

Beyond the Enclave: A Mixed-Methods Study of Chinese Immigrant Business Owners Concentrated in Georgia

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ABSTRACT

Much existing research on immigrant entrepreneurship focuses on enclave economies in coastal metropolitan areas. However, this study examines a population outside of that setting and seeks to uncover the behavior and characteristics of these individuals.

Compared with the enclave populations described in earlier research, this population is highly educated, long-settled, English-proficient, and working in several professional fields. Specifically, it examines the constraints on entrepreneurial growth when legal and social exclusion are no longer primary barriers. Using a mixed-methods design, this study surveys 41 Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs, most of them in Georgia, in addition to 3 semi-structured interviews. The survey covered topics such as demographics, firm characteristics, networks, and self-rated growth and satisfaction, while the interviews were transcribed and coded for recurring themes.

We compared self-rated growth figures based on factors like firm age, English proficiency, network composition, and customer base. However, with this sample size, we didn't find any significant differences. The study identifies access, rather than exclusion, as the main challenge for this group. It appears that for entrepreneurs looking to expand, market-based cultural learning and building cross-ethnic relationships can be quite beneficial.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, immigrant entrepreneurship has been a pathway to economic mobility and integration, especially in the United States. In the US, immigrant entrepreneurs represented about 24% of all U.S. entrepreneurs in 2019, up from about 19% in 2007 (Kerr & Kerr, 2024). This statistic is disproportionate to the overall immigrant share of roughly 14% (Kerr & Kerr, 2024), highlighting the entrepreneurial spirit of many immigrants. Immigrant-owned businesses contribute significantly to their

communities whether it's reinforcing community employment, catering to unmet demands, or offering culturally specific goods and services that contribute to diversity.

Past research has shown that immigrants are highly entrepreneurial, but due to many different factors. Most of these can be separated into two categories: opportunity and necessity (Fairlie & Lofstrom, 2015). On one hand, many immigrants spot opportunities and bring niche and innovative ideas from their home countries, developing new products and services for overall growth. On the other hand, there are many immigrants who turn to entrepreneurship due to difficulties in the labor market that prevent them from advancing in traditional employment. These include language difficulties, citizenship status, or discrimination. In many of these cases, starting a business is one of the only paths they can take to put food on the table for economic stability and mobility, often described as necessity entrepreneurship (Light, 1972; Zhou, 2004).

Beyond the local impacts, countless immigrants have founded high-growth and innovative startups in the United States such as billion-dollar companies and venture-backed tech firms (Anderson, 2022). In fact, immigrants tend to produce new technologies and new patents at higher rates, in part because of the technical and specialized nature of many of these immigrants (Hunt & Gauthier-Loiselle, 2010). This fact leads many scholars and policymakers to describe this group as drivers of innovation or job creators. Additionally, the self-selection of immigrants may be another factor, though Borjas (1987) argues that the direction of that selection depends on the income distributions of the origin and destination countries, so migrants are not always drawn from the more entrepreneurial end. However, there is heterogeneity in that some immigrant groups have a higher self-employment rate than others, due to a multitude of factors such as education and skill level (Fairlie & Meyer, 1996).

Specifically, Chinese immigrants represent a vital part of the immigrant entrepreneur community, along with others of Asian descent. Chinese Americans are the largest Asian-origin population in the US by total ancestry. Counting the foreign-born alone, there were more than 2.4 million Chinese immigrants as of 2023, third behind immigrants from Mexico and India (Greene & Batalova, 2025). Chinese immigrants have a long history of entrepreneurship within America, with early migrants arriving in the mid-19th century, drawn by the California Gold Rush and labor demands such as the Transcontinental Railroad while pushed by political instability back home (Takaki, 1998). However, these migrants faced severe racial discrimination and violence that made it hard to integrate into society, and legal exclusion such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred them from many occupations (Takaki, 1998). Because of the difficulty around job hunting, a large number of Chinese immigrants turned to self-employment instead, and by the late 1800s Chinese-owned small businesses such as laundries and restaurants proliferated. Discrimination persisted well into the mid-20th century, and the Angel Island Immigration Station, built for interrogation and exclusion, detained over 175,000 Chinese migrants between 1910 and 1940 (Lai et al., 1980).

Furthermore, after U.S. immigration laws were reformed in 1965, things started to look up for immigrants. During this period, a new wave of Chinese immigrants arrived, including students,

professionals, and a skilled workforce, and Chinese entrepreneurship began to evolve to become more technical and expand to many different industries rather than a focus on small shops. In fact, Chinese and Indian engineers ran about a quarter of the Silicon Valley technology businesses started between 1980 and 1998, including 29% of those started from 1995 to 1998 (Saxenian, 1999). Wadhwa et al. (2007) later found that a quarter of engineering and technology companies founded nationally between 1995 and 2005 had at least one immigrant founder, though the two studies count different things and cannot be read as one trend. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Business Survey, there were around 151,000 Chinese American-owned employer businesses in the U.S. in 2022, generating around \$285 billion in receipts and 1.2 million jobs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Several features are often described as distinctive of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship: support from dense co-ethnic and diaspora networks (Light & Gold, 2000; Zhou, 2004), transnational ties used for competitive advantage (Saxenian, 2006), cultural values such as family enterprise and a strong work ethic (Sanders & Nee, 1996), and a growth-oriented mindset that is not monolithic (Zhou, 2004). Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship is rooted in historical necessity but is increasingly characterized by diversity and change. This study will build on those insights, using original data to explore how contemporary Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in the U.S. experience and perceive their entrepreneurial journey. One major question this study explores is: What constrains growth for Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs outside enclave settings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been extensive research on immigrant entrepreneurship over the years, and a few big ideas keep showing up. One of the earliest is disadvantage theory, which states that immigrants turn to self-employment due to the lack of opportunity in regular labor markets. Light (1972) compared Chinese, Japanese, and Black business owners in America and found that discrimination and prejudice pushed many immigrants toward the alternative path of running their own businesses. Bonacich (1973) added the idea of middleman minorities, groups who trade between the majority population and other groups, often in small retail and service niches. These theories are representative of the early history of Chinese immigrants in the United States.

Another viewpoint focuses on the resources that come out of ethnic communities rather than the barriers outside them. Zhou (1992), after studying New York's Chinatown, developed the idea of the ethnic enclave as an economic engine that supplies loyal customers, trusted labor, credit, and other forms of support. Light and Gold (2000) describe these advantages as ethnic resources, while Sanders and Nee (1996) point to the family as a key form of social capital. Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990) argue that outcomes depend on the fit between what a group brings and the opportunity structure it faces, and Kloosterman and Rath (2001) extend this with mixed embeddedness, stating that immigrant business owners are heavily impacted by the markets and rules of the host country and not just by their own networks.

One area of research explores how the same network can both assist and limit individuals simultaneously. Granovetter (1973) discovered that new information typically flows through weak ties rather than close connections, as those who are close often share the same knowledge. Burt (1992) suggested that the real advantage lies with those who bridge two otherwise disconnected groups. Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) discussed the costs associated with embeddedness, while Uzzi (1997) found that while embeddedness can enhance performance, there's a tipping point beyond which it becomes detrimental. In this context, a tightly-knit co-ethnic network can provide trust, credit, and referrals but may lack broader connections.

Another area of research focuses on where immigrants are currently settling. Singer (2004) identifies Atlanta as one of the emerging gateways: cities experiencing rapid immigrant growth over the past two decades after a period of little change. Georgia was among the states where the foreign-born population increased at more than twice the national rate during the 1990s. Li (2009) introduced the concept of the ethnoburb, describing a suburban ethnic cluster that is neither a downtown Chinatown nor fully dispersed. Waters and Jiménez (2005) argue that newer destinations may lead to different patterns compared to established ones.

More recent work has moved beyond the small-shop image. Fairlie and Lofstrom (2015) show that immigrants start businesses at higher rates than the native-born across many countries, driven by everything from necessity to genuine opportunity. Saxenian (1999, 2006) documented highly skilled Chinese and Indian engineers building technology firms in Silicon Valley using transnational connections to their advantage, a process she characterizes as "brain circulation." Portes, Guarnizo, and Haller (2002) describe transnational entrepreneurship as an alternative form of economic adaptation, and find that transnational entrepreneurs are a minority of the immigrant self-employed rather than the typical case. Zhou (2004) argues that ethnic entrepreneurship overlaps heavily with the mainstream economy, and that the overlap continues to grow. Most of this literature, however, is built on data from large immigrant enclaves in coastal gateways where these communities have been long established. There is far less data on Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in places like Georgia, where the enclave history is recent. That gap is where this study fits in.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate Chinese immigrant entrepreneurship, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining survey responses with qualitative interviews. The survey provides a broad picture of trends and patterns across a diverse sample of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs, while the interviews allow for a richer exploration of individual experiences through a case study-type approach.

The survey targeted Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs over 18 years old and originally from mainland China, in order to maintain uniformity. This study allowed a broad definition of business that could

include small family businesses, self-employed persons with incorporated businesses, and larger firms, in order to capture a wide range of entrepreneurship. The criteria focused on the owner rather than the business itself, and the survey didn't inquire about the business's location since the questions were directed at the respondent's residence. As a result, we can't report how many firms are based outside the United States.

The survey was a structured online questionnaire with multiple-choice, free-response, Likert-scale, and checklist questions. Two versions were administered, one in standard English and one directly translated into Mandarin, to account for language understanding discrepancies among participants. The Mandarin version was translated directly from the English one, and both were reviewed question by question before they were released. Out of the 41 completed responses, 36 were in English and 5 were in Mandarin. Names and identifying personal information were not collected, respondents had the freedom to skip any question, and all ethical guidelines were followed in the data collection process.

Respondents were recruited through a combination of convenience sampling and varied outreach, including members of Chinese American and Asian American business associations, entrepreneurial networks, and other community organizations. The survey was distributed through online networks (e.g., WeChat, iMessage) and community groups to increase reach, and respondents were encouraged to share it within their own networks. The final sample consisted of 41 respondents. While this sample was not random or large, the number is sufficient to observe meaningful patterns. Caution was exercised in interpreting and generalizing the results. These channels were composed of individuals from the same ethnic background, so the findings regarding how engaged respondents are in Chinese and Asian American associations are influenced by the specific context in which they were surveyed.

During the analysis, four issues with the questionnaire emerged. First, respondents had different time frames for their experiences with bands: some were asked about 5 to 10 years, 10 to 15 years, and 15 or more, while others were given ranges of 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years, and 16 or more. This discrepancy created overlaps and gaps in the data, particularly noted at the edges of Table 2. Second, the question regarding business relationships allowed multiple responses, despite its options being mutually exclusive. This led to a total of 44 selections from 40 respondents, with three individuals choosing more than one option; for analysis purposes, this will be treated as a single-response measure. Third, one response to that question was corrupted during export and is therefore considered a non-response. Lastly, one respondent skipped the networking question, resulting in data from only 40 respondents and a total of 109 selections for that item.

In the last part of the survey, respondents indicated their availability for the optional interview section. The interviews ran between 25 and 45 minutes and were semi-structured, meaning key talking points and questions were prepared but the conversation followed the flow of the responses. All three were conducted in English through one-on-one phone calls, and personal identifying information was not collected. Each interview was transcribed for further analysis, and all necessary permissions were given by the interviewees.

The three individuals were selected because their survey responses varied significantly regarding customer base, network composition, and perceived cultural influence, which exemplifies maximum-variation sampling. Consequently, the diversity they represent is partly due to the selection process and does not necessarily indicate that the rest of the sample is equally varied.

The interviewees were asked to give an overview of their life and business story. Key topics included their origin and motivation, the startup process and any previous business experience, the barriers they faced at the start and still face today, the resources and support that helped them grow, what they would do differently in hindsight, and how they were treated as foreign business owners during political tensions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, including the role of their international connections.

Survey responses were first analyzed as frequency distributions, which are detailed in Tables 1 through 3. Each percentage is based on all 41 respondents, allowing for the recovery of raw counts. We then compared self-rated growth, satisfaction, and perceived cultural influence across various factors, including customer base, business relationships, networking venues, English proficiency, firm age, and business connections in China. Given the small group sizes, we present these findings as group means with standard deviations, 95% confidence intervals, and effect sizes, without conducting significance tests. I transcribed the interviews in full and coded them manually: first, I read each transcript without making any marks, then revisited them to attach short labels related to motivation, startup constraints, language, culture, networks, customers, or cross-border work. These labels were then grouped into themes. The open-ended survey responses were coded in the same manner and are summarized in Table 5.

RESULTS

Quantitative Survey Results

In all, 41 people completed the survey. Tables 1 through 3 lay out the full breakdown of their demographics, business characteristics, and their own assessments of their businesses.

Of the 41 respondents, most were men (58.5%) and middle-aged, with 73.2% aged 40-59. The group was also highly educated, with every respondent holding at least a bachelor's degree, and 48.8% had earned a master's and another 17.1% a doctorate. Most rated their English as fluent (51.2%) or advanced (29.3%), and most had lived in the United States for over a decade. More than half (56.1%) had been in the country for sixteen years or more, including 34.1% for over twenty. Almost all were citizens or permanent residents, with only three holding visas. One feature of the sample worth noting is that the majority of respondents came from Georgia (78.0%), with the rest in Texas (12.2%), Arkansas (4.9%), North Carolina (2.4%), and Tennessee (2.4%). The full demographic picture is in Table 1.

For business characteristics, 36.6% had run a business in China in the past with no further expansion, while 12.2% had ongoing business(es) in China. Another 48.8% had never run a business in China, and one respondent (2.4%) did not answer. As for industries, finance was the most common (22.0%), with manufacturing (19.5%) and technology (17.1%) close behind. More than half (51.2%) ran more than one business at once. Most were not new companies, as 31.7% had been operating for over fifteen years while only 4.9% had been open for less than two years (Table 2).

Participants also answered questions regarding their customers and connections. 43.9% of respondents had a mixed customer base, while 24.4% stated that their customer base was mostly non-Asian. 9.8% stated they served mostly Chinese customers, and another 9.8% mostly Asian-American customers, so 19.5% served a mainly co-ethnic base (Figure 1, Panel A). As for business relationships, 51.2% reported working with entrepreneurs of all backgrounds equally, and 24.4% mainly with Chinese-American entrepreneurs. When it comes to networking, Chinese and Asian-American business associations were the most popular choice, with 70.7% of respondents (29 people) selecting them. They slightly edged out industry events, which attracted 68.3% (28 respondents), followed by local chambers of commerce at 56.1%. This question allowed for multiple responses and received a total of 109 selections from 40 respondents, indicating that attending a co-ethnic association doesn't necessarily mean a respondent isn't involved in other types of networking. In fact, five respondents (12.2%) exclusively attended co-ethnic venues, while 24 out of the 29 who mentioned a Chinese or Asian-American association also identified at least one venue not focused on ethnicity. Business connections themselves stayed close to home: 70.7% of respondents reported connections within their own state and 48.8% in other U.S. states, while 34.1% reported ties to China and only 14.6% to any other country (Figure 2). As for barriers to growth, marketing was the highest (34.1%), followed by funding (22.0%), labor shortages (17.1%), and too few connections (12.2%) (Figure 3). 4.9% named language or cultural differences, making it among the least common answers, tied with lack of mentorship and with other. For growth plans in the future, 41.5% intended to expand within two years, and another 19.5% were already in the middle of doing so (Table 2).

Three questions asked respondents to score parts of their business from one to five on a Likert Scale, where a higher number meant more of that specific quality (Table 3; Figure 4). Respondents were in the middle about their growth over the past five years, with an average of 3.12 (SD = 1.12). Business satisfaction averaged 3.41 (SD = 1.07). The last question asked how much Chinese culture shaped their business, which came out to a 3.12 average but with far more spread (SD = 1.34): 22.0% picked the highest rating while 14.6% chose a 1 and another 14.6% a 2. There's one important consideration regarding the growth question. It focused on the past five years, but two firms were less than two years old, and eight had been in business for three to five years. This means that ten respondents (24.4%) were evaluating a period that was at least as long as their business's existence.

Table 4 compares self-assessed growth among these groups, alongside their satisfaction and perceived cultural influence. The findings mostly show no significant differences. Growth doesn't vary meaningfully based on customer base, the nature of business relationships, or whether respondents exclusively attend co-ethnic venues. In fact, the few estimates that do change contradict what the access argument would

suggest. Every confidence interval crosses zero, and given the small group sizes, only a substantial difference would have been noticeable. This doesn't prove that network composition is irrelevant; it simply indicates that this study can't demonstrate its significance. However, two contrasts are worth mentioning. Respondents who rated their English as intermediate or beginner ($n = 8$) reported a growth score of 2.62, compared to 3.24 for those who considered their English fluent or advanced ($n = 33$), marking the largest gap in the table. Additionally, the five respondents who were "not sure" about their business relationships indicated the lowest growth of any group at 2.20.

The survey ended with two free response questions, asking in the respondent's own words what their largest success factor was and what their largest challenge was. Thirty-six participants responded to the first question, while thirty-four answered the second. The most frequently mentioned theme of success was market and policy positioning, highlighted by seven respondents. Many pointed to their own knowledge and expertise, as well as the quality of their products and services. Additionally, many stressed having a good character and being honest to build a good reputation. Others credited good timing in their business entry, a strong team, or having a large and helpful network. In response to the challenge question, "networks and connections" topped the list with six mentions. This was closely followed by "cultural differences," "U.S. government policy," and "access to the mainstream market," each receiving five mentions, while "language" had four. Interestingly, government policy was cited as frequently as market access, which was unexpected in this study.

Table 5 summarizes these responses, detailing each theme, the number of respondents associated with it, and a phrase reflecting the respondent's own words.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 41)

Characteristic	n	%	Characteristic	n	%
Gender			Citizenship status		
Male	24	58.5	U.S. citizen	19	46.3
Female	17	41.5	Green card / permanent resident	19	46.3
Age, years			Visa holder	3	7.3
20-29	1	2.4	State of residence		
30-39	6	14.6	Georgia	32	78.0
40-49	15	36.6	Texas	5	12.2
50-59	15	36.6	Arkansas	2	4.9
60-69	4	9.8	North Carolina	1	2.4
Highest education attained			Tennessee	1	2.4
Bachelor's degree	14	34.1	Region of origin		
Master's degree	20	48.8	Jiangsu	11	26.8
Doctorate	7	17.1	Beijing	6	14.6
English proficiency (self-rated)			Zhejiang	4	9.8
Fluent	21	51.2	Sichuan	3	7.3
Advanced	12	29.3	Hunan	2	4.9
Intermediate	7	17.1	Henan	2	4.9
Beginner	1	2.4	Fujian	2	4.9
Years in the United States			Hubei	2	4.9
Less than 5 years	5	12.2	Other province	7	17.1
5-10 years	8	19.5	Not reported	2	4.9
11-15 years	5	12.2	Religious affiliation		
16-20 years	9	22.0	None / no affiliation	18	43.9
More than 20 years	14	34.1	Christianity	15	36.6
			Buddhism	1	2.4
			Prefer not to say	7	17.1

Note. Participation in each item was voluntary and respondents could skip any question; percentages are calculated over all 41 respondents and may not sum to 100. Figures are also subject to rounding. Region of origin is reported at the province level; provincial capitals and cities named by respondents were assigned to their province. "Other province" comprises provinces named by a single respondent.

Table 2
Business Characteristics of Respondents' Firms (N = 41)

Characteristic	n	%	Note
Prior business experience in China			
Never operated a business in China	20	48.8	
Previously operated a business in China	15	36.6	
Currently operate a business in China	5	12.2	
Not reported	1	2.4	
Industry sector			Multiple responses permitted

Characteristic	n	%	Note
Finance	9	22.0	
Manufacturing	8	19.5	
Technology	7	17.1	
Retail	6	14.6	
Healthcare	4	9.8	
Hospitality	4	9.8	
Construction	3	7.3	
Energy	2	4.9	
Education	2	4.9	
Real estate, transportation, media, agriculture (1 each)	4	9.8	
Number of employees			
1 (solo)	8	19.5	
2 to 5	8	19.5	
6 to 15	10	24.4	
16 to 50	6	14.6	
51 to 200	7	17.1	
More than 200	2	4.9	
Operates more than one business			
Yes	21	51.2	
No	20	48.8	
Years in operation		Two band schemes in use; approximate	
Less than 2 years	2	4.9	
3 to 5 years	8	19.5	
6 to 10 years	9	22.0	
11 to 15 years	9	22.0	
More than 15 years	13	31.7	
Primary customer base			
Mixed equally	18	43.9	
Mostly non-Asian	10	24.4	
Mostly Asian American	4	9.8	
Mostly same-ethnicity (Chinese)	4	9.8	
Depends on product or service	4	9.8	
Other	1	2.4	
Business relationships formed with		44 selections; 3 double answers	
Entrepreneurs of all backgrounds equally	21	51.2	
Mainly Chinese American entrepreneurs	10	24.4	
Mostly non-Asian entrepreneurs	5	12.2	

Characteristic	n	%	Note
Not sure	5	12.2	
Mainly other Asian American entrepreneurs	3	7.3	
Not reported (response corrupted in export)	1	2.4	
Geographic reach of business connections			Multiple responses permitted
Within your state	29	70.7	
Other U.S. states	20	48.8	
Within your city	16	39.0	
China	14	34.1	
Other countries (excluding China and U.S.)	6	14.6	
Networking venues attended			109 selections from 40 respondents
Asian American or Chinese business association	29	70.7	
Industry-specific events	28	68.3	
Local chamber of commerce	23	56.1	
Hometown or province (laoxiang) events	11	26.8	
Online or virtual networking groups	11	26.8	
University or young-professional events	7	17.1	
Not reported	1	2.4	
Attends at least one non-co-ethnic venue	35	85.4	Derived
Attends co-ethnic venues only	5	12.2	Derived
Largest barrier to scaling			Single response
Marketing	14	34.1	
Funding	9	22.0	
Labor shortages	7	17.1	
Limited connections or network	5	12.2	
Language or cultural differences	2	4.9	
Lack of mentorship	2	4.9	
Other	2	4.9	
Plans to expand within two years			
Yes	17	41.5	
Already in process	8	19.5	
Maybe	9	22.0	
No	7	17.1	

Note. Participation in each item was voluntary and respondents could skip any question; percentages are calculated over all 41 respondents and may not sum to 100. Figures are subject to rounding. Items marked as permitting multiple responses sum to more than 100%. The two derived networking rows classify respondents rather than selections: co-ethnic venues are the Asian American or Chinese business association and hometown-province events.

Table 3
Self-Rated Scale Measures (N = 41)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Self-rated business growth, past 5 years		
1	3	7.3
2	8	19.5
3	17	41.5
4	7	17.1
5	6	14.6
Satisfaction with current performance		
1	2	4.9
2	4	9.8
3	18	43.9
4	9	22.0
5	8	19.5
Influence of Chinese culture on the business		
1	6	14.6
2	6	14.6
3	14	34.1
4	5	12.2
5	9	22.0
No response	1	2.4

Note. Participation in each item was voluntary and respondents could skip any question; percentages are calculated over all 41 respondents and may not sum to 100. Figures are also subject to rounding. All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). Mean (SD): self-rated growth, 3.12 (1.12); satisfaction, 3.41 (1.07); influence of Chinese culture, 3.12 (1.34).

Table 4
Self-Rated Growth, Satisfaction, and Cultural Influence by Subgroup (N = 41)

Grouping	<i>n</i>	Self-rated growth, M (SD) [95% CI]	Hedges' <i>g</i> [95% CI]	Satisfaction, M (SD)	Cultural influence, M (SD)
Primary customer base					
Mixed or mostly non-Asian	28	3.07 (0.98) [2.69, 3.45]	—	3.29 (0.98)	2.96 (1.32)

Grouping	n	Self-rated growth, M (SD) [95% CI]	Hedges' g [95% CI]	Satisfaction, M (SD)	Cultural influence, M (SD)
Mostly co-ethnic (Chinese or Asian American)	8	3.25 (1.49) [2.01, 4.49]	+0.16 [-0.66, 0.97]	3.62 (1.51)	3.57 (1.62)
Depends on product/service, or other	5	3.20 (1.48) [1.36, 5.04]	+0.12 [-0.87, 1.11]	3.80 (0.84)	3.40 (1.14)
Business relationships formed with					
All backgrounds equally	21	3.14 (1.06) [2.66, 3.63]	—	3.48 (0.98)	3.00 (1.22)
Mainly co-ethnic entrepreneurs	11	3.36 (1.12) [2.61, 4.12]	+0.20 [-0.56, 0.96]	3.55 (1.29)	3.30 (1.42)
Mostly non-Asian entrepreneurs	5	3.80 (1.30) [2.18, 5.42]	+0.58 [-0.47, 1.62]	3.60 (1.34)	2.80 (1.48)
Not sure	5	2.20 (0.84) [1.16, 3.24]	-0.89 [-1.95, 0.17]	2.80 (1.10)	3.60 (1.67)
Attends industry-specific events					
Yes	28	3.14 (1.11) [2.71, 3.57]	—	3.46 (1.04)	3.07 (1.33)
No	12	3.17 (1.19) [2.41, 3.92]	+0.02 [-0.68, 0.72]	3.33 (1.23)	3.17 (1.47)
Networking venue exclusivity					
Attends non-co-ethnic venues too	35	3.17 (1.12) [2.79, 3.56]	—	3.46 (1.09)	3.06 (1.30)
Attends co-ethnic venues only	5	3.00 (1.22) [1.48, 4.52]	-0.15 [-1.12, 0.82]	3.20 (1.10)	3.40 (1.82)
Self-rated English proficiency					
Fluent or advanced	33	3.24 (1.12) [2.85, 3.64]	—	3.52 (1.03)	3.09 (1.30)
Intermediate or beginner	8	2.62 (1.06) [1.74, 3.51]	-0.55 [-1.35, 0.26]	3.00 (1.20)	3.25 (1.58)
Firm age					
More than 5 years	31	3.13 (1.23) [2.68, 3.58]	—	3.42 (1.09)	3.03 (1.43)
5 years or less	10	3.10 (0.74) [2.57, 3.63]	-0.03 [-0.76, 0.71]	3.40 (1.07)	3.40 (1.07)
Active business connections in China					
Yes	14	2.93 (1.49) [2.07, 3.79]	—	3.36 (1.45)	2.54 (1.20)
No	27	3.22 (0.89) [2.87, 3.57]	+0.26 [-0.41, 0.92]	3.44 (0.85)	3.41 (1.34)

Note. All three measures were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). Effect sizes are Hedges' g for self-rated growth against the first subgroup in each block, marked with a dash. Every interval includes zero, so the comparisons are suggestive only and no significance test is used as a decision rule. The relationship subgroups sum to 42 because three respondents selected more than one option and one response was not recorded. The networking and industry-event groupings omit the respondent who skipped that item, and the cultural-influence column is computed over 40.

Table 5

Themes in Open-Ended Survey Responses

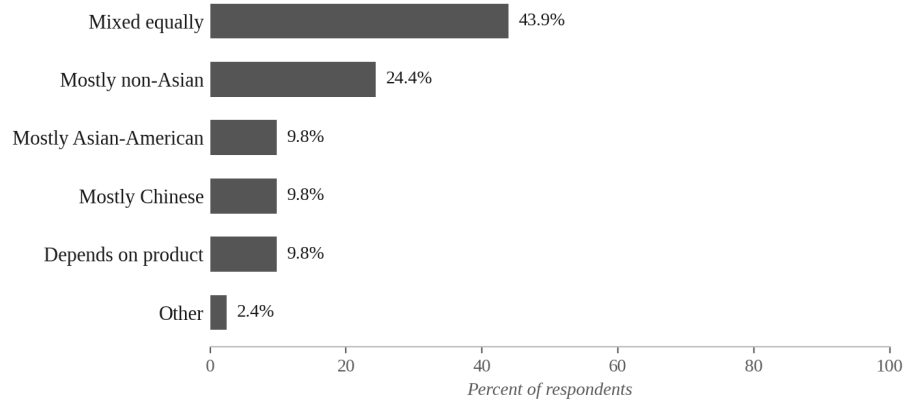
Theme	n	Representative respondent phrase
Biggest factor helping the business succeed (n = 36)		
Market and policy positioning	7	“Local market with gov incentives”
Professional expertise	4	“Be an expert in your field”
Team, people, and skilled specialists	3	“skilled specialists and partners with full of insights”
Company values and working environment	3	“Stand for our values.”
Hard work and persistence	3	“Hard work and resources in both US and China”
Trust, integrity, and honesty	2	“Honesty”
Quality of products and services	2	“Reliable quality services.”
Customer focus and satisfaction	2	“Customer satisfaction”
Marketing and adapting to local markets	2	“Formulate different marketing strategies according to different regional cultures”
Single mentions and unclassifiable	8	networking; reputation and word of mouth; savings; localized support; patents; personality
Biggest challenge facing Chinese American entrepreneurs (n = 34)		
Networks, connections, and referrals	6	“Trust and access to high level networks”
Cultural differences and cross-cultural communication	5	“Not easy to connect with people from other cultures.”
U.S. government policy and regulation	5	“The intervention of the U.S. government in business activities”
Mainstream market access and reaching non-Chinese customers	5	“Circle barrier”; “The Main Street”
Language	4	“Language fluency and cultural understanding.”
Market conditions and positioning	3	“Developing market in different countries”
U.S.–China relations	2	“Government policy and stress between US and China.”
Value and intellectual property recognition	2	“Value recognition.”
No specific challenge named	3	“It depends on the industry and individual circumstance”
Single mentions	4	immigration policy; cross-border team friction; input costs; general uncertainty

Note. Themes were derived inductively from the open-ended responses using the coding procedure described in the Methodology. Counts are of respondents, not of mentions. A response naming two distinct themes was coded to both, so the challenge counts sum to 39 mentions across 34 respondents. Representative phrases are quoted from respondents verbatim, with one spelling error silently corrected; two Mandarin responses in the challenge set are counted under market conditions and intellectual property respectively.

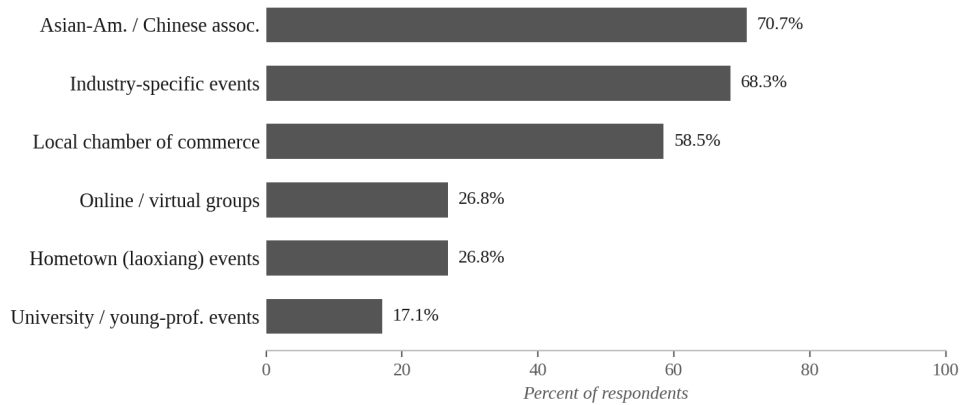
Figure 1

Where Respondents Sell Versus Where They Network

Panel A. Primary customer base

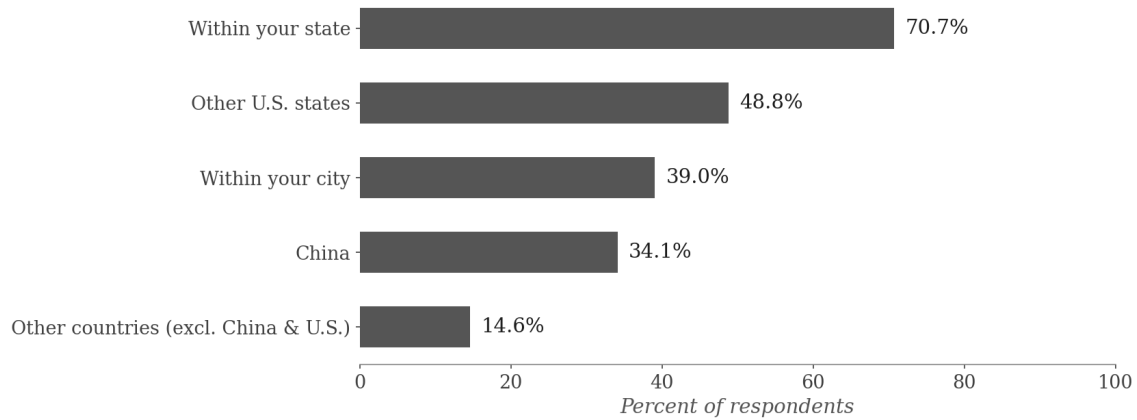


Panel B. Networking venues attended



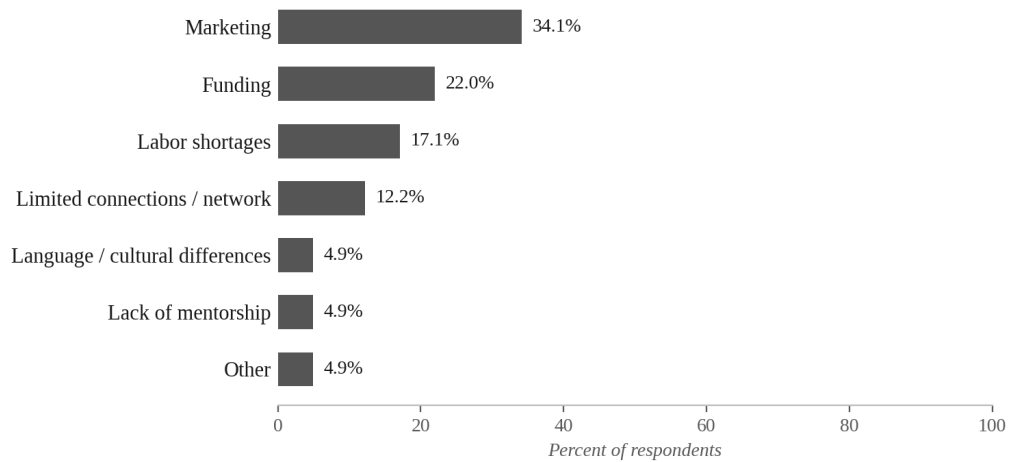
Note. N = 41. In Panel A each respondent chose one customer group; in Panel B respondents could select more than one venue, so values exceed 100%. Most respondents serve a mixed or mostly non-Asian market (68.3% combined), yet the single most common place to build professional ties remains a co-ethnic association.

Figure 2
Geographic Reach of Business Connections



Note. N = 41. Respondents could select more than one option, so values exceed 100%. Connections cluster within respondents' home states, and international ties run almost entirely through China.

Figure 3
The Single Largest Barrier to Scaling a Business

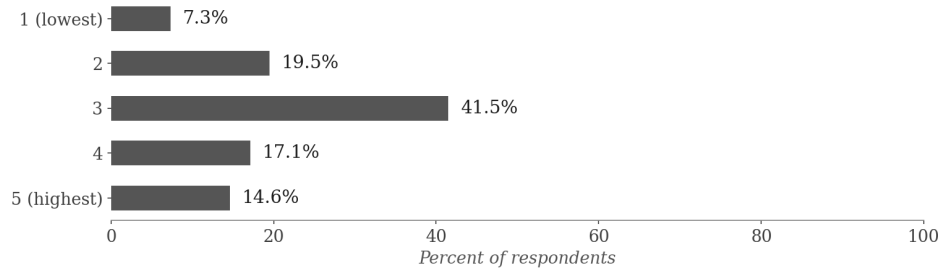


Note. N = 41. Each respondent selected one barrier. Marketing and a lack of connections were named most often, while language or cultural differences were among the least common, chosen by only 4.9% of respondents.

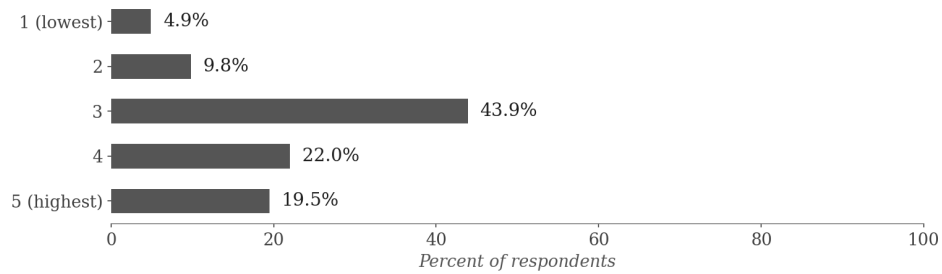
Figure 4

Distributions of Self-Rated Scale Measures

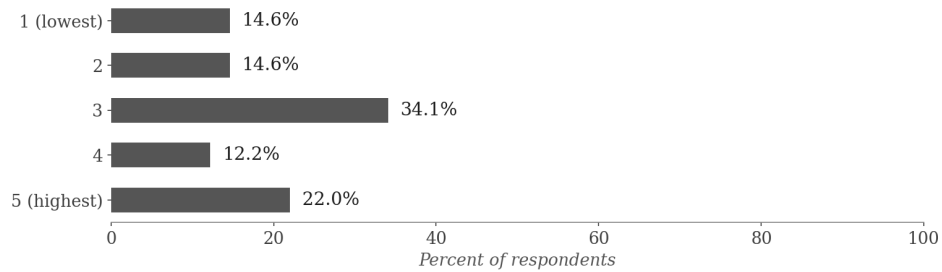
Panel A. Self-rated business growth, past 5 years



Panel B. Satisfaction with current performance



Panel C. Influence of Chinese culture on the business



Note. N = 41. All items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest); one respondent did not answer the cultural-influence item. Means (SD): growth, 3.12 (1.12); satisfaction, 3.41 (1.07); cultural influence, 3.12 (1.34).

Qualitative Interview Results

Below is a profile of each participant's interview, with direct statements indicated by quotations. To preserve anonymity, the three individuals are identified as Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3.

Participant 1:

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Participant 1 first immigrated to the United States in the late 1980s for graduate study and worked in the lighting industry for about a decade, during which he developed his expertise and built connections. He always had the dream of having his own business, but “family and career” commitments never left room. In 2019, he finally had the chance after his previous position was no longer needed. Since he already had connections, he had customers from the start, and because a few of them wanted products from manufacturers in China, he pivoted into an import and sourcing business.

Funding was a major barrier early on. He explained that since a brand-new business has no credit history, banks were unwilling to lend to him, so he had to bootstrap the business and borrow from friends and relatives. He described the frustrating chicken-and-egg loop of his business needing money to grow, but only earning money once it has grown. He stated that when you start a company, “every penny, you have to come out with your own money.” He is now located in Georgia, but he made it clear that location was not critical for his business and industry.

One of the major points he emphasized was the difference between speaking English and understanding the business culture in the United States. As a proficient speaker himself with years of English education at a Chinese university, he is comfortable with his fluency, but he has noticed that fluency alone is not enough. In his own words, “I think the culture is more important than the language itself.” He explained that there are not only underlying meanings in daily conversation, such as figurative language, but also prominent cultural differences in the business scene. In the U.S., a sales conversation focuses on all of the details of the product or service behind it before any pricing is brought up. However, in China, “prices are the number one thing” and is usually the first question the customer asks. He extended this observation towards relationship rituals. In China, business and personal life often intersect, where the business owner often hosts the client for dinner and treats them well before they talk about business. On the other hand, although business does go outside of the office in the United States, most individuals “don’t want to spend their weekend or evenings talking about business” and “would rather spend time with their families.”

When prompted on factors that aided in his success, he emphasized his adaptability. He was able to grow his business by adding new products that his existing customers would ask for, going from solely lighting products to related goods such as security systems, flooring, and cabinets, and more recently automation and robotics.

As for his network, he states that he does not actively filter by ethnicity, though his Chinese background gives him a “bigger network in the Chinese community” with more connections and referrals. When asked about the barriers limiting others from scaling, he ranked them in order: “the language, the culture, and then from there is your network.” He described attending various Asian community events as well as industry-specific gatherings, though he recognizes the meager payoff. At many events he sees “a lot of service providers” who are “just trying to sell stuff,” though he rates industry events and trade shows higher.

Participant 2:

Participant 2 first studied foreign trade in a Chinese university before immigrating to the United States as a global supply chain director as part of an external company. This is where he saw firsthand how American manufacturing worked, including its weaknesses. He explained that in the real world “nothing can be taught in the textbook.” After that job, he founded his own firm, an electronics manufacturing company based in East China. His operations extend across the United States, China, and Mexico, where he moved a lot of his production due to global trade restrictions.

His market strategy differed from many of his competitors. Instead of initially focusing on the Chinese market and then expanding internationally, his first customers were from the United States. He made this decision because American buyers do not care as much about the size of the business as they do about the quality and substance. He states that “they just trust you if you have great products” and “if you are following their business rules and following their process.” To him, this was a “fair opportunity” compared to focusing in China, where there are already much larger firms dominating the markets. His choice to build in the U.S. was also based on the culture and environment. He states that China has become increasingly competitive over the years with a “premature, marketing-driven economy,” while business in the United States is much more predictable and full of clear regulations.

Yet these same regulations that protect fair play also caused a lot of struggle for Participant 2. He emphasized the difference between the quality-first culture of the U.S. and the less regulated China. Chinese firms usually just start selling with an early version of a product and then fix things along the way, whilst the US market refuses that model. The product must meet all of the strict quality criteria from the start, and as he put it, “you cannot give a premature baby to grow” together. This was a challenge for his company, because a lot of these regulations were limiting his market entry and delaying his expansion and profit. The main challenge was qualification. Customers provided the specifications and application requirements, and his team felt confident they could meet them. However, upon closer examination, they realized there were many requirements they weren't entirely sure about. Through trial and error, his business navigated these challenges and emerged competitive. In his view, a demanding but fair market was an advantage since it rewarded a supplier that had the quality and delivery regardless of where the supplier originated.

As for English proficiency, he developed his skills completely through real-world contact rather than in a structured class or curriculum. He reflects that this ability to communicate clearly gave him the opportunity to expand easily outside of the Chinese community. As for his network, he emphasized the importance of having strong connections in the industry that an individual may be trying to start a business in. He described having a lot of connections from his past occupation as well as international connections from primarily China that helped him jump start his business.

Participant 3:

Participant 3 started as a Chinese-language instructor at a university in China. She stated that she “just worked in the university” and “didn’t do any business before in China.” She immigrated to the United States to join her husband and taught Chinese for three years before transitioning careers. In 2019, while waiting for her green card and EAD card, she was unable to take regular employment, so she “had to learn something new” and decided to find a way to work for herself. After attending a financial literacy seminar she started a life insurance practice, and after the COVID-19 pandemic hit she added a mortgage license. Because of the pandemic much of her work moved online, which she explained was beneficial since she is able to reach more people outside her local area. She now resides in Arkansas after moving from Georgia, and many of her clients are still in Georgia.

As for her customer base, she explains that they are almost all Chinese. This was not a preference but due to a limit in her language and confidence. Although much of her family has assimilated into American culture, she does not speak English often and is “not very confident to approach American native English speakers.” She has explored the idea of English marketing but has pushed it off due to time constraints. She agrees that having a better English proficiency would absolutely be beneficial to her business. She reflects on the fact that she has “a lot of Chinese friends” who are “very helpful and very supportive.” They refer their friends to her, and as she puts it, “it’s enough for me now.” Another factor that leads her to stick with the Chinese community is the culture. She finds that Chinese individuals are often predisposed to the idea of saving money for the future and are more readily eager to implement strategies that she sets. On the other hand, she found that many American prospects focus more on the present moment, and it’s hard to get them on the same page in a financial plan.

For the future, she plans on expanding her team in order to reach a wider and more diverse customer base. For networking, she belongs to the Arkansas Asian business association, but after going several times she says “I don’t think it helped” and “I don’t think it’s useful for me” because it brings no business. What does work for her is general Chinese community events, which she credits with helping grow her customer base. The line she draws is not between co-ethnic and mainstream networking but between formal association membership and informal community events.

DISCUSSION

Read side by side, the survey and the interviews create a cohesive image. The Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in this study are educated, settled, and fluent. This stands in stark contrast to the waves of immigrants who settled in major ethnic hubs in earlier years. However, since no enclave sample was collected for this study, the comparison relies on published descriptions of those populations (Light, 1972; Bonacich, 1973; Zhou, 1992) instead of a group that was measured alongside this one. Instead of

laundromats or restaurants, it is evident that Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs have pushed the gateway of opportunity through their businesses and technology.

There's another issue with that comparison that this study can't address. The individuals mentioned in the earlier research came under different immigration rules and selection criteria. Today, a Chinese immigrant entrepreneur in Flushing or Silicon Valley would probably be graduate-educated and proficient in English, as that's what post-1965 skilled migration tends to favor. We have two possible explanations: one related to geography and the other concerning the timing of arrivals. However, with only nine respondents outside of Georgia, there's not enough variation to explore either explanation.

For the people in this sample, every one of them held at least a bachelor's degree, and two-thirds held a graduate degree. It is possible that the high average amount of education was an integral part of the respondents' successes and their international development and migration. It is no longer about exclusion. It is about access, specifically from the comfort of the Chinese community into the wider market.

These businesses appear well-integrated: 68.3% cater to a mixed or mostly non-Asian clientele, while 19.5% primarily serve a co-ethnic base, either Chinese or Asian-American. It might seem that networking remains confined to the Chinese community since 70.7% mentioned Asian-American or Chinese associations. However, this interpretation is misleading. The survey asked about venues attended, not contacts made, allowing multiple responses. Only five respondents exclusively attended co-ethnic venues. A more direct question reveals that 51.2% build business relationships with entrepreneurs of all backgrounds, compared to 24.4% who mainly connect with Chinese-American entrepreneurs. Most participants are not inwardly focused.

For the smaller group that is, the co-ethnic community fosters business growth and community building but can also limit those who become too comfortable within it. Without trusted relationships outside of the bubble, it is difficult for immigrant entrepreneurs to develop partnerships and reach clients that are part of an entirely new community. Reach is the one thing a network built inside a single community cannot fully supply. Granovetter (1973) and Burt (1992) define reach as stemming from ties beyond a close circle, while Uzzi (1997) argues that dense ties become less beneficial after a certain point. However, this perspective applies to only a minority in the sample.

Table 4 was created to determine if that minority experiences slower growth, but the results show otherwise.

In fact, respondents named marketing (34.1%) as the number one barrier to success, whilst language came last. This contrasts with the interviews, where two of the three participants ranked language as a top barrier. Participant 1 identified "language, culture, and then your network" as key obstacles, while Participant 3 linked her confidence in English to her entire client base. One reason for this discrepancy is that the barrier question required a single choice from seven options; marketing was included, but reach was not. Thus, a respondent unable to connect with non-Chinese customers had no relevant option. The

open-ended responses reinforce this, showing that language and cultural differences were the largest cluster after networks. Additionally, Table 4 indicates that English proficiency is most closely associated with growth. The forced choice likely explains why language was ranked last.

Furthermore, the three interviews are valuable because they demonstrate this exact boundary from three different angles, though they were picked for their differences and so cannot show how the rest of the sample is spread. Participant 3 is living inside it. Her clients are almost all Chinese, not by preference but because of the initial community and referrals, and she states that “it’s enough for me now” because she is “not very confident to approach American native English speakers.” Participant 1 is a step further out. He started among co-ethnic contacts and still keeps his relationships, yet no longer filters customers by background and has pushed steadily into the mainstream. Participant 2 shows what it looks like to refuse the enclave from the beginning, going after American customers from the start, betting they would “just trust you if you have great products” and follow “their business rule.”

The cultural component is still clearly an issue. For Participant 1, it was the unwritten choreography of an American deal, while for Participant 2 it was the rulebook of American manufacturing, where a product has to arrive finished and compliant rather than be improved after the sale. The access barrier doesn’t mean that these entrepreneurs cannot speak to the mainstream market, but that being fluent in a market means knowing its habits, and those are picked up slowly, by doing, in a way no language class delivers.

Interestingly, there seems to be quiet disagreement beneath the data on the role of Chinese culture in the respondents’ businesses. On a five-point scale, respondents rated the role of their culture at a 3.12, which is virtually dead in the middle. However, the standard deviation of 1.34 is a testament to conflicting opinions: while 22% chose a 5, nearly a third chose the lowest two points. The interviews show both ends. For participant 3, the culture impact was a good amount due to the difference in saving practices, while for participant 2 culture was barely part of the picture, since he positioned his strategy around rules and quality. For some, heritage is an active asset, though for others it has virtually no impact. Treating these entrepreneurs as one cultural type would flatten exactly what the spread is trying to tell us.

Of course, the setting itself has a major impact on the dataset. More than three-quarters of the respondents, 78.0%, are in Georgia, not in the large coastal Chinatowns where the enclave economy was built and studied. The location may actually be a driver of the entrepreneurs’ expansion. A dispersed, suburban Southeast does not offer a dense ethnic market to stay inside, even for those who might want to, and that absence may nudge entrepreneurs towards the mainstream market. Singer (2004) identifies Atlanta as an emerging gateway, while Li (2009) discusses the suburban ethnoburb, both aligning with this idea. However, this remains a hypothesis, and this study does not test it.

This reframes the familiar split between opportunity and necessity, too. Almost half (48.8%) of the respondents never ran a business in China, and only 12.2% are actively running one there. Participant 1 spent a decade in lighting as an employee, Participant 2 was a supply chain director, and Participant 3 was a professor. None of the three planned to start a business, and the motive behind it was geared more

towards opportunity than necessity. Most of these individuals are second-career founders, and the years they spend in an American company are likely where they picked up the business culture and knowledge that later set them apart. Participant 2 points out that in the real world, “nothing can be taught in the textbook.” The crucial test would be whether years of U.S. professional experience before founding a company predict later growth, but this survey doesn’t address that since it never asked. With network composition and firm age showing flat results in Table 4, this unmeasured variable appears to be the most promising aspect of the study.

One notable theme in the open-ended responses emerged unexpectedly. Five respondents identified U.S. government policy or regulation as their biggest challenge, matching the number who cited access to the mainstream market. They pointed to immigration rules that complicate hiring and challenges in qualifying as government contract suppliers. Two others mentioned U.S.-China relations, while market and policy positioning was the most frequent success theme. These responses reflect perceptions of opportunity structure rather than networks or culture, which Kloosterman and Rath (2001) refer to as mixed embeddedness.

Transnational ties can be beneficial, but Portes et al. (2002) note that transnational entrepreneurs are a minority among immigrant self-employed individuals, aligning with this sample. A third of the respondents (34.1%) still had active business connections in China, but only 14.6% reported ties to any country outside China and the United States (Figure 2). Although this group does have international reach, it is far from spread around the globe, running only along the single thread between the U.S. and China. For Participant 1 and Participant 2, that connection is a large part of their business, since one sources his products from Chinese factories and the other manufactures across China, Mexico, and the United States. Entrepreneurs who can gain the most from China are also the ones with the most to lose if that corridor narrows.

As a whole, the seemingly unrelated stories and responses start to come together. One owner keeps adding product lines, another relocates a factory across borders, a third changes careers in midlife and moves her whole practice online. They all show a readiness to shift their stance when the current one becomes ineffective. The survey shows the same restlessness at scale: even though these were mostly mature firms, with nearly a third (31.7%) in business for over fifteen years, 51.2% were running more than one business at once, and 61% were either planning to expand or already doing so. Respondents rated their satisfaction with company development higher than their actual growth, scoring 3.41 compared to 3.12 on a five-point scale. Since the same individuals answered both questions, the comparison is paired and valid; the two ratings correlate at $r = .77$, and the 0.29 difference is significant, $t(40) = 2.50$, $p = .017$.

CONCLUSION

This study had the goal to understand the behavior of contemporary Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs through a survey of 41 business owners alongside three longer interviews. Findings indicate that the individuals in this group do not face harsh exclusion that pushed many earlier generations into a strict co-ethnic community. They are not isolated within their community; most sell outside of it, build business relationships across different backgrounds, and only five out of 41 exclusively attend co-ethnic venues. Instead, there is a challenge of turning the presence within the Chinese community into a wider market, and learning the unwritten rules of American business, obtained only through real-world experience. The challenge isn't reflected in the ethnic makeup of customers or networks, which aren't linked to self-reported growth. Instead, it appears in language and market familiarity. Respondents with the least confidence in English reported the lowest growth, and all three interviews highlighted learning about American business through experience.

If it is true that the barrier is access rather than exclusion, then the good news is that access is something an entrepreneur can actually work on. With these findings, one can conclude that relationships are an important part of the picture. From the respondents, industry-specific events (68.3%) and local chambers of commerce (56.1%) were nearly as common as Asian American and Chinese associations (70.7%), and Participant 1 said outright that he found industry gatherings and trade shows more useful than community ones. Entrepreneurs can build these relationships outside of formal events, through introductions and personal connections. Additionally, being able to adapt to many different cultures and ways of doing business is also a skill that entrepreneurs can develop, and on this evidence it is the part most worth working on, since changing the composition of a network showed no growth difference here.

Moreover, this study has several limitations. First off, the sample is not large or random, so the patterns found are likely not representative of the Chinese American immigrant entrepreneur population as a whole. A majority of the respondents reside in Georgia, which is far from the majority of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs. Recruitment relied on community channels and word of mouth, meaning those who responded were likely more connected than those who are isolated. Additionally, since these channels were co-ethnic, any findings about co-ethnic embeddedness partly reflect the locations of the respondents. The study also only collects data from Chinese entrepreneurs without a comparison group, so a distinction in behavior cannot be proven. The comparisons in Table 4 lack power, with some cells containing as few as five observations. Thus, the null results indicate an absence of evidence rather than proof of absence. Additionally, the sample primarily includes businesses that have survived; 31.7% have operated for over fifteen years, while only 4.9% have been in business for less than two years. This means entrepreneurs whose businesses failed (likely facing the toughest challenges) are not included. The self-reported measures should also be assessed critically, since responses on the five-point scales tended to waver around the median. Several survey questions were flawed as outlined in the Methodology. The growth question spanned a five-year period that ten respondents had not fully experienced, and the interview coding was conducted by a single person without a second coder. These limitations do not

disprove any analyzed trends, but they do mean this study is best read as a close look at one group rather than one representative of a larger population.

For future research, an obvious next step would be comparison. A study that places native-born owners or another immigrant group side by side with Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs would be helpful in developing a distinction in behavior. A second study should compare entrepreneurs from an established gateway and an emerging one in the same year to distinguish between cohort and geographic influences. It should also inquire about the number of years a founder spent in U.S. professional employment before starting their venture, and differentiate language skills from market reach when addressing barriers. A longitudinal study that follows businesses over time would show how these entrepreneurs actually grow and where their networks change, and repeating this study in a different region with more participants and random sampling would test whether the patterns found here are distinct.

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