

Chinese Immigrants Love the U.S. Welfare System

An interview with Professor Norman Matloff

IDA CHOI — *This program has been urging listeners to write to Congress to oppose current proposals on immigration reform, saying that the proposals are bad for us Chinese. You [Dr. Matloff] have a different opinion. Please tell us your background, and what your view is.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — I teach computer science at UC-Davis. I want to explain why immigration reform is good for the Chinese community. Recently we've had too many immigrants. No one is saying that immigrants are bad. My wife and my father are immigrants. But the current high levels of immigration are hurting the Chinese community.

Po Wong, executive director of the Chinese Newcomers Service Center in San Francisco, explained it well. He said we have too many immigrants. He really supports immigrants, and helping immigrants is his job. But he said, "There is more immigration each year than the community can absorb." In all aspects — jobs, education, housing, health, social services, etc. — the Chinese community can't cope with such a high rate of influx of immigrants each year.

Why is the rate so high? In 1990, Congress passed a bill increasing the yearly immigration levels by 40 percent. Even before that time, the levels were too high, but after 1990 it has been even worse. We should reduce these yearly quotas.

The first ones to feel the adverse impacts of the heavy influx are the earlier-arriving immigrants, who are negatively impacted by the later-arriving ones. ...Look at the sewing factories in Chinatown. The

wages are way down! They were low to begin with, but they are even lower now. Why? Because too many new immigrants are looking for this kind of work. So, of course, the employers can pay lower wages.

IDA CHOI — *But why should the reduction include canceling the eligibility of siblings of naturalized citizens to immigrate?*

NORMAN MATLOFF — This is a very important point. Look at the 1965 immigration act which set up this idea of family-reunification-based immigration. What does "family reunification" really mean? Say a hypothetical Ms. Chan is here in the U.S., a naturalized U.S. citizen, and she has a sister in Hong Kong. Congress' idea was that Ms. Chan's sister might really miss Ms. Chan, and want to be with her, so Congress gave the sister the chance to immigrate.

We all know that it doesn't work that way. Our Ms. Chan's sister isn't coming to the U.S. because she misses Ms. Chan — her motive is economics! She's not coming for family reasons.

So since Congress' goal for family reunification is not being met, why should Ms. Chan's sister be able to immigrate, whereas other Hong Kong people without siblings cannot? My point is that the

reality of family reunification is not consistent with what Congress has in mind when it set up this law. So there is no reason to continue having family reunification-based immigration.

DAVID PANG — *But what about the backlog of already-processed applications, people now on the waiting list?...*

On January 31, 1996 Dr. Norman Matloff of the University of California at Davis, who is fluent in Chinese, was a guest on a Chinese language talk show (KEST-AM) in San Francisco on the topic of immigration reform. Ida Choi, the host, warned Dr. Matloff before the program that he would receive a lot of hostile calls about his position on limiting immigration. She was quite surprised to hear results to the contrary. Dr. Matloff has translated the transcript of the show from the Chinese, and we reprint excerpts.

NORMAN MATLOFF — ...We have so many immigration-related problems. I mentioned that the workers in the Chinatown sewing factories are really hurt by today's high levels of immigration. Congress has to consider the well-being of those who are already here.

Look at education. Our schools in California are getting poorer and poorer. California ranks 43rd out of 50 states in per-pupil spending! What's the problem? The problem is that we have too many kids, and that problem in turn is mainly due to immigration.

Look at welfare. In 1994 there were nearly seven times as many elderly immigrants on welfare as in 1982 — a seven-fold increase in the short timespan of 12 years! One analyst has calculated that each American family will have to pay \$3,000 in taxes in the next ten years just to cover the welfare used by elderly immigrants. This is coming out of your pocket, out of my pocket. Meanwhile we are not doing enough for our native poor.

"I don't know how to say this in a nice way, but elderly Chinese immigrants have become especially heavy users of welfare, relative to other nationalities."

IDA CHOI — *So you feel there is a major problem with welfare.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — You were correct earlier when you suggested that reforms in immigration and welfare policies are related. Last year when the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform recommended cutting back on family reunification, they specifically mentioned immigrant use of welfare, especially by elderly immigrants.

Concerning Chinese, I don't know how to say this in a nice way, but elderly Chinese immigrants have become especially heavy users of welfare, relative to other nationalities. By "Chinese" I mean people from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Among all elderly Chinese immigrants who immigrated to California between 1980 and 1987, 55 percent — more than half! — were on welfare in 1990. That Chinese rate is nearly triple the Mexican rate of 21 percent.

IDA CHOI — *So there are lots of cracks in the welfare system. Sure, there are a lot of elderly Chinese who get welfare, so there must be at least some who abuse it.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — I must correct you. It is not just "some" recipients who abuse it. It's virtually all of them. Say a daughter in the U.S. applies for her elderly mother to immigrate. The daughter must certify to the INS that she has sufficient income and financial assets to support her mother. So the daughter herself has certified that her mother doesn't need welfare. Since all the immigrants have to pass this screening, you can see that the vast majority of the recipients don't need the money; their children themselves have certified that the seniors don't need the money.

The problem is that the children have no intention of supporting their parents. Even though they sign the form, they already have made plans for their parents to go on welfare as soon as the three-year waiting period ends. The parents have the same plan.

Even the Chinese community activists admit this. For example, Yvonne Lee, head of the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans, has said that if welfare were not available to immigrant seniors, their children would not sponsor their parents to immigrate. So it's very clear that they plan from the outset for the seniors to go on welfare; the seniors are coming here for that purpose.

...Again you shouldn't say that only "some" recipients don't need the money. Their own children certified just the opposite. Also, most of the elderly recipients come from middle-class families of above-average income. Seventy-five percent of the children of the recipients have household incomes above the California average.

A CALLER, MS. NG FROM LAFAYETTE — *I have two points to make. I immigrated here in 1980. We have to take care of those who came here at that time, so we really should cut down on the number of new immigrants we accept now. Second, medical care is really expensive. Some children put their parents on welfare so the seniors can get Medi-Cal. I really agree with the professor.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — ...The caller mentioned the key point. American medical care is expensive. Given that, the U.S. should not be allowing so many seniors to immigrate. The elderly have heavy needs for medical care. So, it's best for them to stay back in China or Taiwan, where medical care is much cheaper than

here. So it makes sense to cut down on the number of elderly immigrants.

A CALLER, MR. MUI FROM OAKLAND — *I completely agree with the professor. I disagree with the last caller, who said we should support those earlier immigrants who are already here. Those old folks' children should support them. The children signed support forms. Where does all that SSI welfare money come from? It comes from the Social Security fund, which longtime immigrants like me worked hard to contribute to. That money shouldn't be going to immigrants who haven't worked in the U.S. And the budget deficit is going to harm all of our grandchildren.*

A CALLER, MS. WONG FROM BERKELEY — *...I have a friend who immigrated to the U.S. ten years ago, by herself, not bringing her family. But through family reunification laws, she has now, directly and indirectly, brought in over 100 people. Imagine: one person pulls in 100!*

NORMAN MATLOFF — ...David [Pang, co-host] said that Chinese are ashamed to take welfare. Actually, it's just exactly the opposite. I've interviewed many Chinese social workers on this very point. I remember one social worker in particular. When I asked her whether the seniors are embarrassed to take welfare, she laughed out loud. She thought it was really funny. The notion that they would consider welfare to be a stigma was a joke to her. They aren't ashamed at all. It's not a stigma to them.

IDA CHOI — *They feel that welfare is their right.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — Yes, but the Mexican seniors are just the opposite. Social workers who work with Mexican immigrants say that it is a big stigma to them. So no wonder the Chinese SSI rate is nearly triple the Mexican rate. One can apply for SSI after three years in the U.S. The data show that most Chinese immigrant recipients apply immediately after the three-year period ends, whereas the Mexican recipients only do so after ten years....

Look at my computer science students. More than half of them are Chinese-Americans, U.S. citizens. But computer companies hire foreign students instead. Foreign students are willing to work for low salaries, because the employer sponsors them for a green card. So my Chinese-American students — again, they are U.S. citizens — either they can't find jobs or find less-desirable jobs

(say, selling computers instead of designing them).

A CALLER, MS. CHAN FROM SAN FRANCISCO — *...but I want to say that on the welfare issue, the law is just too lax. Welfare is easy to get so they take it.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — Right. Actually, I blame those Chinese organizations. For example, Professor Bill Ong Hing from Stanford [and head of the Immigrant Legal Resources Center in San Francisco], he's really radical. Whatever Congress proposes, he opposes. Those Chinese community organizations don't represent the opinions of most Chinese.

In response to the caller, my point is that as soon as Congress makes any proposal to tighten up immigration eligibility for welfare, the Chinese organizations immediately rise up in loud protest. A week ago they organized a rally in San Francisco's Chinatown, where they were saying the same thing. Henry Der of Chinese for Affirmative Action said that he would be meeting with Senator Feinstein, telling her not to tighten up on immigrant eligibility for welfare.

“More than half [of my computer science students] are Chinese-Americans, U.S. citizens. But computer companies hire foreign students instead ... [who are] willing to work for a green card.”

A CALLER, MRS. NG IN SAN FRANCISCO — *A lot of people get welfare but secretly work for cash. They put the money in someone else's name, use the money to start businesses, buy houses. Everyone knows it. They do a lot of traveling.*

A CALLER, MRS. YU IN SAN FRANCISCO'S NORTH BEACH DISTRICT — *...My friend worked during those three years [before eligibility] but quit immediately when the three years were up, to get welfare. Then she arranged for her two sons and daughter to immigrate. Then all three children went back to China to find a spouse. After they got married, she brought over all the in-laws as immigrants. They're all getting welfare...*

A CALLER, MS. SO FROM OAKLAND — *The welfare rules are too lax. I know Hong Kong immigrants who work in remodeling. They get paid in cash, get a business loan in someone else's name — and yet still they get on welfare.*

NORMAN MATLOFF —...Last year Self Help for the Elderly [a politically powerful Chinese organization in San Francisco] announced in the Chinese newspaper that they would hold a public hearing on welfare-reform legislation pending in Congress. ...The Self Help officials gave speeches about how “mean-spirited” Congress was to consider such legislation, etc. But in the question-and-answer period which followed, the most common question from the audience was “I want to go on vacation to China or Taiwan or Canada. Will that jeopardize my welfare checks?” This is ridiculous! Welfare recipients are supposed to be poor, not taking international vacations....

After three years, the children’s responsibility for their parents ends completely, under the law. The seniors can apply for welfare no matter how rich the children are. Say a son applies for his mother to immigrate. He has to fill out form I-134. The form says that his own responsibility ends after three years. But the form also says the goal of the form is that his mother will never go on welfare, even after the three years. But the son will sign the form, even though he’s already planning for his mother to go on welfare.

[At this point in the program a caller suggests it is unfair to link questions of immigrants and welfare.]

...You say they are applying for welfare legally... that’s true in some senses, not true in others. When they apply for welfare, they are doing so legally. But the sense in which it is illegal is that when they applied to immigrate they were asked, “Are you likely to become a public charge?” Their children were asked that too. Say a man applies to immigrate who is over 65 and has no real money of his own. Of course he is going to go on welfare! In fact, he and his children plan that from the outset. Yet they sign these forms under penalty of perjury, saying he won’t go on welfare. That’s illegal.

Now again I emphasize, we are not just talking about “some” seniors — 55 percent of the Chinese seniors who immigrated during the 1980s were on welfare as of 1990. Every indication, including from statements of organizations like Self Help, is that the percentage is even higher today in 1996....

The caller also said that immigration is good for economy. That is not really true. Look at what the earlier caller said about there being an oversupply of labor, that it is hard to find good jobs. Think about

it. Which line of work has a labor shortage today? None. It’s just the opposite — parents today are worried that their children won’t find good jobs when they grow up, they won’t be able to buy a house, etc. I agree that many immigrants work very hard, but we already have enough workers; we don’t need more.

A CALLER, A MS. NG — *...the husband is working as a dentist, but he doesn’t have a license. He gets paid in cash, and he doesn’t pay taxes. And he gets welfare.*

IDA CHOI — *Where are they from?*

MS. NG — *Guandong Province [China]. He always goes back to Hong Kong and China to buy his dental equipment. He travels a lot. And he’s on welfare. This is really an unfair world.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — ...We already have social problems and immigration is adding to that burden. Because of the high levels of immigration, our social problems become even harder to solve. ...Water is a problem. The California government forecasts that due to California’s population growth, we are headed for really severe water shortages in about 10 years. That population growth is due mainly to immigration.

DAVID PANG — *Companies say they need to hire those foreign students, who are really talented, in order to maintain their competitive edge.*

NORMAN MATLOFF — Not true. Just the opposite. If you look at the computer industry awards for technological advances, you’ll find that virtually all of them have been to U.S. natives. The companies want to hire foreign nationals because they are willing to work for low salaries. Even Sun Microsystems, one of the companies now lobbying against the Simpson bill as you mentioned, has publicly admitted that it hired low-salary foreign nationals.

[The complete transcript of the talk show is available on the internet from the Bay Area Coalition for Immigration Reform, Box 2457, San Francisco, CA 94126, (415) 397-6669, <www5@netcom.com>] □