

When Families Came to America: Adaptation of Italian and Chinese Familial Traditions in New York City, 1890-1970

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Abstract

Despite the importance of immigration as a topic in American history, until now, there has been no comparative research of European and Chinese immigration to the United States. This paper compares the transformation of familial traditions that occurred when Italian and Chinese families arrived in New York City. These transformations prove that American immigrants did not simply continue old world traditions and also did not completely metamorphose into foundationless products of the new environment, but instead were the product of cultural interaction between old traditions and new circumstances. The Italian immigrant community placed high value on the nuclear family in their home country. After arriving in New York, they faced comparatively more job opportunities, and as a result, did not need to rely on family organizations for personal, economic and social activities. By comparison, the Chinese community placed high value on the extended family and the broader family group, and used family relationships to construct a social network. Chinese immigrants to America faced not only strong discrimination and limited job opportunities, but also anti-Chinese legislation that prevented them from bringing their families with them to the U.S. Consequently, they made greater use of the social-cultural modes and symbols most familiar to them, i.e. family, to organize personal, economic and social

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activities. One primary manifestation of this process was the use of family name associations, in which groups of people bearing the same family name would organize themselves into cohesive social groups, thereby, grafting their old traditions onto a new social context.