According to the Customs and Border Protection agency, from 2022 to 2023 alone, the number of undocumented migrants nearly doubled, from 27,756 to 52,700. The growth has been incredibly rapid: in the first nine months of 2023, the US Border Patrol made 22,187 arrests of Chinese nationals entering the country from Mexico. This was 13 times the number from the same period in 2022 (Mordowanec, 2024). Despite their increasing numbers, the experiences of undocumented Chinese migrants have not been adequately documented or theorized. Much of what is known about how migrants experience illegality is based on studies of Latinx migrants. As the undocumented population becomes more heterogeneous and expansive, so has the urgency and salience of understanding how migrant illegality is experienced across national origin, race/ethnicity, and social class.

2. Methods

This study includes multidisciplinary bodies of research and analysis on undocumented unauthorized Chinese migration, containing in-depth and semi-structured interviews with undocumented migrants, community organizers, and social workers at campsites around the border of San Diego and Tijuana. These series of interviews have shown that restrictive immigration policies exclude most Chinese migrants from legal entry into the US, forcing many to endure dangerous migration routes, incur extraordinary debt, and perpetuate their status of illegality and underrepresentation (NBC 7 San Diego, 2229405). A qualitative research design is also used to explore the

experiences and challenges faced by undocumented Chinese migrants in the United States. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives, including undocumented migrants, community organizers, and social workers at campsites around the border of San Diego and Tijuana. Inclusion criteria for undocumented migrants included individuals who migrated from China to the United States without legal documentation, adults and youths willing to share their experiences, and migrants who have lived in the United States for at least six months. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, and conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their unique experiences. Key questions addressed migration journey, challenges faced, impacts of restrictive immigration policies, economic challenges, effects on daily life and well-being, support systems, and perceptions of the future. Statistical analysis is used to observe patterns of data regarding migrant movements. This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to protect the rights and well-being of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained using pseudonyms, and data was securely stored.

3. Results

Several factors have contributed to this steady and sharp increase in recent years. Primarily, the strict lockdown measures implemented during COVID-19 have increased people's frustration with authoritarian government control and a continuously deteriorating economy. The rising living costs, in addition to diminishing opportunities and freedom, have made migration economically and ideologically even more desirable during this time. Additionally,

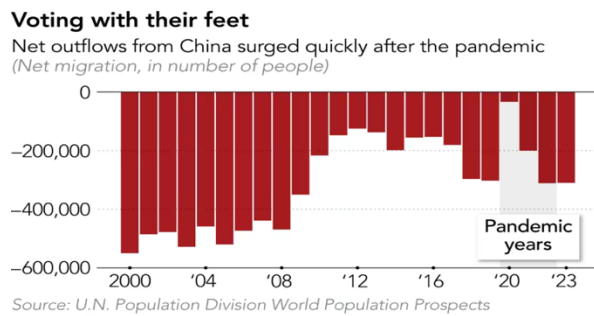


Figure 1. Net outflow of migration to the United States from China.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act (INA) of 1965 repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act and replaced it with a new system of national origin quotas that gave preference to immigrants with families already living in the US or skills deemed useful. Although the INA was meant to increase migration opportunities for Chinese migrants, it set the same annual caps on employer and family-based visas for all countries. It created enormous backlogs of visa applications for populous countries like China, which had over 1.4 billion people as recorded in 2022. As of January 2020, the US State Department was still processing family-based and employer-based visas filed almost a decade ago by Chinese applicants. In 2021, Chinese B-visa applications saw a rejection rate of more than 79%. Though that number came down to 30% in 2022, the visa refusal rate for Chinese nationals has varied, showing signs of a steady increase from just 9% in 2014.

Thus, entering the US through legal pathways is difficult even for highly skilled migrants or those with family relations already living in the US legally, let alone for below-working-class migrants without family connections and outstanding educational backgrounds. Socioeconomic status of migrants is also critical in determining their access to lawful entry into the US due to mobility restrictions imposed by both China and the US. According to one social worker volunteering at a campsite in Jacumba Springs, China has historically limited passports to the most educated and well-connected; As such, even with modern reforms, it is difficult for residents of undeveloped rural areas to obtain complete documents for foreign travel without impossibly complicated procedures. On the other hand, the US only issues visas to those who can prove they have significant financial ties and social stability in their home countries and who are unlikely to overstay their visas as undocumented immigrants.

However, low-income, less-educated migrants living outside of major urban centers are rarely able to meet the criteria required to travel to the US on a tourist visa. Additionally, the popularization of online social media has heightened coverage and fueled people's knowledge and motivation to enter the US without inspection, evading

immigration control. One blogger, Weiheng Wang, has shared his experience on X (formerly Twitter) since August 2022. He is only one of many bloggers who are sharing more information about smuggling routes, local guides’ contacts, and subsequent legal procedures after arrival on Chinese social media. One blogger who transported reuploaded his videos to Chinese TikTok (Douyin) quickly gained over 30,000 followers and 200,000 views within one month. The first forum that appeared upon a simple search of Weiheng Wang on Chinese Quora, Zhihu, prompted over 35 million views. This multi-billion-dollar underground “smuggling” industry has increasingly been brought under the spotlight and has caught many people’s attention as a feasible alternative to enter the US to pursue a better life.

One of the striking ways in which the violence of the immigration and asylum systems becomes visible in the Chinese migrant community is through its effect on families. Children of undocumented immigrants inevitably bear the burden of physical and emotional strain. On one hand, their journey to the United States unfolds through dangerous routes, with harsh natural climates and criminal dangers that severely threaten their physical safety and mental health at a young age. On the other hand, the social and economic pressure on new undocumented immigrants forces most parents to leave their children back in their home country until they are well-settled. This process which could take years, causing the youths’ anxiety and pain of separation from their loved ones throughout their development. Furthermore, once in the US, their life of instability and foreignness is pursued persists as they are unsupported and unacknowledged under due to various technical and social barriers, making their path stuck within the undocumented immigrant community and struggling to find a way up. limiting their social mobility.

For these migrants aiming to enter the US without legitimate paperwork, a minority who Migrants wishing to enter the United States without legitimate paperwork but are financially and resourcefully affluent might obtain a Japanese or Schengen visa and fly directly to Mexico, then cross the border into the US. However, a cheaper and more popular route is to fly to Latin

American countries that have comparatively low visa requirements for Chinese nationals and travel north towards the US-Mexico border to cross without inspections. Many migrants choose to fly first fly to visa-exempt countries like Ecuador, then trek through the Darién Gap in Central America, and continue north through nine countries to Mexico before crossing the desert and the southern US border. Serving as the only land corridor between Central and South America, the 66-mile-long Darién Gap is one of the world’s most dangerous migration routes. In recent years, as authorities have cracked down on other routes via air and sea, the Darién Gap has become a primary transit hub for migrants entering the US. Over 15,500 Chinese migrants were counted in Panama after traversing the jungle. This figure is nearly eight times as many as from the same period in 2022 and more than 40 times that of 2021.

Even after successfully exiting the Darién Gap, migrants still face many challenges. They will continue to cross more than six borders, each with the risk of being detained or deported. Even after they reach the US southern border, individuals often are subjected to long waits in the freezing desert. The lucky ones may get picked up by border patrol vans in a matter of hours, while the less fortunate can be forced to camp out for days in places such as the Jacumba Springs desert, with nothing but the supplies they were able to bring along their journey and belongings left over from previous migrants. Migrants that come in families prove to be on the



Figure 2. Diagram of the typical route taken by Chinese migrants to reach the United States-Mexico border.

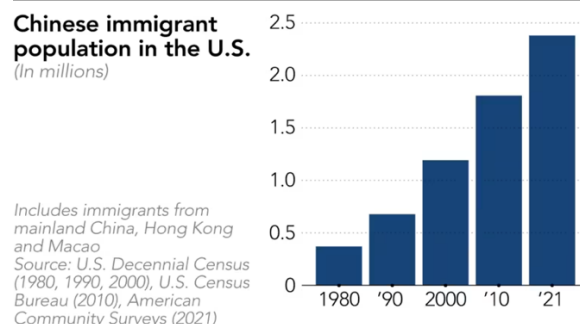


Figure 3. Table showing Chinese immigrant population in the U.S. since 1980.

luckier end, as the U.S. Customs & Border Protection vans transporting them to immigration centers prioritize younger children. However, several interviews that were conducted with single travelers portray the dire situation the less fortunate are in. A woman in her 40s from Qing Yuan, Guang Dong, recounts how she had been beside the border for two days, living inside tents that previous migrants had left over. She stated, “I do not want blankets; I just want to get out of here.” The chilling nights of the desert were detrimental to her body, and even thick mattresses could not keep her warm; she had no access to hot food and water to maintain her body temperature. Another middle-aged man from Jiang Su, China, was residing in the same camping spot and had gotten a fever. He had left his wife and kids in China and traveled in the same daring route as the women through the Darién Gap and finally arrived in the United States. However, even at the end of his journey, environmental and physical factors threaten to render his efforts for economic improvement vain. Even for those who manage to arrive at the immigration center on vans, many are deported back to their homeland, especially with the increased scrutiny and declined approval rates of Chinese asylum applications in recent years. However, even for groups who ostensibly benefit from the asylum regime, this does not mean that their ordeal is over. The application process is marked by an expensive, lengthy, and indeterminate legal process. Based on our interviews with migrants and legal service providers, the legal fees incurred by Chinese migrants filing asylum claims range from \$8,000 to over \$15,000 per applicant. Over 800,000 asylum cases are currently pending in immigration courts, with waits of seven to eight years. Approval rates across immigration judges range widely between 10 and 80 percent, adding more uncertainty to these people’s destinies. Such a journey is strikingly dangerous and disturbing to any well-equipped adult, let alone young children who are left with no choice but to follow in the steps of their parents.

The journey of Chinese undocumented immigrants leaves a permanent effect on family bonds and dynamics. It is common for these migrants to leave their children behind, resulting in extended periods of family separation. This pattern has been particularly stark within the Chinese migrant community, given their supremely high rates of migration compared to other ethnic groups. Criminal defense attorney Marc Carlos said Chinese migrants are paying human traffickers significantly more to cross the border. Carlos said prices for smuggling Chinese migrants have skyrocketed, with average payments ranging from \$40,000 to \$60,000. In comparison, the going rate for smuggling Latinos through the San Ysidro crossing is \$6,000 to \$10,000. As a result, only about 12.6% of all Chinese undocumented immigrants come as a family unit, compared with over 85% being single adults. Furthermore, only a small number of 206 accompanied minors was shown in the statistics. The high costs of migration often prevent families from bringing younger children who cannot contribute financially immediately upon arrival.

Parents who must be smuggled into the US often work long hours with significantly reduced salaries to pay off smuggling debts, leading to situations where US-born children are sent back to China to live with grandparents or other relatives until they are school-aged (Yoshikawa 2011). Even US-born children are sent back to their relatives and suffer from separation from their parents despite their own legal residency status because no one spares the time and energy to take care of them in the US. A social worker from a nonprofit serving Chinese immigrants observed that “Chinese parents would never bring their young children to work long hours in America. But by the time they are 16 or 17, they are pressured to [migrate to the United States] to make money.” One woman had brought two of her children to the US: a girl at the age of 15 and a boy who was 17. She noted that her husband had come to the US by the same means a year earlier and had settled in New York. The husband’s business in He Bei, China, had failed, and the family racked up large amounts of debt. When questioned, the woman’s foremost wish was to guarantee a successful future for her two children. The two children were both extremely close to the date of college applications, and neither had achieved fluency in English nor demonstrated much motivation to integrate into society. While the parents are trying their best to obtain more opportunities for their family, the emotional stress of their children proves difficult to surpass. The consequences of these migration strategies, including separation from immediate families and US culture, are profound. These children face significant educational and social integration challenges when they do arrive. The late age of arrival and pressure to work long hours at young ages also makes attending school difficult. Moreover, they often face language barriers and cultural shock, without direct and close support to lead them through a period of adjustment. These teenagers are thereby less likely to succeed academically and more likely to be ostracized by peers. This vicious cycle induces them to be less engaged in school and the community, often leaving school early for low-paying, labor-intensive jobs. Debt may also shape undocumented youths’ experience of illegality by

preventing many from being able to benefit from DACA. A key provision of DACA eligibility is arrival in the country before the 16th birthday and holding a high school diploma or GED. Since the immigration and asylum systems induce family separation, debt, and convoluted migration routes. As such, undocumented Chinese youth tend to be older and may have never finished secondary education, thus not being able to satisfy the prerequisites for governmental assistance.

4. Discussion

Over recent decades, there has been a sharp increase in the number of these migrants, who face severe challenges exacerbated by tight immigration policies and a strict asylum system. This detailed examination explores the complex and strenuous journey undertaken by undocumented Chinese migrants as they confront a myriad of legal barriers, perilous migration paths, and significant financial burdens in their quest for a better life in the United States. The journey is fraught with risks, including dangerous treks, dependence on human traffickers, and usurpation by police forces along the way. More importantly, the hardships faced by these migrants extend beyond individual struggles, impacting generations, particularly their children, who encounter distinct challenges. These children of undocumented migrants typically grow up hidden in the margins, trapped in a cycle of poverty and exclusion, and deprived of opportunities readily available to their peers. Their early years are characterized by instability and limited access to crucial services, which greatly restricts their potential development for better livelihoods.

Through this analysis, it is clear that reforming the immigration system and policies is a necessary and urgent task to control the surge in illegal immigration from China. Analysts agree that some level of law enforcement is needed to stop illegal immigration, but the past 100 years of history tell us that strengthening law enforcement is unlikely to effectively reduce illegal immigration, but opening up avenues for legal entry and work may be successful. In 1954, then-Immigration Bureau Director Joseph Swain relaxed the rules of the Mexican Farmworker Program to encourage growers to use legal Mexican farm workers instead of unauthorized immigrants.

The impact on illegal immigration was huge. Between 1953 and 1959, Border Patrol arrests fell 96 percent (from 835,311 to 32,996) and according to the Congressional Research Service, “There is no doubt that the Bracero Program...helped end the illegal immigration problem in the mid-1940s and 1950s.” Between fiscal years 2005 and 2015, apprehensions of Mexicans at the Southwest border fell 82 percent, from 1,106,40 to 186,017. More and more Mexicans are entering the U.S. using legal H-2A visas (for agricultural work) and H-2B visas (for non-agricultural seasonal work). (The H-2A and H-2B categories are part of a 1986 law.) (Anderson.S 2023)So, some work visas should be designed and issued based on the strengths of Chinese immigrants.

China is known as the world's factory, and their workers are skilled and highly capable. As manufacturing returns to the U.S., the U.S. does need these skilled workers. Other occupations that Americans are more averse to and have huge vacancies can also be opened to Chinese workers, such as elderly care, nannies, etc. In addition, the number of quotas for legal Chinese immigrants should be adjusted. China is a big country with a population of 1.4 billion, but the number of immigration quotas given to China each year is the same as that of other countries, resulting in the quota being issued one to two months after the beginning of each fiscal year, and a large number of cases accumulating year after year. Take EB-5 for investment in the United States as an example. The current waiting period is just up to 2015. (with a latest waiting period table for September) Another solution is to strengthen cooperation and diplomatic relations with the Chinese government. Foreigners who fail to obtain asylum status and stay in the United States are generally required to be repatriated. However, US officials cannot force other countries to accept their citizens. In most cases, this would not be a problem. However, there are more than a dozen countries that are not very cooperative with this process, and China is among them. Currently, China's population is shrinking for the first time in 60 years, with fewer births than deaths. In addition to this, China's economic growth rate has dropped to the lowest point in 40 years. From this perspective, China may need these citizens who have left, so this should be a good time to negotiate. At the same time, the Chinese government should be implored to enforce against and ban the propaganda of human trafficking and human traffickers on Chinese social media, and share information in mainstream media to expose the hardships and dangers of the long journey that migrants have to face.

5. Conclusion

Addressing these challenges requires more than policy changes; it calls for a collective effort to build and strengthen community-based support structures. Advocacy and public awareness are vital in shedding light on the unique difficulties faced by undocumented Chinese migrants and their families. There is a pressing need for more substantial, community-driven initiatives that provide not only legal assistance, but also educational support, career counseling, and mental health services designed specifically for the needs of second-generation undocumented immigrants. Such programs are crucial in breaking the cycle of exclusion and empowering these youths to succeed. While large inflows of immigrants, whether undocumented or legal, have often been met with massive backlash from society. However, it may not be necessary for individuals to bear such amounts of rejection. One example of this may be the Mariel Boatlift of 1980. Large amounts of political prisoners and exiles from Cuba had been allowed into the ports of Miami as per an agreement between President Jimmy Carter and Fidel Castro. While these migrants from Cuba were seen to pose a potential threat to the economy and society, they were largely successful in their integration into the US. The migrants were quick to assimilate and obtain job positions, which had little adverse effect on the economy and the people of the US. This resulted in a 7 percent increase of the worker population in the Miami labor market, in addition to over a 20 percent increase in the Cuban working population. (Card, D 1990)The success stories of these Cuban immigrants crossing the border into the United States can serve as a model for illegal immigrants from China. Every Chinese migrant who crosses the border illegally from China is an individual with a variety of professional skills that can benefit society and the economy. As a community and society, it is imperative to take steps to create an inclusive environment that recognizes and respects the value and potential of every person to improve human life. This includes advocating for policy reforms that provide a clearer path to citizenship and clear up the legal uncertainty faced by many undocumented families. Through persistent advocacy and broad support, the status of undocumented Chinese immigrants and their descendants can be secured and it can be ensured that they can fully and freely participate in the societies in which they live. This effort is not only a policy issue, but also a human rights issue that requires an immediate and lasting commitment from all sectors of society.

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