The Road Less Taken: The Settlement of Chinese Immigrants in Small Towns

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the settlement process of Chinese immigrants who are settling in small towns in the United States. The process includes three stages: initial settlement, adaptation, and permanent settlement. The analytical framework used to analyze these immigrants’ experience is based on the concept of “familial-to-familiar.” Using a qualitative approach, findings from the study suggest that family ties are one of the main reasons why Chinese immigrants choose to move to small towns. Regardless of how long they have lived in these towns, many interviewees do not feel that they are permanently settled until certain conditions are met: career development, purchase of a house and family reunification. The settlement process also varies across gender lines and socio-economic backgrounds.
Most studies tend to focus on immigrants who reside in metropolitan cities. Although they shed a good understanding of the lives of these immigrants and the settlement process, little is known about the immigrants who live in small towns and rural areas. Furthermore, when studies examine the process of settlement, the aspect of permanent settlement is often not included. Instead, the usual emphasis is on the initial settlement (George and Tsang, 2000), and the process of social and economic adaptation and assimilation (Greene, 1997; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Markovic and Manderson, 2000). This paper attempts to fill the gap in the literature by taking a more integrative approach that examines a group of small-town Chinese immigrants in the whole process of settlement from the initial stage to permanent settlement. The Chinese notion of the family is used to analyze the qualitative data collected from 17 individuals from 11 families.

**Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

Lin (1998) categorizes cities such as New York, Houston, Miami, and Los Angeles as immigration gateway cities. Not only do most of the immigrants who come to the US land in these gateway cities, but they also settle in these metropolitan areas, for some good reasons. For one, they can find many support systems in their ethnic communities. The earlier immigrants settled in cities and formed communities and established organizations to meet their needs related to settlement (Burnet and Palmer, 1989: Chapter 9). Because of this history, cities have a higher concentration of co-ethnics who serve as resources and networks for newcomers. The majority of studies on immigrants tend to focus on immigrants in urban settings, including settlement, incorporation, cultural retention, ethnic identity, and development of ethnic communities.
As Census data indicated, the Asian American population increased to over 10 million in 2000 from just about 1.5 million in 1970 (Min, 2006:26). Chinese represent one of the fastest growing and the largest group among Asian American populations. Chinese are the tenth largest ethnic group in the United States (Parrillo, 2002: 141). Chinese population increased 50.9 percent from about 1.5 million in 1990 to about 2.3 million in 2000 (Brittingham and Cruz, 2004: 4). While top eight states with a large Asian American population includes California, New York, Texas, Hawaii, New Jersey, Illinois, Washington, and Virginia in a descending order in 2000, 29% of all Chinese-American population lived in California, 20% in New York, and 5% in Texas (Min, 2006a:34-36). According to Alba, Logan and Stults (2000), there were 3,205,000 Chinese in New York metropolitan regions (CMSA), 3,078,000 in Los Angeles CMSA, 3,320,000 in San Francisco CMSA, 430,000 in Chicago CMSA, and 131,000 in Miami CMSA in 1990. While gateway cities continue to have a high concentration of immigrants, there are also indications of immigrants opting for rural settlement. Based on an analysis of census data, Lichter and Johnson (2006) find that recent immigrants who arrived in the US in the past five years are bypassing cities and are settling in non-metropolitan areas, although the rate, thus far, is considered modest. The rate of non-metropolitan settlement is quite high for Hispanics, particularly meatpacking and seasonal farm workers (see also Martin, 2003). As indicated by Lichter and Johnson (2006), very few studies focus on how immigrants settle in small towns. In particular, little is known about the settlement patterns of Asians outside metropolitan areas. Due to the small number of Asians in many of the non-metropolitan areas, an analysis of their settlement in such areas could not be carried out with census data. However, while

*Chinese Immigrants in Small Towns: Settling or Struggling*
Asians are the smallest minority group in non-metropolitan areas, their growth rate is the fastest during 1980s (42 percent) (Beale, 1996 as cited in Lichter and Johnson, 2006:111).

The purpose of this paper is to explore an under-researched topic on the settlement process of Chinese in small towns that takes place in three phases: initial settlement, adaptation and permanent settlement, in the context how Chinese notion of family facilitates the settlement process in these three phases. These small towns are located in the Center of New York State which are about four hours drive to nearby major cities such as New York City, Buffalo, and Boston, and about an hour drive to two other middle side cities, Albany and Binghamton.

The Complexity of Settlement

Massey (1986: 681) observes that settlement is a slippery concept. A cursory examination of how different scholars use this concept supports this observation. Studies on the settlement of immigrants have examined such aspects as geographic concentration (White 1998; Ray et al., 1997), spatial aspects (Ma, 2003), the settlement experience of newcomers (George and Tsang, 2000), housing patterns (Ray, 1994) and employment (Greene, 1997). More recent studies have examined changes in these different domains, such as Zhou and Kim’s study (2003) on the impact of globalization on changing immigration and settlement patterns, and Logan, Zhang and Alba’s study (2002) on changes in immigrant enclaves and ethnic communities.

Other scholars have approached settlement as a social process, i.e., as immigrant incorporation for Portes and Zhou (1993) or adaptation for Markovic and Manderson (2000). As an adaptation process, Jones (1986 as cited in Jones and Eyton, 1989)
identified economic, occupational, social-institutional and cultural adaptations as critical during the initial stage. Mwarigha (1998) conceptualized settlement in three stages: immediate, intermediate, and long-term. It has also been recognized that settlement is not a linear and definitive process. New arrivals, for example, do not necessarily stay put in their area of arrival; they may relocate to another area after a period of time (see Lichter and Johnson, 2006).

Massey (1986) examined the process of settlement of Mexican migrants to US which were divided into three phases: the initial “sojourner phase”, “transition phase”, and the final “settlement phase”, a phase which can be understood as permanent settlement, i.e., when immigrants adopt the receiving country as their “home. Massey found that after these migrants built up time in the US, they “come to see themselves as residents of the host society. They have been joined by wives and children, and they have developed widespread contacts with people and institutions in and out of the immigrant enclaves” (1986: 671).

In short, the studies reviewed above show a wide range of approaches and different emphases given to the topic of settlement. Synthesizing these approaches would yield a more systematic framework on settlement. Settlement is a long process, which can be divided into three phases: the initial settlement, adaptation, and permanent settlement. Such division of the process is primarily for analytical purposes while in real life, it is a continuous, ongoing process (see Massey, 1986: 671). For the purpose of this paper, the initial settlement phase refers to the time when immigrants land to the receiving country. However, according to the literature reviewed above, the great majority of the immigrants land and settle in gateway cities. The immigrants in small
towns are more likely a result of relocation. Therefore, the initial settlement phase include immigrants who either land to small towns directly from their homelands or move to small towns from other areas in the US. Adaptation phase refers to the process that can be conceptualized in terms of adaptation and integration in the economic, political, social and cultural domains in which immigrants participate in work forces, political and social organizations, and acculturate themselves in their host society (see Castles and Miller, 2003: 250-2). Immigrants start to engage themselves in exploring and developing about their new country. The permanent settlement phase refers to the final sentiment in which the immigrants adopt their receiving country as “home”.

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study that examines how some Chinese immigrants narrate their immigration and settlement experiences anchored in family relationships. As Booth et al. (1997) argue, the family plays an important economic and social role in immigrant adaptation. Immigrants who come with children and/or elderly parents face additional burdens and difficulties. Individuals within the family experience different complications in the adjustment process (language, job seeking, establishing new networks, gender role changes, isolation, value conflicts between and among generations, etc.) in diverse social domains (school, workplace, home, nursing home, etc.). However, each family member’s challenges in the settlement process are brought back to the family setting in which the family unit shares frustrations and develops strategies to cope with these challenges. Given the importance of the family in Chinese culture, family dynamics will be used as a framework that guides the analysis of this study.
The Chinese Concept of the Family

The importance of the family as the building block of society and the nation can be traced back to the teaching of Confucius, who taught five specific types of relationships: between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friends (Wong, 1998: 26). Three of these relationships are family-based. Each family member is obligated to care for the welfare of other family members. Leung and Nann (1995:2) further argue that the two other relationships are modeled after the family, "because the nation was regarded as an extension of the family order: the emperor as tianzi (son of Heaven); benevolent officials as fumu guan (parental officials who love their subjects as children); and friends as brothers. The nation was regarded as a big family, and the family as a small nation. In fact, the Chinese term for the state guojia literally means 'state-family.' “

The influence of the family in other Chinese institutions is suggested by Serrie's study (1998) of Chinese organizations which shows these as extensions of the family. Based on his study of social organizations in 13 communities in Mainland China and other six overseas countries that include India, Thailand, the Philippines, New Zealand, US, China, and Australia. Serrie classified the bases of Chinese organizations from ‘familial’ to ‘familiar’ into family, surname, residence, origin and contractual. Except for the last type of organization ‘contractual’, the rest are derivative of family ties. Surname organizations are open to members sharing the same surname, who are most likely to be patrilineally related. Residence organizations recruit members on the basis of territorial proximity. Typically, the majority of residents share the same surname in some villages. Origin organizations, such as district and dialect associations extended beyond
the original neighborhoods and villages, reunite overseas Chinese on the basis of a common community of origin in a part of China. Contract-based organizations recruit members on a voluntary basis, usually on the basis of shared interests and needs. Although contractual organizations are not normally family-based, nonetheless they tend to follow this familial model. For example, recruitment of members is often based on kinship, surname, residence or origin. Serrie (1998:214) concluded that "Chinese social organizations seem to build outward from the familial to the familiar, with the principle of contract (and its potential for total prior unfamiliarity in recruitment) least preferred." In other words, this familial-familiar orientation is at the heart of many Chinese social organizations, which play a role in caring for the welfare of their members. This paper adopts Serrie’s concept of the familial to the familiar, to help analyze the immigration and settlement experiences of Chinese immigrants in the United States, particularly those who are settling in small towns. The study adopted Serrie’s familial-to-familiar concept, with some modifications, as an analytical tool for exploring how Chinese immigrants are organizing their lives in small towns.

Methods

These three small towns are located in the Central New York State. The population of the “Hilly County” where these towns were located was 61,676 in 2000. White Americans are the majority population in this country (91.8 percent); African Americans (3.9 percent) comprise the second largest group. Asians accounted for 1.4 percent of the total population. There are 105 Chinese, which is about 0.2 percent of the total population of the county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, the majority of the
Chinese live in a single small town called “Middletown”, the population of which is about 14,000 (US Census Bureau, 2000).

Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to generate data from 17 persons who came from 11 families. Some Chinese known to the author were approached in the beginning of the project, and were asked to refer other Chinese immigrants in the areas to participate in the project. During the initial contact with the potential participants, they were asked whether they were Chinese and immigrants. If they were both Chinese and immigrants, they were invited to participate in the interviews. The interviewees were residents of “Middletown” and two other nearby small towns. Individuals who did not live with their family members in these towns were also recruited, as their experience could be compared with those living with families. Furthermore, the recruitment of interviewees stopped when little new information could be learned from subsequent interviews (see Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The interviews were conducted in the summer of 2003.

Since the goal of this study is to explore the settlement process of Chinese immigrant in small towns, the ethnographic approach was most appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore “the life, behavior, attitudes, and concepts of a particular cultural or social group” (Bentz and Shapiro: 1998: 117). Data for this study were taken from face-to-face, in-depth, and standardized interviews that took place in the interviewers’ homes at a convenient to them and in the language of their choice. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, Mandarin and English. As a qualified interviewee, s/he needed to have the required verbal skills to communicate, as well as a developed sense of independence and self-identity. Only those who were 8 years and
older was the criteria to be interviewed or older were interviewed. Each member of the household was interviewed separately and parental or guardian permission was sought when minors were interviewed. The semi-structured interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions. This type of qualitative research instrument allowed the interviewees to elaborate their immigration experience in relation to the notion of family and their views on settlement. It also allowed the researcher to probe into how these immigrants perceived their situations and what assumptions they brought into their decision making (see Anderson, 1999:11). Interviews were transcribed from the tapes. The analysis of the data started during the process of interviewing. The researcher identified themes related to the research questions. New questions were developed in order to probe further into data provided by the interviewees. The researcher also identified themes and relationships among concepts by reading and re-reading the transcribed data to refine the themes and concepts (see Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

**Demographic Characteristics**

Eleven families were interviewed. A total of 17 individuals, 10 females and 7 males, from these 11 families participated in the study. Eleven of them came from Mainland China, three from Taiwan, and three from Hong Kong. Two were children. One was nine years old, and the other was ten years old. Two were in their 20s, six were in their 30s, five in their 40s, two in their 50s.

These 17 individuals came from a total of eleven families. Nine of them lived with their family members in these small towns. Two interviewees’ families were still in Mainland China. All of the family members from four families were interviewed. Only one member was interviewed from other families.
The occupational distribution of the interviews appeared to be shaped by the labor market of small towns. Five were professionals, one worked full time in an office, seven worked in Chinese restaurants or restaurant-related businesses; two were homemakers and two were students. Except for the full-time students and a retiree, all were working full-time. Their fluency in English varied a great deal. The majority of the interviewees who worked in restaurants had very limited English, but nonetheless, they could manage to perform their jobs with their limited language skills. In contrast, the professionals were fluent in English. Their length of residency in the US also varied a great deal, ranging from three years to 40 years. Nine out of the 17 interviewees had resided in the US between 10 and 30 years. Some of them came with different types of visa such as student visa, visa for business purposes, and later they applied for permanent residency status. Three women came to the U.S. for marriage. Some came illegally. However, all had legal status in the US at the time of the study.

The three women who came to the US for marriage and one professional came to these towns directly from their homelands without any prior living experiences in other parts of the US. Other interviewees had lived in other cities and small towns in the US for various length of time for employment and/or studies.

All of the adult interviewees were married. All couples were Chinese, except two Chinese women who were married to white Americans. Of this group, five were married prior to migration; the rest got married after coming to the US. Some male interviewees migrated alone and later sponsored their family members to the US. Some still had some immediate family members in their homelands.

**Findings**
Initial Stage of Settlement: Reasons to Choosing to Live in Small towns

For the purposes of this study, the initial stage of settlement refers not only to the arrival of immigrants to small towns directly from their countries of origin but also the relocation of immigrants, i.e., those moving from urban to rural areas. In a sense, immigrants who go through relocation also need to start all over again in the new area. Similar to other immigrants, Chinese come to the US for a variety of reasons. The participants cited advancing their education, seeking better job opportunities, and looking for a better life. As to the reasons for coming to small towns, many interviewees expressed family-related reasons. Three Chinese immigrant women came to these towns because their husbands’ careers were located in these places. They had no choice, unless their husbands’ future careers would change. Another case involved a Chinese immigrant who came to study in one of the colleges in this county. Some may wonder how a young adult, born and raised in Hong Kong, found a small town to pursue higher education. His story revealed that this college was introduced to him through one of his older brother’s friends. After finishing his degree, he found a job in a nearby town. Since the living environment and quality of live suited him well, he decided to settle in the town as his permanent home.

The husband of an interviewee (the couple were married in Taiwan) was offered an opportunity to do research in the US. After he finished his research, he looked for job opportunities. The wife described why they chose Middletown:

My husband sent out a hundred applications, and we got 20 offers. We compared the locations of these offers. We found that this was closest to New York City. That means it is close to my brother who worked and lived there. So we picked this place.
The decision-making process of a restaurant owner presents another interesting example. Although his father had been sponsoring him to come to the US, the petition was taking a long time. He decided to “jump the gun” and came to the US illegally. He paid a fortune to a snake head who smuggled him along with other illegal migrants in a ship to a South American country. As directed by the snake head, he climbed mountains after mountains with other illegal migrants to come to the American soil. After he arrived, he had to work extremely hard in order to pay off the debt. He had worked in so many different restaurants in different small towns. He said that he wanted to start a restaurant after he paid off his debt. He did not want to “float from place to place” anymore. He found the possibility to open his restaurant from a newspaper advisement with the help of his parents, who also owned a restaurant in a nearby town. His wife elaborated:

My husband had always worked in other states, outside New York. Although he has been in the US for more than eight years, he has never had a chance to live with his parents. Now he has his own business, and it is also close to his parents. Recently, his brother’s family and his sister all moved back to my parent-in-laws’ home. The feeling is that the family has been reunited.

Chain migration or network theory (Massey et al., 1993) explains how migrants are connected to former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties defined by kinship, friendship and shared community origin. The examples presented above are more reflective of internal chain migration, i.e., chain migration within the US. In the case of the study participants, although they did not prefer to settle in small towns, they decided to do so to be close to immediate or extended family members.
Unlike other interviewees, some Chinese restaurant workers in this study did not have any family connections in these towns. Rather, they were drawn to these areas because of job opportunities. Due to their low educational level and limited skills, they had to take whatever opportunities were available to them; location was not a primary concern. Working in a Chinese restaurant, the employers and co-workers were also Chinese. Employer-employee relationship in this context is governed by both origin and contract.

Adaptation Process: Helping Each Other Out

Like other immigrants, the study participants faced many challenges when they first set foot in the US. Regardless of their social economic and educational backgrounds, all interviewees expressed that language barrier and unfamiliarity with the new environment were the very first challenges that they had to face. These immigrants received help both in the first city they landed in and the towns where they reside now. Depending on their social-economic backgrounds, they relied on different levels of help from the familial-to-familiar. The data analysis reveals very different adaptation patterns between restaurant workers and professionals.

Restaurant workers relied more heavily on family networks before they arrived in these small towns. Some of them lived with and/or worked for either their immediate family members or relatives who had already established themselves in the US. For those who did not have any family members or relatives, they relied on friends who came from their homelands. Their friends provided them with information on living and working in New York City, arranging temporary housing for them, until they became more independent. After becoming more familiar with US society, they started to
explore other opportunities outside New York Chinatown, which motivated their decision to move to small towns. This middle-aged restaurant waiter who came to the US alone without his family members reasoned why he chose to work in small towns:

There are too many people competing for restaurant work in Chinatown. I sought job opportunities from an agency which found me this job in this small town. I needed money, and I came.

The adaptation of women who migrated for marriage entirely depended on the support of their husbands. As mentioned earlier, they came directly to these small towns from their home countries. One interviewee had no relatives or friends when she arrived in this town 15 years ago. She, married to another Chinese, described her first two years of life in this town as follows:

When I came here, my husband already had an apartment. Having a place to stay was not an issue. I did feel lonely, far away from home. But my husband worked only five days, and he came home for lunch. So it was not too difficult to spend the day. We played tennis every weekend, very relaxing compared with my life in my home country. Then he bought me a kitten which was very cute. It became my companion. After a year, I got pregnant. That really kept me busy.

Her first two years in the small town basically focused on her husband and child. Her circle expanded when she started to further her education and later on, when she joined the workforce.

A woman from China came to this small town on account of her marriage to a white American who had established his career long in the area. Similar to the situation of the woman above, she did not know anyone in town except her husband. Worse, her English skill was very limited. In the beginning of the marriage, the couple needed a dictionary to communicate with each other. Her husband helped her learn English and adapt to her new home. Later on, she met some Chinese friends through her husband’s
work place. It took more than two years for her to start feeling more comfortable living in her new community.

The more educated professionals were less affected by language and cultural barriers and they relied less on family and/or friendship networks; nonetheless, their occasional use of such networks can be very meaningful, comforting and beneficial. Other than family members helping each other on a daily basis, professional Chinese immigrants tend to rely on help from other Chinese and non-Chinese friends and/or colleagues, who extend emotional and instrumental support to them. A Chinese couple related that when they arrived in town, they were the third Chinese family to settle there. Through their work, they were able to make friends with many non-Chinese colleagues and neighbors, and they participated in many local events and activities. According to the wife, she was excited to see the growth of the Chinese community in her town. Her feelings about this development evoke the notion of origin in the concept of the familial-to-familiar. She said:

"Now there are more Chinese here. That is our Chinese community. The older generation is leaving and dying. We have new members now. There is a new generation. After I retired, I have more time now. So I have more time to contact these Chinese friends. We gather together for some events."

Another woman, who is married to a white American, had been living for 29 years in a town of 5,000 people, also shared her sense of happiness, when a family originally from Taiwan moved into town. The new arrival, a three-generational family, was the second Chinese family to settle in her town to start a new business:

"...[I am] very happy to have them. I am always happy to use Chinese. The grandmother loves small towns, but not the daughter-in-law. I"
eventually convinced her to stay. I help them to overcome many problems. When they are busy, I help them to look after the shop. I drink coffee with them, when they are not busy. I also tried very hard to help her [the daughter-in-law] to get used to the life here. She is a city person. Our relationship seems to be like a family.

The above case illustrates how social networks, help new arrivals to adapt to their new life in small towns. They used the network from immediate family to country of origin to help them adapt into the lives in these small towns.

As mentioned earlier, the restaurant workers show a different adaptation pattern. Many restaurant workers came to the US alone because they could not afford to bring their families with them. Their sole reason for coming to small towns is economic. For this group, their employer played an important role in facilitating their adaptation. Under the framework of employer-employee, this adaptation process is akin to Serrie’s notion of contract-based relationship.

All interviewed restaurant workers had similar descriptions of working in small towns. Although the restaurant owners and employees might not have any blood relations, the former serves as “family” to their employees. These workers obtained information about their current jobs through head hunter agencies in New York Chinatown. A middle-aged man, who had worked as a cook and a waiter in several small town restaurants and is now a restaurant owner, described the relationship between restaurant employers and employees as follows:

I appreciate our Chinese people [restaurant owners] who solve the shelter problems of their employees. We save a lot of rental money. And we don’t have language problems. The bosses help us out on this matter. If you work in the kitchen, you don’t need English. But those who work in the front, they do. The bosses would help us, such as how to read the menu in English etc. If we need personal things, they would take us to the
nearby K-mart or Wal-mart or supermarkets. [Public transportation in small towns is not efficient.] All the people in the house help each other out. Whoever visits Chinatown for vacation or business will bring back things we need, such as phone cards. Sometimes we watch Chinese soap opera together, and we chat with a glass of beer. Here, [the house] it is like a family.

He continued to describe how Chinatown was important to the workers’ everyday life.

He said, “New York Chinatown is our second family.”

New York Chinatown provides many newcomers with rich resources where they are able to find work, housing and feel a sense of belonging. This is particularly true for restaurant workers who face serious language and cultural barriers. Our data revealed that these immigrants described New York Chinatown as their “base” or their “second family.” Although they no longer lived in New York Chinatown, they still relied on the resources there to solve their everyday challenges because small towns do not offer a strong community support to meet their needs. They look for new jobs, spend vacation, and shop for their entertainment and some necessities in Chinatown. Because of language barriers, these immigrants had to rely on professionals such as accountants and lawyers who could speak Chinese in Chinatown. To them, Chinatown, which has been developed based on the notion of “origin” a place they consider as home.

Although more educated Chinese immigrants might not heavily rely on the resources available in Chinatown, they were also happy to pay a visit there periodically. A semi-retiree who goes to Chinatown every two to three months described these visits as:

[The] quality of life here has been very good. We have many American friends. The best treat or enjoyment, you may say, is shopping in Chinatowns. The trip is a big event, especially when our kids were small.
Other than the close relationship with their immediate families, which helps them meet their basic needs, these examples illustrate the importance of establishing a close relationship with other Chinese in these small towns. They were grateful to see other Chinese moving in. They formed relationships that resemble an extended family which facilitates the exchange of help and fosters a sense of community. Serrie (1998) argues that when overseas Chinese lack kinship connection, they would extend their network through surname, residence, then origin, eventually contract ties. Through these informal networks, immigrants help each other out during the adaptation process. The help can range from simple companionship to more instrumental assistance, which facilitates immigrants’ adaptation in their new environment. The experiences shared by restaurant workers illustrate how some Chinese immigrants in small towns organize their life which is influenced by family values; even their views of Chinatown were also framed in terms of the family.

Permanent Settlement: Settling or Settled or Struggling?

The literature does not have a conclusive definition on settlement (see Leung, 2001), although most definitions of settlement agree on some operative conceptions that it is a process that goes through several stages. Based on the narratives of the interviewees, this study tapped a different dimension of settlement, one which is subjectively perceived by the immigrants themselves. After going through adjustment and adaptation, immigrants only felt that they were settled permanently in these small towns if some conditions had been met. One of these conditions is family-related. As some interviewees had articulated, their families were tired of “drifting from place to place.” If they could establish a business or a career in these small towns, they
considered themselves as settled. Furthermore, owning a house also strengthens their sense of permanent settlement. This profile fits one of the couples who participated in the study:

We don’t want to move again. I don’t know why. Perhaps I prefer stability. Being in the US for so many years, we had moved to so many places. I did not feel like being home. When we are stable, a sense of being home has been developed. (Interview with the husband)

My husband and I help each other out whether it is our business or our family. And we don’t want to move from place to place. Eventually, we bought a business and a house for ourselves. (Interview with the wife)

Another couple similarly grew tired of moving from place to place. After working as a waiter and waitress for years, they bought a restaurant in a small town and decided to grow “their own roots.” Being in the restaurant business, however, is time-consuming; as one restaurant worker put it, it is a life that is basically “from pillow to stove.” Families with young children face the challenge of arranging for child care. This couple had to ask the wife’s parents to come from China to take care of the couple’s infant. However, with a visitor’s visa, the grandparents could only stay for a limited time. Therefore, the couple reluctantly agreed to allow the grandparents to take their child back to China. While the set-up helps the couple solve the problem of child care, it is far from ideal. As the wife expressed, “I will feel settled, when I buy a house for ourselves and reunite with our daughter.” The husband sighed, “The feeling of separation from our daughter is painful. The best is to keep her here. But the present arrangement is the best. I hope we could reunite soon.”

The feeling of separation from the family is worse for those who came to the US alone and left their families behind. A cook who has been in the US for three years left
his family in China. He sends considerable remittances to his family back home; her has yet to feel settled in the town: “All I want is to earn more money. I hope I could own a restaurant in three years, and sponsor my family members to come. If I could not achieve such goal, I plan to go back home.” Another interviewee echoes the cook’s feelings. He also observed that single immigrants have more option on whether to stay or move elsewhere. He relayed the story of a single professional who came to town to start his career. In six months, he found another career opportunity in another small town that is closer to his girlfriend in Ottawa. His conclusion was: “Singles won’t stay here [a small town] long.”

In the case of another restaurant owner, the turning point in his sense of settlement in the small town was his reunion with his wife and two teenage children six years ago. He has limited English and his social life is confined circle, but when he was asked whether he felt settled in town, his response was, “Absolutely. I have my family, my business, my children, and my own house. Although my work is tough, my family is my hope and comfort.” However, his teenage son and daughter, who were brought up by their grandparents in China, felt somewhat uncertain. Their father had been away from them since they were young. The boy said, “I could not remember my father much, until I reunited with him couple years ago here. He seems like a stranger to me, but now it is a bit better.” When asked whether they felt at home in the small town, both gave a similar reply, “[Our] grandparents’ home feels more like home.” They still had very strong nostalgic feelings for China, especially their grandparents’ home, where they grew up.

A woman who married a white American with whom she has two grown-up children (her children were finishing university). Although she had a loving family, she
was faced with a dilemma: whether to go ‘home’ where her parents are, or stay ‘home’
where her husband and children are. After almost 25 years of living in a small town, she
has successfully overcome the challenges of adaptation and integration. But deep down
in her heart, this town was not her permanent home because her family is not complete.
She always wanted to be with her parents. In the Chinese context, married children
consider their parents as part of their family. She sponsored her parents to come to the
US. They came and lived with her for two years, but afterwards, they moved to New
York Chinatown. Her parents decided to move because they faced linguistic and cultural
isolation in the small town. Although her parents were a couple of hours away from her,
they were nonetheless accessible, a fact that contributed to her sense of home. As she put
it: “I started to consider the US as my home, after my parents came.” The family, thus, is
an important consideration in the Chinese immigrants’ sense of settlement.

Discussion and Conclusion

There were two goals in this study. First of all, we attempted to move beyond the
scope of other studies that usually focus on immigrant settlement issues. Instead of
examining one aspect of settlement at a time, such as geographic concentration of
immigrants, initial settlement, adaptation, acculturation and so on, this study examined a
more elaborated process of settlement that includes three stages: the initial phase,
adaptation and permanent settlement. Secondly, while the great majority of the studies
focus on immigrant settlement in metropolitan cities, this study chose to explore
immigrant settlement in small towns. A small group of Chinese immigrants who settled
in small towns in Central New York State was studied. The dynamic of their settlement was analyzed with the concept of familial-to-familiar.

The study considered two types of immigrant settlers: those who arrived in small towns directly from their home countries and those who had lived in other parts of the US and relocated to small towns. Both groups needed to adapt or re-adapt themselves to the lifestyle of small towns. Family-related reasons brought immigrants to small towns; the exception are restaurant workers, whose main reason for coming to small towns was job-related. Interestingly, even for the economically-motivated restaurant workers, they came to view their relationship with restaurant owners as family-like, with their employers assuming responsibility for their everyday needs such as transportation, housing and meals.

The study found that although immigrants of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds rely on different sources and types of assistance during their adaptation process, wherever this assistance may fall in the familial-to-familiar spectrum, they all were grateful for the support extended to them. Even when no exchange of assistance took place, interviewees shared feeling excited when other Chinese moved in.

The study noted that Chinese immigrants with lower English competency seemed to experience more disadvantages in small towns compared with their counterparts in metropolitan areas because of fewer culturally and linguistically sensitive services in the former. These immigrants have to either to travel to Chinatown in New York City to seek help or rely more on other Chinese in the area.

Another important aspect of settlement uncovered by the study is immigrants’ perception of the notion of permanent settlement. The results of the interviews indicate...
that permanent settlement cannot be measured in terms of the length of residence in the receiving country. Some immigrants might have lived in the US for decades, yet they have not developed a strong sense of permanent settlement, i.e., in the sense of viewing America as their permanent “home.” It seems that they can only feel being “home” if certain conditions are met, including career development, purchase of a house and family reunification. The matter of family reunification is not only limited to immediate family members but also includes members of the extended family, suggesting that the Chinese concept of the family is broader than the nuclear family.

Since the notion of permanent settlement entails meeting certain conditions, future research need to examine whether changes in these conditions would influence immigrants’ regard for the US as their permanent home. A study of some Asian Indians’ settlement experience in small towns provides some insights to this question. Leung and Mohammad (2005) found that the rise of prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the US after September 11 changed some of these immigrants’ decision about settling in the US permanently. Some were considering returning to their homeland; others were looking for other opportunities outside the US. This implies that the notion of permanent settlement can change depending on how immigrants’ perceptions of how expected outcomes may be met in the receiving society.

Serrie’s (1998) concept of the familial-familiar continuum was a powerful analytical concept in understanding the settlement process of Chinese immigrants in small towns. The cases examined in this study show how immigrants availed of their culturally constructed concept of the family to help their settlement process (George and Tsang, 2000; Leung 2001). The ways these immigrants sought assistance to facilitate
their settlement depended on available resources on the familial-to-familiar continuum. Some of them received help from their immediate family members and/or relatives. If these forms of support were not available, they relied on other sources which may derive from ties based on origin and contract.

The restaurant workers, the group which faced language and employment barriers, made use of their work or contract relationship with their employers in addressing settlement challenges. The role of Chinatown and their employers in the lives of restaurant workers provide good support for Serrie’s argument. Those unable to bring their immediate family members due to financial reasons, or those unable to take care of their family members due to the demands of their jobs or businesses may find small towns offering limited services or assistance. In such settings, Serrie’s (1998:199-200) argument about the “principle of contract” in social organization makes sense.

These observations imply two important points. First, cultural resources are important in responding to the challenges of settlement. The familiar-to-familiar concept has been adopted by many overseas Chinese as a survival strategy. As discussed earlier, the survival of both restaurant owners and workers rests on this kind of relationship. Restaurant owners provide housing for their workers and they see to the general well-being of their workers; the latter, in turn, accept lower wages, enabling the restaurant to survive and thrive. Second, although the more linguistically and culturally competent immigrants do not rely on contractual strategy to survive in small towns, they receive other assistance in the familial-familiar continuum, which ease their initial settlement and adaptation. Further research on the settlement process would benefit from a
consideration of the use of different levels of assistance of immigrants across different socio-economic backgrounds.

In conclusion, more studies are needed to examine immigrants’ process of settlement in small towns. Comparative studies of settlement processes in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas would be fruitful. As this study illustrated, the settlement process needs to be seen as a multi-stage process, whose outcomes differ for immigrants with different socio-economic resources. Finally, the role of culture plays an important role in how immigrants devise ways and means to survive initial settlement challenges and how they advance to the next stages.

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