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Profiles of Asian American Subgroups in Massachusetts: Chinese Americans in Massachusetts

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INSTITUTE for ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Chinese Americans *in Massachusetts*

This report profiles Chinese Americans in Massachusetts by presenting an overview of statewide census data as well as highlighting in more detail Chinese Americans living in four communities: Boston's Chinatown, Quincy, Malden and Newton. This profile is the first in a series on Asian American subgroups in the state.

Chinese Americans are the largest Asian American group in Massachusetts, constituting more than one-third of the Asian Americans in the state. Massachusetts continues to attract Chinese, with their population increasing by 57% during the 1990s, while the total population in the state grew by only 5.5%. The population of Chinese Americans is estimated to have increased by more than 30% between 2000–2004 (Table 1).

Chinese Americans are a highly diverse group, consisting of new immigrants, as well as those who have lived in the U.S. for generations. They are urban and suburban, low-income and affluent, restaurant workers and scientists. They trace their ancestry to mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and other areas of the world. They also speak a variety of Chinese dialects. While Toisanese and Cantonese were originally the dominant dialects in the Chinese American community, Mandarin and other dialects such as Min or Fukienese are used much more widely than before.

Chinese Americans in Massachusetts are highly concentrated in Greater Boston. About half of all Chinese in the state live in six cities and towns: Boston, Quincy, Cambridge, Malden, Newton and Brookline (Table 2). While the center of the Chinese American community in the Boston area has been Chinatown for many years, newer communites have formed in cities such as Quincy and Malden. In addition, significant concentrations of Chinese Americans live in more affluent suburbs such as Newton and Lexington.

The median age of Chinese in the state is 33.0, which is somewhat younger than that of the overall population at 36.5. Nearly 70% of Chinese in Massachusetts are foreign-born and of these, about one-quarter arrived in the U.S. in the five years prior to the 2000 U.S. Census. Only 4.5% of the Chinese American population arrived in

Table 1. Chinese American Population in Massachusetts

1990	2000	2004 est.
53,792	84,392	110,984

Percent change 1990–2000: 56.9%
Percent change 2000–2004: 31.5%

Table 2. Cities and Towns in Massachusetts with the Largest Chinese American Population

	1990	2000	% change
Boston	16,701	19,638	17.6%
Quincy	4,153	9,184	121.1%
Cambridge	3,616	4,854	34.2%
Malden	1,584	4,504	184.3%
Newton	2,211	4,047	83.0%
Brookline	2,662	3,509	31.8%
Somerville	1,091	1,862	70.7%
Lexington	1,001	1,692	69.0%
Randolph	1,130	1,516	34.2%
Waltham	666	1,472	121.0%
Framingham	714	1,215	70.2%
Amherst	1,219	1,188	-2.5%
Worcester	694	1,181	70.2%

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the U.S. before 1965. Of the foreign-born Chinese residents in the state, about one-half are naturalized citizens.

Limited English-speaking ability is an issue for a significant number of adult Chinese Americans and is especially acute among elders. One in five Chinese Americans between the ages of 18 and 64 speaks English "not well" or "not at all," while 69.2% of Chinese Americans aged 65 or older report similar levels of English attainment (Table 3).

Table 3. English Proficiency by Age for Chinese Americans in Massachusetts

	5–17 yrs.	18–64 yrs.	65+ yrs.
"Not Well/ Not at All"	7.3%	20.9%	69.2%
"Well"	20.5%	26.0%	11.7%
"Very Well"	53.2%	40.1%	10.9%
"Only English"	19.0%	13.0%	8.2%

The median household income for Chinese in the state, $51,708, slightly exceeds that of the total population, $50,502, while the per capita income for Chinese, $23,203, slightly trails that of the total population, $25,952. A disagregated comparison of the household income distribution of Chinese Americans with that of the overall population reveals more detail about the economic status of Chinese American households (Figure 1). While the distribution of Chinese American household incomes follows a pattern similar to that of the total population, it can be noted that the percentage of Chinese American households in all categories at $100,000 and above slightly exceeds that of total population households. The greatest disparity between the two groups, however, is in the lowest income category (less than $10,000) where 12.9% of Chinese American households are found, as compared to 8.8% of overall households. The family poverty rate for Chinese in the state is also higher than that for the total population: 9.9% as compared to 6.7%. However, Chinese American households and general households receive public assistance income at the same rate, 2.9%, indicating the possibility of an underutilization of public assistance by Chinese Americans.

Evidence of polarization in the socioeconomic standing of Chinese in Massachusetts can also be seen in occupation data. Chinese Americans are more highly concentrated in the management, professional, and related occupational census category than the general population. At the same time, 16.5% of Chinese males work in food preparation and serving related occupations, as compared to only 3.8% of the general male population. A higher percentage of Chinese females, 8.3%, work in production occupations as compared to 4.7% of the general female population. Chinese Americans are less likely than the general population to work in sales and office occupations, and construction, extraction, and maintenance occupations.

In the area of educational attainment, Chinese Americans are more concentrated at

Figure 1. Household Income Distribution for Chinese Americans and Total Population in Massachusetts

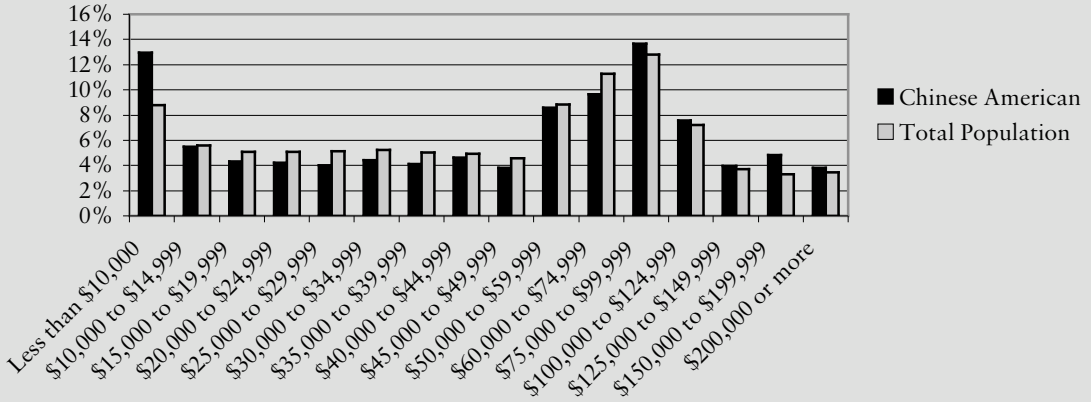
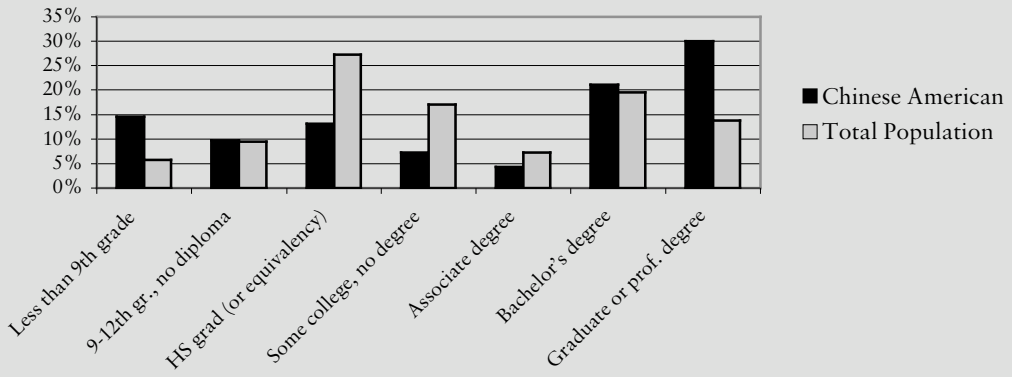


Figure 2. Educational Attainment for Chinese Americans and Total Population 25 Years and Older in Massachusetts



both the high and low ends of the spectrum than the general population. Just over half of Chinese Americans over the age of 25 have received a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree as compared to 33.2% of the general population. On the other hand, 14.5% of Chinese Americans in the same age group have received less than a 9th grade education as compared with 5.8% of the overall population (Figure 2).

Chinese American households in the state are on average larger than those of the overall population, 2.9 as compared with 2.5 persons. The homeownership rate for Chinese Americans is below that of the general population, 51.2% as compared to 62.0%.

Chinatown: The Traditional Hub[1]

Since its beginnings in the 1870s, Boston's Chinatown has been the center for Chinese in Massachusetts socially, culturally, and economically. Historically, its residents have been low-income Chinese Americans, many with limited-English proficiency who have lived within an ethnic enclave either as a stepping stone or for a longer period of time. Chinese from all over Eastern Massachusetts, however, have visited the neighborhood to utilize its extensive network of social service agencies, businesses, and organizations. To some extent, Chinatown has been a gathering place for Asians of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds. Chinatown has also played an important role as a nexus for political activism for Chinese Americans and Asian Americans more generally.

Originally a six-block area bounded by Harrison Avenue and Essex, Hudson, and Kneeland Streets, Chinatown began to expand in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Chinatown Community Assessmsent Report 2). Shortly thereafter, however, Chinatown's land area was reduced significantly due to urban renewal projects and institutional expansion. More recently, the neighborhood, which borders the financial district, downtown shopping area, and historic sites, has attracted the attention of real estate developers. As large office, retail, and luxury or market-rate housing complexes have risen, community organizers for many years have struggled to protect the area from unchecked development. Gentrification, however, is fundamentally changing the nature of the neighborhood. Along with increased traffic and congestion, Chinatown is becoming less affordable for low-income individuals and less concentrated by Chinese residents. The next decennial census will no doubt reflect these dramatic changes.

Some demographic changes are already evident in available data. As a percentage of the total population living in Chinatown, Asian Americans decreased from 71.4% in 1990 to 57.1% in 2000. The number of Whites more than doubled while the number of Asians increased by just 6.8% during the 1990s. Over 90% of Asians living in Chinatown are Chinese (Table 4).

[1]Current boundaries for Chinatown are defined in this report as U.S. Census tracts 701, 702, and 704.

Table 4. Population in Chinatown

	1990	2000	% change
Asian American	4,915	5,250	6.8%
Chinese American	4,701	4,828	2.7%
White	1,398	2,895	107.1%
Black/Afr. Am.	490	664	35.5%
Total Population	6,887	9,196	33.5%

That Chinatown is home to a large number of seniors is reflected in the median age of Chinese Americans in Chinatown which is 45.4, considerably higher than the median age of 36.5 for the general population statewide. Almost one in four Chinese males and one in three Chinese females are at least 65 years old.

Fifty-seven percent of Chinese Americans in Chinatown are citizens, a figure somewhat lower than that for the Chinese Americans statewide (64.7%). A somewhat larger percentage of Chinese Americans in Chinatown are foreign-born (79.7%) than in the state (69.9%).

Chinese residents in Chinatown are much more limited in English language skills as compared with their statewide counterparts. Fifty-seven percent of working-age Chinese Americans (18–64) speak English "not well" or "not at all", while over 84.6% aged 65 and older experience a similar English language barrier.

The median income for Chinese American households in Chinatown is $13,046, which is about one-quarter that of Chinese American households statewide. The per capita income is $10,691, less than half of that for Chinese Americans statewide. The family poverty rate is three times that of Chinese Americans statewide—almost one-third of Chinese American families in Chinatown are earning below the poverty level. These income levels are significantly below those of the general population in the city of Boston which are $39,629 and $23,353 respectively. In addition, the family poverty rate in Chinatown is significantly higher than for the general population in Boston which is 19.5%.

Chinatown residents are concentrated in low-level occupations. More than one in two Chinese males are employed in service occupations, most of which are in the food industry. One in four Chinese females are employed in service occupations, although only about half of those are related to the food industry. Chinese female residents of Chinatown are also highly concentrated in production occupations (Table 5).

Chinese Americans living in Chinatown have a much lower level of educational attainment than their statewide counterparts. One in four males has less than a ninth-grade education, and only 8.1% hold a college degree or above. More than 50% of females have less than a ninth-grade education, and only one in ten holds a college degree or above.

The average size of Chinese American households in Chinatown is 2.4, less than the statewide average. And, not surprisingly, most housing units in Chinatown are rental units. Only 3.5% of housing units are owner-occupied.

Quincy & Malden: The New Communities

With the Chinese population in Greater Boston exploding since immigration reforms in the 1960s, with the land area in Chinatown diminishing, and with rents in Boston escalating, Chinese began settling in areas outside of Boston proper. Beginning in the 1980s, two Chinese American communities began forming just north and south of Boston in Quincy and Malden. These two cities were attractive because they were still close enough to Chinatown for an easy commute, were accessible by the subway, and offered more affordable housing with opportunities to

Table 5. Selected Occupation by Sex for Chinese Americans in Chinatown

	Male	Female
Management, professional & related	14.3%	23.1%
Service	52.1%	27.8%
Food preparation and serving related	*47.7%*	*14.6%*
Sales and office	13.5%	27.8%
Construction, extraction, and maintenance	6.6%	0.7%
Production, transportation, and material moving	13.5%	20.5%

Table 6. Population of Chinese Americans in Quincy and Malden

	Quincy	Malden
Chinese Americans in 1990	4,153	1,584
Chinese Americans in 2000	9,184	4,504
Percent change since 1990	121.1%	184.3%
Percent of Asian American population	67.8%	57.1%
Percent of Total Population	10.4%	8.0%

buy real estate. In general, the socioeconomic standing of Chinese Americans in these two cities is higher than that of Chinese Americans in Chinatown and lower than that of Chinese Americans statewide.

During the 1990s, the Chinese American population increased dramatically in Quincy and Malden—by 121.1% in Quincy and 184.3% in Malden (Table 6). Quincy's Chinese American community is now far larger in number than Chinatown's, and Malden's is quickly approaching that size. Despite their growing numbers, Chinese Americans in these two cities are still striving to build community structures and gain political influence in city affairs.

Unlike Chinatown, the Chinese residents and businesses in Quincy and Malden are scattered throughout the city rather than concentrated in a single area. In Quincy, Chinese residents are heavily concentrated to the north of the city while restaurants, businesses, and social service agencies are scattered on or near the long stretch of Hancock Street. In south Quincy there are several restaurants and a 90,000 square foot shopping plaza with an Asian supermarket and small retail businesses.

Chinese Americans in Quincy still have ties to Chinatown, but increasingly they can meet their needs locally. There are a couple of multi-service Asian American organizations and several social service agencies that are Chinatown-based but have branches in Quincy. In addition, the mainstream nonprofit service community has made significant efforts to serve Chinese Americans. There are two festivals held every year and numerous cultural and religious organizations in Quincy including two Chinese language schools (one Cantonese and one Mandarin), the largest Buddhist temple in the state, and a number of churches.

In Malden, Chinese Americans are concentrated to the west of the city near the subway line while businesses and social services agencies tend to be located around Malden Center. There are only a few organizations that primarily serve the Chinese and Asian American communities, and mainstream agencies generally provide only limited access to services. Many residents commute to Chinatown for services.

Chinese Americans in Quincy and Malden are also part of larger Asian American populations. In Quincy, although Chinese Americans account for approximately 68% of the Asian American population, there are also small numbers of Vietnamese (1,679) and Indians (1,127). In Malden, Chinese Americans make up a smaller proportion of the Asian American population (57.1%). Vietnamese account for 17% of Asian Americans, and Indians, 12.2%.

In Quincy and Malden, the Chinese American population consists mainly of a combination of new immigrants directly from Asia, former residents of Chinatown, and former residents of other parts of the Boston metropolitan area. While the percentage of Qunicy's Chinese American population that is foreign-born is about the same as Chinese Americans statewide (approximately 70%), nearly 80% of Chinese Americans in Malden are foreign-born. The percentage of Chinese Americans who are citizens in Quincy (70.2%) is higher than the statewide figure (64.7%) while the percentage of Chinese Americans in Malden who are citizens is only 55.6%.

Both Quincy and Malden have significant numbers of Chinese Americans with limited English skills. In both cities, over one-third of working-age Chinese Americans (18–64 years old) are not proficient in English, while 73.2% of Chinese Americans 65 years and older in Quincy are not proficient in English and fully 95.6% of Chinese Americans 65 years and older in Malden have difficulty communicating in English.

The median household and per capita incomes for Chinese Americans in Quincy and Malden are well above that for households in Chinatown, but below those for

Table 7. Income and Poverty for Chinese Americans and Total Population in Quincy and Malden

	Quincy		Malden	
	Chinese	Total Pop.	Chinese	Total Pop.
Median household income	$46,687	$47,121	$49,375	$45,654
Per capita income	$15,484	$26,001	$18,061	$22,004
Percent of families below poverty level	7.5%	7.2%	9.5%	9.2%

Chinese Americans statewide. In Quincy, the median household income for Chinese Americans is only slightly below that of the general population, but the per capita income is well below that of the general population. Chinese Americans in Malden have on average a higher median household incomes than the general population but a lower per capita income. It should be noted that although Chinese Americans living in Malden have higher incomes by both measures than Chinese Americans living in Quincy, the poverty rate for Chinese Americans in Malden is also higher (Table 7).

As might be expected, Chinese Americans in Quincy and Malden are more concentrated in management, professional and related occupations than Chinese Americans in Chinatown, but less than Chinese Americans statewide. In Quincy, Chinese Americans are employed in these occupations at a rate considerably lower than the overall population while in Malden they are employed in those occupations at a rate higher than the overall population (for males this differential is much more significant than for females) (Table 8). In both cities, Chinese males are much more highly concentrated in service occupations than males from the general population, and Chinese females are much more highly concentrated in the production occupational category than females from the overall population. About one-third of Chinese males in both cities are employed in food preparation and serving related occupations.

Low educational attainment is evidenced in a significant portion of the Chinese American populations in Quincy and Malden. About one in five Chinese Americans living in Quincy and Malden have less than a 9th grade education, compared to between 5% and 6% of the general population. In Quincy, only 8% of Chinese Americans hold a college degree or above, a rate lower that of the general population (10%). In Malden, however, 18.7% of Chinese Americans hold a college degree or higher, compared to 9.9% of the general population.

Table 8. Selected Occupation by Sex for Chinese Americans and Total Population in Quincy and Malden

	Quincy		Malden	
	Chinese	Total Pop.	Chinese	Total Pop.
Male				
Management, professional & related	28.0%	37.3%	43.1%	33.9%
Service	39.9%	16.3%	33.2%	16.3%
Food preparation and serving related	*35.9%*	*8.0%*	*31.9%*	*7.0%*
Sales and office	16.9%	21.5%	9.6%	10.4%
Construction, extraction, and maintenance	5.9%	13.3%	3.6%	13.9%
Production, transportation, and material moving	9.2%	11.4%	10.6%	8.0%
Female				
Management, professional & related	34.4%	43.1%	39.1%	37.3%
Service	18.4%	13.7%	17.1%	17.9%
Food preparation and serving related	*9.4%*	*5.0%*	*8.8%*	*4.1%*
Sales and office	32.6%	38.5%	27.8%	30.4%
Construction, extraction, and maintenance	0.3%	0.6%	0.0%	0.5%
Production, transportation, and material moving	14.2%	0.9%	16.0%	1.0%

The home ownership rate for Chinese Americans in both cities is considerably higher than for the general population. In Quincy, two-thirds of Chinese Americans live in owner occupied housing units, compared with about one-half of the general population. In Malden the respective rates are 53.3% and 43.3%. Chinese Americans in both cities have household sizes roughly 50% larger than that of the overall population, due at least in part to the common occurrence of Chinese Americans in Quincy and Malden living in extended families or with adult children. With more workers per household—and Chinese American households in Quincy and Malden are about twice as likely as the general population to have three or more workers in the family—families are more able to afford to buy real estate.

Newton: A Suburban Home

Several developments in the years during and after World War II contributed to the formation of a Chinese American middle class. Two important factors in this development were a reduction in employment discrimination against Chinese Americans and the repealing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which prohibited the naturalization of Chinese. In addition, a series of legislative acts from the late 1940s to the early 1960s allowed for the immigration of thousands of refugees from the revolution in China, many of these from the educated and professional classes (Wong 126–127).

Newton was one of the suburban cities and towns in Greater Boston where Chinese American families began to settle, many moving from Chinatown or other neighborhoods in Boston. Currently there are second and third generation as well as immigrant Chinese families residing in Newton. There are a variety of cultural activities for Chinese Americans. For example, one of the largest Chinese educational and cultural organizations in Greater Boston is housed in Newton and serves children, adults and seniors. Some of the many activities include dance classes, Chinese classical and folk music ensembles, exercise groups, a language school for children, and a summer camp. In addition, a Chinese evangelical church based in Chinatown recently opened a branch in Newton.

In 2000, there were 4,047 Chinese Americans in Newton, 4.8% of the total population in the city. Chinese Americans in Newton have a higher rate of nativity (39.9%) as compared to Chinese statewide (30.1%) and a higher rate of citizenship (74.5%) than Chinese Americans statewide (64.7%). Still, six out of ten Chinese Americans in Newton are foreign-born and a considerable number experience an English language barrier. One in ten between the ages of 18 and 64 speak English "not well" or "not at all" and nearly one-half aged 65 and older have a similar limited level of English proficiency.

The median income for Chinese American households in Newton, $78,335, is well above the statewide average for Chinese American households, yet below that of the total population in the city, $86,052. The Chinese American per capita income in Newton, $32,057, lags considerably behind that of the overall population in the city, $45,708. In the area of employment, Chinese Americans are concentrated in management, professional, and related occupations at a rate similar to the overall population, about two-thirds. Chinese females are employed in professional occupations at a slightly higher rate than Chinese males and both males and females in the overall population (Table 9).

Table 9. Selected Occupation by Sex for Chinese Americans and Total Population in Newton

	Chinese American		**Total Population**	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Management, professional & related	66.7%	70.7%	65.5%	65.2%
Service	8.9%	8.0%	6.9%	8.8%
Food preparation and serving related	*2.1%*	*4.4%*	*2.3%*	*2.5%*
Sales and office	16.2%	17.4%	18.0%	24.1%
Production, transportation, and material moving	5.3%	3.8%	2.5%	0.3%

Residents of Newton in general have a high level of educational attainment, although there are twice as many Chinese Americans (6.5%) with less than a 9th grade education than the general population (2.3%). Slightly fewer Chinese Americans (64.6%) have obtained a college degree or higher than the overall population (68.0%).

Chinese American households are larger than those in the general population (3.2 and 2.5 respectively). The percentage of Chinese Americans who live in owner-occupied housing units in Newton is very high, 78.4%, while the rate for the general population is 69.6%.

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The Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston utilizes resources and expertise from the University and the community to conduct research on Asian Americans; to strengthen and further Asian American involvement in political, economic, social, and cultural life; and to improve opportunities and campus life for Asian American faculty, staff, and students and for those interested in Asian Americans.

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