New Immigrants in New York

Completely Revised and Updated Edition

Edited by Nancy Foner

Chinese: Divergent Destinies in Immigrant New York

Min Zhou

If you love her, send her to New York, because that's paradise; if you hate her, send her to New York, because that's hell.

—Prelude to the Chinese movie
A Native of Beijing in New York

New York offers many fortunes but unequal opportunities to newcomers. Not everyone can make it here. It [New York] is like a happy melting pot for some, a pressure cooker for many others, and still a dumpster for the unfortunate.

—A Chinese immigrant

In New York City, any rush-hour subway ride in the morning or evening gives a visitor a chance to rub shoulders with people of different ancestries and hear various languages spoken. New York has, of course, long been an immigrant city, but until recently the immigrants were overwhelmingly European. Time has washed off the "colors" of the old-timers from Russia, Italy, and Ireland, "melting" them into an indistinguishable "white." A new ethnic mosaic is in the making as a result of the arrival of hundreds and thousands of newcomers from Asia and the Americas.

This chapter has benefited from insightful discussions with prominent scholars, civic and business leaders, community organizers, and residents in the Chinese immigrant community in New York City. I wish to thank Nancy Foner, Paul Huang, John Logan, and Joyce Zhao for their helpful comments and suggestions. I also thank Jo-Ann Yap Adeo and Amy Chai for their research assistance. The research is supported by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.
Today, the visitor to New York inevitably encounters the world. As one Anglo traveler on the number 7 subway train through Queens reported, “I feel I am riding a train through the globe. There are so many different faces, so many strange languages, and so many unfamiliar mannerisms that I suddenly become an alien. Once the train gets past Shea Stadium and goes underground, I feel I am on the Orient Express.” Indeed, this traveler was getting off the train in Flushing with fellow passengers who were mostly Asian. Flushing is now known as the Chinatown of Queens. A traveler who takes the N train to Brooklyn and gets off at Eighth Avenue comes out of the subway station to find what seems to be a street in China. That is Sunset Park, but the Chinese call it Bat Dai Do (Eighth Avenue in Cantonese); it is the Chinatown of Brooklyn.

Chinese immigrants, though arriving in New York as early as the 1850s, now constitute one of the largest pieces of this new ethnic mosaic. Between 1872 and 1989, 72,000 Chinese immigrants (including 10,000 from Hong Kong and 9,000 from Taiwan) entered the City of New York legally, and between 1990 and 1996, about 71,500 added to the pool of Chinese newcomers (New York City Department of City Planning 1992a, 1999). Post-1990 arrivals from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong consistently rank third among the newest New Yorkers (New York City Department of City Planning 1999), not counting the thousands of undocumented Chinese immigrants (Chin 1997; Liang 1997). Together with their native-born coethnics, the number of ethnic Chinese in New York City grew more than sixfold in just three decades, from 33,000 in 1960 to 239,000 in 1990, and to an estimate of approximately half a million in 2000. How are these newest New Yorkers adapting to their new homeland? As this chapter explores the processes of transformation and adaptation among new Chinese immigrants in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, it illuminates the divergent destinies that these immigrants experience. I use a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, including U.S. census data, immigration statistics compiled by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and the New York City Department of City Planning, and my own field observations and interviews. Specifically I examine the changing trends of Chinese immigration, the distinct characteristics of the newcomers, the new patterns of settlement, and the impacts of immigration on the lives of new immigrants.

Changing Trends in Chinese Immigration to the United States

The Consequences of Chinese Exclusion

Chinese immigration to the United States dates back to the 1840s, initially driven by the capitalist expansion of the American West. Since then, more than 1.5 million Chinese immigrants have been legally admitted (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1997:28). In the beginning, Chinese immigrants arrived on the West Coast in search of gold. Most came under labor contracts, working at first in the mining industry and later on the transcontinental railroads west of the Rocky Mountains. These Chinese laborers, predominantly male peasants from the Canton region of South China, intended to stay for only a short time and “dig” enough gold to take home. But few realized their gold dreams; many found themselves instead easy targets of discrimination and exclusion. Not only were their contributions to developing the West and to building the most difficult part of the transcontinental railroad unrecognized, their mere existence became a nuisance when the job was done (Chan 1991). In the 1870s, deep-seated anti-Chinese sentiment among white workers surfaced and turned into racist attacks against the Chinese. Whites accused the Chinese of building “a filthy nest of iniquity and roteness” in the midst of the American society and driving away white labor by “stealthy” competition. They called the Chinese the “yellow peril,” the “Chinese menace,” and the “indispensable enemy” (McCunn 1979; Saxton 1971). Rallying under the slogan “The Chinese Must Go,” the Workmen’s Party in California successfully launched an anti-Chinese campaign for laws to exclude the Chinese. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was renewed in 1892 and later extended to exclude all Asian immigrants until World War II.

Legal exclusion, augmented by extralegal persecution and anti-Chinese violence, effectively drove the Chinese out of the mines, farms, woolen mills, and factories and forced them to cluster in urban enclaves on the West Coast that later evolved into Chinatowns (Nee and Nee 1973; Saxton 1971). The number of new immigrants arriving in the United States dropped substantially following the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act, from 123,000 in the 1870s to 14,800 in the 1890s, and then to a historically low number of 5,000 in the 1930s. This trend did not change significantly until the 1960s (see figure 5.1). Faced with Chinese exclusion, many Chinese laborers already in the United States lost hope of ever fulfilling their dreams and returned permanently to China. Others, who could not afford the return journey (either because they had no money for the trip or because they had no fortunes to bring home), gravitated toward San Francisco’s Chinatown for self-protection, whereas others departed for the East Coast to look for alternative means of livelihood (Zhou 1992). As a result, Chinatowns in the Northeast and the Midwest, particularly in Chicago, grew as they absorbed those fleeing the extreme persecution in California (Lee 1960; Lyman 1974; Zhang 1998).

New York’s Chinatown made its initial appearance in the four-block neighborhood across Canal Street from Little Italy in Lower East Manhattan in the 1870s (Sung 1987). During the era of free immigration between 1860 and 1880, 99 percent of the Chinese laborers that came to the United States lived and worked in the Pacific Northwest and more than 70 percent in California (Wong 1995). At the turn of the century, the proportion of Chinese living in California dropped to 39 percent while the proportion in New York increased to 6 percent. New York’s Chinese population was relatively small but experienced steady growth; it grew
from 7,170 to 13,731 between 1900 and 1940 while California experienced population loss from 45,755 to 39,556.

During the exclusion era, immigrant Chinese in New York shared many common characteristics with their coethnics in California and elsewhere in the country. First, most were from villages in the Sze Yap area, speaking Taishanese (a local dialect incomprehensible even to the Cantonese), and from other villages in Sam Yap and the greater Canton region. Second, most left their families behind in China and came to America as sojourners with the aim of making a "gold" fortune and returning home. Third, most were poor and uneducated and had to work at odd jobs that few Americans wanted. Laundrymen, cooks or waiters, and household servants characterized most of the workers in Chinatown. Fourth, they spoke very little English and seemed unassimilated in the eyes of Americans. In fact, as "aliens ineligible for citizenship," the Chinese were not allowed to naturalize. Pre-World War II Chinatowns across the country were bachelor societies. In 1890, there were 495 men per 100 women in New York's Chinese population; in California, 1,224 men per 100 women. By the 1940s, New York's Chinatown had grown into a ten-block enclave, accommodating almost all the Chinese immigrants in the city. As a typical bachelor society, the gender ratio in New York was even more skewed than before, with 603 men per 100 women, compared with a much more balanced ratio of 224 men per 100 women in California.

Post-World War II Trends

After the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the passage of the War Bride Act in 1945, Chinese women were allowed into the United States to join their husbands and families, and they comprised more than half of the postwar arrivals from China. As a result, the bachelor society began to dissolve. However, the number of Chinese immigrants entering the United States each year was still very small because the annual quota was set at 105 (Sung 1987). According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, legal admissions of Chinese immigrants averaged only 965 annually in the 1950s, a drop from 1,670 in the 1940s when many war brides came.

The surge of Chinese immigration, which began in the late 1960s, reflects the passage of amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, also referred to as the Hart-Celler Act. The act abolished the national quota system that restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, lifted the ban on immigration from Asia, and established the seven preference categories with an equal per-country limit of 20,000 in annual admissions. Since the Hart-Celler Act went into effect, immigration from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan has grown at unprecedented rates. According to the U.S. immigration statistics (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1997), the number of legal immigrants admitted from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan went from 110,000 in the 1960s to 445,000 in the 1980s. Altogether from 1971 to 1996, approximately 1.1 million Chinese
immigrants were legally admitted to the United States as permanent residents. In
New York City, Chinese immigrants arrived at an average annual rate of 12,000
in the 1980s and 1990s, accounting for almost 20 percent of all Chinese immi-
grate legally admitted to the United States (New York City Department of City

Immigration has led to huge increases in the Chinese American population as
a whole (see figure 5.2). Indeed, in 1990, foreign-born Chinese accounted for
about two-thirds of the Chinese American population nationwide. By 1990, the
ethnic Chinese population in the United States was 1,645,472, fourteen times its
size in 1950 (118,000). In 1990, the state of California was home to 45 percent
of the U.S. Chinese population; New York State came second, with 17 percent of
the total. Compared to California’s ethnic Chinese population, New York’s is much
more urban and concentrated: in 1990, about 84 percent of the Chinese in New
York State lived in New York City, whereas only 19 percent of California’s Chinese
lived in San Francisco and another 10 percent in Los Angeles. Overall, contem-
porary Chinese immigration has transformed the nation’s old Chinatowns from
bachelor societies to full-fledged family communities. In New York’s Chinatown,
over two-thirds of the adult residents are currently married, and in New York City
as a whole, about 80 percent of the Chinese live in married-couple households.

Forces Behind the Surge of Chinese Immigration

Without question, the passage of the Hart-Celler Act has been critical in acceler-
ating Chinese immigration since the late 1960s. Indeed, by stipulating that
spouses and children of U.S. citizens are exempt from numerical limitations, the
act has allowed Chinese immigration to exceed the 20,000 per-country limit. More
than three-quarters of contemporary Chinese immigrants have come to the United
States to join families, and many are immediate family members not subject to the
per-country limit.

Broader geopolitical factors, independent of or interacting with the act, also
account for the surge of contemporary Chinese immigration. Between 1949 and
the end of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), China was sanctioned
by the West and isolated from the rest of the world. Emigration was highly
restricted, and communications with overseas relatives were regarded as anti-
revolutionary and subversive. For many years the government banned the move-
ment of Chinese people across borders and severely punished those who at-
ttempted illegal border crossing. Since the 1970s, sweeping social, economic,
and political changes have taken place in China. Several historical events are
particularly important: China gained admission to the United Nations at the
expense of Taiwan in 1971; President Nixon visited China in 1972, marking the
first official Sino-U.S. contact since the founding of the People’s Republic of
China; the Chinese Great Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 upon the death of
Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong and premier Zhou Enlai; China and

the United States established normal diplomatic relations in 1979; the Chinese
government began to implement an open-door policy in 1978 and launched na-
tionwide economic reforms in 1984; also in 1984, China and Britain signed an
agreement on the 1997 return of Hong Kong to China; and last but not least,
the Chinese military put down a pro-democracy student movement in Beijing’s
Tiananmen Square in 1989. These historical events have had significant conse-
quences for emigration from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

In China, liberalized emigration policy, economic reform, and the new oppor-
tunity to study abroad are among the most significant factors contributing to emi-
gration. As China opened its door in the late 1970s, it relaxed emigration restric-
tions. The normalization of Sino-U.S. relations with China made it possible for
relatives of U.S. citizens or longtime U.S. resident aliens to apply for U.S. immigrant
visas in China. Initially, most of the United States-bound emigrants were from the
historically important sending regions in Guangdong Province. Later on, newly es-
abled migration networks facilitated emigration from other parts of China.

China’s open-door policy has also unintentionally created pressure for emi-
gration. Since 1978, China has aggressively pursued its modernization goal
through scholarly and technological exchanges. Over the past thirty years, China
has sent hundreds of thousands of students and visiting scholars to the United
States, as well as to other Western countries, for postgraduate education and
advanced professional training (Orleans 1988; see also Chinese Education
130,000 government-sponsored exchange visitors and students and 137,000 self-sponsored students went abroad to study or do research in the developed countries in the West in the 1980s and early 1990s, the majority headed for the United States. A significant proportion of the students who came to the United States, estimated at two-thirds or more, decide to stay rather than return to China (Orleans 1988). Many foreign students find permanent employment in the United States after completing their studies or practical training. In fact, most employer-sponsored immigrants from China have had their nonimmigrant student visas adjusted to permanent residency status in the United States. Moreover, the 1989 crackdown of the student pro-democracy movement in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square led to special U.S. legislation, the Chinese Student Protection Act, granting permanent residency to more than 48,000 Chinese nationals (mostly students and visiting scholars) and their families between 1993 and 1994 (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1995, 1996:19).

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, political uncertainty and anxiety about the future have spurred emigration. The ousting of Taiwan from the United Nations and the normalization of China-U.S. diplomatic relations caused a huge volume of capital outflow, as well as an exodus of middle-class Chinese to the United States (Li 1997). The return of Hong Kong to the sovereignty of China in 1997 also triggered the exodus of thousands of capitalists and members of the middle and upper-middle classes who sought safe havens in the West. The flight of middle-class professionals and capitalists coincided with the globalization of the U.S. economy, which now attracts transnational capital investment and favors the importation of highly skilled foreign labor (Liu and Cheng 1994; Skeldon 1994). Starting in the early 1980s, capitalists from rapidly growing Asian economies saw the United States as a modern gold mine for investment. Many overseas Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan invested in old Chinatowns and new suburban Chinese communities (Li 1997; Lin 1998; Wong 1998).

Last but not least, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and subsequent political repression in Vietnam has pushed thousands of refugees out of their homeland. The United States resettled over 600,000 of them, including some 200,000 ethnic Chinese, whose admissions were not subject to the per-country limit. Many Sino-Vietnamese went to live in Chinatowns or in neighborhoods settled by other Chinese immigrants.

Chinese Newcomers to New York

Diverse Origins

During the past three decades, approximately one in five Chinese immigrants (and more than a quarter of those from the mainland) arriving in the United States has called New York City home. Unlike old-timers, most new Chinese immigrants to New York flew there directly from Asia, rather than remigrating after spending time in America’s West. The majority came to join their families, others were sponsored by their U.S. employers, and still others were smuggled in without proper documents (Chin 1997; Kwong 1997; Liang 1997; Sung 1987; Wong 1987; Zhou 1992).

Whereas old-timers were typically Cantonese from rural villages in the southern areas of Guangdong Province, recent Chinese immigrants have come from a wider range of places. In 1990, 48 percent of Chinese New Yorkers were born in China, 11 percent in Hong Kong, 8 percent in Taiwan, 11 percent in other parts of the world, and 22 percent in the United States. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service data attest to the concentration of mainland Chinese in New York City. Among new Chinese immigrants who entered New York City between 1982 and 1996, 77 percent were from the mainland, 13 percent from Hong Kong, and 10 percent from Taiwan (New York City Department of City Planning 1992a, 1999).

Even among mainland Chinese, diversity of origin is a distinct characteristic. In Canton, cities and towns have replaced rural villages as the major sending communities. Outside Canton, many regions that historically sent few emigrants to the United States have become important sources of emigration, including capital cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin; coastal cities in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shandong; and inland cities in Sichuan and Hunan. Today, few Chinese immigrants understand Taihunanese, the dialect of the old-time peasants, and Mandarin speakers have become nearly as numerous as Cantonese speakers among the most recent arrivals. In Chinatown, Cantonese remains the most common language, but Fujianese has become increasingly common among coethnic residents and workers as the Fujianese subculture expands (Kwong 1997). In recent years, Chinese immigrants from Southeast Asia and the Americas have also become visible in New York City.

Diverse Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Today’s Chinese immigrants have a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some arrived with little money, minimum education, and few job skills, which forced them to take low-wage jobs and settle in deteriorating urban neighborhoods. Others came with family savings, education, and skills far above the levels of average Americans. Table 5.1 shows that new Chinese immigrants have been disproportionately drawn from the highly educated and professional segments of their sending societies. Nationwide, levels of educational attainment are significantly higher than those of the general U.S. population in both 1980 and 1990, and skill levels have increased over time. Most remarkable are foreign-born Taiwanese, who were twice as likely as their mainland counterparts and three times as likely as average Americans, to have a college degree. Not surprisingly, a higher proportion of foreign-born Taiwanese hold professional occupations as compared to their coethnics as well as to average American workers, no doubt an indication of employer-
Chinese: Divergent Destinies in Immigrant New York

What about New York City’s Chinese? As table 5.2 shows, New York seems to attract a less diverse group of immigrant Chinese than Los Angeles. New Chinese New Yorkers are dominated by immigrants from the mainland (48 percent), whereas new Chinese Angelinos are more evenly distributed by place of origin, with a significant proportion (22 percent) from other Chinese diasporic communities around the world. New York’s Chinese immigrants have lower socioeconomic status as measured by education, occupation, and median household income. Moreover, New York’s ethnic Chinese population is residentially more concentrated at the neighborhood level, with one-fifth residing in Manhattan’s Chinatown (Old Chinatown hereafter); only 4 percent of Los Angeles’s ethnic Chinese population lived in Chinatown.

Although New York receives a disproportionate number of low-skilled Chinese immigrants, not all are confined to low-level occupations. Some have continued the time-honored route of mobility, starting out at the very bottom of the labor market, while others from the beginning have been able to move into professional occupations in finance, education, and even various levels of the government. Still others are self-employed. Immigrants with high levels of human capital (education and skill) and those with limited human capital but experience in a trade tend to be attracted to entrepreneurship, especially in business specialties where the Chinese are concentrated and that offer opportunities and resources for business creation. Today, Chinese immigrants in New York find themselves in various types of jobs, ranging from cooks, waiters, seam-

**Table 5.2 Selected Characteristics of the Chinese American Population: New York and Los Angeles,** 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of birth (%)</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Los Angeles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland China</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic status (among the foreign-born only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average years of schooling</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial and professional occupations (%)</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$29,667</td>
<td>$36,224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence in Chinatown (%)</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from tables 1, 3, 4, and 5 in Zhou (1998).
stresses, and housekeepers to research and development scientists, computer engineers, laboratory technicians, Wall Street stockbrokers, midtown bankers, and "astronaut" (transnational) businessmen.

**New Patterns of Settlement**

Today's Chinese New Yorkers are diverse not only in the dialect they speak, the customs they practice, and their socioeconomic characteristics but also in their settlement patterns. Historically, the majority of Chinese immigrants who came to New York clustered in Old Chinatown. Today, about one in five settles there; many others bypass the century-old enclave to settle in new Chinatowns in outer boroughs or upscale neighborhoods in affluent suburbs. As shown in figure 5.3, ethnic Chinese New Yorkers are dispersed throughout the city, although they are highly concentrated at the neighborhood level. Ethnic Chinese clustering is visible in Manhattan, where Old Chinatown is located; in northeastern and north-central parts of Queens (Flushing and Jackson Heights); and in western and southern parts of Brooklyn (Sunset Park and Sheepshead Bay). There are relatively few Chinese (about 3 percent) and very little ethnic clustering at the neighborhood level in the Bronx.

**Old Chinatown**

Old Chinatown has been a long-standing immigrant community for over a century. The census of 1860 showed that only 120 Chinese lived in New York City, or 0.2 percent of the total Chinese population (63,109) in the United States at the time (Zhou 1992). Story has it that when a Chinese merchant, Wo Kee, opened a general store on 8 Mott Street in 1870, coethnic immigrants began to gravitate toward the place (Lee 1960; Sung 1987). The first East-bound group settled in a three-street area (Mott, Park, and Doyer) on the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Jackson 1985; Wong 1979). Until the 1970s, most Chinese immigrants entering New York made Chinatown their home. Although decentralization of the Chinese population began as early as the 1950s, substantial out-migration and outer-borough settlement were not common until much later. According to census counts in 1990, about 50,000 Chinese lived in the core (defined by fourteen census tracts?), up from 26,700 in 1970; 53 percent of the area's residents were Chinese, up from 32 percent in 1970; out of the fourteen tracts, five had a Chinese majority and another five contained 25 percent or more Chinese (Zhou 1992; Zhou and Kim 1999). Census counts are no doubt too low and miss many undocumented immigrants who are too scared to cooperate with census staff. Probably at least twice as many Chinese live in Old Chinatown and the surrounding area as census figures indicate.

The majority of Chinatown residents are Cantonese from the traditional sending regions in South China. In recent years, a noticeable group of Sino-Vietnamese has settled in Chinatown; most are fluent in Cantonese and share many cultural characteristics with the Cantonese, as they originally immigrated to Vietnam from Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. Another dialect group, the Fuzhou Chinese from Fujian province, has also established a foothold in Chinatown. Because of cultural differences and coethnic stereotyping, Fuzhou Chinese, who generally arrive as undocumented immigrants, do not mingle with the Cantonese; instead they have built their own subenclave in a three-block area on East Broadway under the Manhattan Bridge (Kwong 1997). Although Chinatown's residents are culturally diverse, they share similar socioeconomic status; many are recent arrivals, have low levels of education, speak little or no English, hold low-wage jobs, and live...
in poverty. As Table 5.3 shows, the elderly are a significant presence in old Chinatown; 21 percent of the household heads in the core area of Chinatown were sixty-five years or older, compared to 15 percent citywide. Some of these elderly people have chosen to keep their residence in Chinatown even after their children and grandchildren have moved to the suburbs.

In Chinatown, walk-up tenement and loft buildings line the streets. Overcrowding characterizes Chinatown living. Over 90 percent of residents live in rental housing, and many housing units are in poor and deteriorating condition. New immigrants arriving in Chinatown are often shocked by the squalid living that provides a striking contrast to the glamorous skyscrapers in the background. One middle-aged woman who arrived to join her daughter’s family in Chinatown recalled:

I’d never imagined my daughter’s family living in this condition. My daughter, who was about to give birth to her first child, lived with her husband in a one-room apartment. When I arrived in New York, my daughter had to squeeze me into their apartment. They had only one queen-size bunkbed that almost filled the room. I slept, and later with the baby, at the bottom, and my daughter and her husband on top. In China, I had a spacious three-bedroom apartment. It was just like hell living there.8

This woman’s family eventually bought a house in Brooklyn. Like her, many immigrants came from relatively affluent middle-class backgrounds but were not wealthy enough to afford adequate housing when they got here. Others who came from the working class seemed more optimistic. One Chinatown man remarked, “Sharing a two-bedroom apartment with another family in Chinatown wasn’t that bad. In China, I lived just like that and there were many people who lived in worse conditions. Here, you are pretty sure that this would change in a few years. But in China, you were not so sure.”9 Many Chinese immigrants reluctantly tolerate the dank and filthy cubicle dwellings in the hope that someday they will move out of Chinatown. Indeed, many have been able to do so. In Chinatown, most of the residents are either recent arrivals or elderly; very few second-generation young people are raising their families there.

For many Chinese immigrants, Chinatown’s inferior living is offset by the easy access to jobs and services. With the continuous arrival of new immigrants and the tremendous influx of foreign capital, the physical boundaries of Chinatown have expanded so that it now covers a huge area in lower Manhattan. The ethnic enclave economy has also been transformed. During the 1950s and 1940s, Chinatown’s ethnic economy was highly concentrated in restaurant and laundry businesses. By the 1970s, the laundry business had shrunk substantially and the garment industry had become one of Chinatown’s backbone industries. In the 1980s, Chinatown’s garment industry grew to more than 500 factories, run by Chinese entrepreneurs and employing more than 20,000 immigrant Chinese, mostly women. Today, the garment industry in Chinatown is showing some signs of shrinking as many factories move out of the enclave, but it remains strong as an ethnic niche for immigrant women. It is estimated that three out of five immigrant Chinese women in Chinatown work in the garment industry. The restaurant business, another backbone industry in Chinatown, has continued to grow and prosper. Listed restaurants run by Chinese grew from 304 in 1958 to 781 in 1988, employing at least 15,000 immigrant Chinese workers (Kwong 1987; Zhou 1992). In addition, various other businesses have also experienced tremendous growth, ranging from grocery stores; import/export companies; and barbershops and beauty salons to such professional services as banks; law firms; financial, insurance, and real estate agencies; and doctors’ and herbalists’ clinics. Chinatown’s economic development is described by sociologist Ian Lin (1998) as a two-circuit phenomenon embedded in a postindustrial global city: sweatshops and tenements are the lower circuit, characterized by low-wage jobs, unskilled labor, sidewalk peddlers, and crowding or slum living; and finance and redevelopment are the upper circuit, characterized by high-skilled and professional service jobs, capital-intensive redevelopment, transnational businesses, and modern tourism.

Table 5.3 Selected Characteristics of the Lower East Side, Flushing, and Sunset Park, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Chinatown Manhattan CDP#3</th>
<th>Flushing Queens CDP#7</th>
<th>Sunset Park Brooklyn CDP#7</th>
<th>New York City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>161,617</td>
<td>221,765</td>
<td>102,553</td>
<td>7,322,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of household head 65+</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renter occupied</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year housing built before 1950</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial makeup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic black</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-born</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arriving after 1980</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least some college</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial and professional</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families below poverty level</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$20,007</td>
<td>$36,000</td>
<td>$25,875</td>
<td>$29,823</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Defined by New York City’s Community Districts.
Chinatown has also witnessed a growth of civic and religious institutions. In Old Chinatown, family or clan associations and merchants’ associations (tongs) were the major community-based organizations. These organizations functioned primarily to meet the basic needs of sojourning workers, such as helping them obtain employment, offering different levels of social support, and organizing economic activities. Powerful tongs controlled most of the economic resources in the community and were oriented toward shielding Chinatown from outsiders and preserving the status quo within the community (Kuo 1977). The single most important social organization was the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA). The CCBA was established as an apex group representing some sixty organizations in Chinatown, including different family and district associations, the guilds, the tongs, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Nationalist Party. Controlled by a few powerful tongs, the CCBA cooperated with all voluntary associations and operated as an unofficial government in Chinatown (Kuo 1977; Sung 1987).

Traditional organizations functioned to secure the standing of Chinatown in the larger society and to provide a refuge for sojourning laborers. Some of them formed underground societies to profit from such illicit activities as partitioning territories, extortion for business protection, gambling, prostitution, and drugs (Dillon 1962; Kuo 1977; Sung 1987). The rapid demographic change in the nature of Chinese immigration has created pressing demands for services associated with resettlement and adjustment problems that have overwhelmed the existing traditional organizations in Chinatown. To accommodate these changes, traditional organizations have been pressured to redefine their role, and various new organizations have been established in Chinatown. A glance at one Chinese business directory, for example, reveals over 100 voluntary associations, 61 community service organizations, 41 community-based employment agencies, 16 daycare centers, 27 career training schools, 28 Chinese- and English-language schools, and 9 dancing and music schools in New York City in the early 1990s (Chinatown Today Publishing 1993). Most of these organizations are located in Manhattan’s Chinatown; some are located in new satellite Chinatowns in Flushing, Queens, and Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

Traditional ethnic institutions have changed their orientation from sojourning to settlement and assimilation. To appeal to the settlement demands of new immigrants and their families, the CCBA has established a Chinese language school, an adult English evening school, and a career training center and has instituted a variety of social service programs, including employment referral and job training services. The CCBA-operated New York Chinese School is perhaps the largest children- and youth-oriented organization in Chinatown. The school annually (not including summer) enrolls about 4,000 Chinese children, from preschool age to twelfth grade, in its 137 Chinese language classes and over 10 specialty classes (e.g., band, choir, piano, cello, violin, tai chi, ikebana, dancing, and Chinese painting). The Chinese language classes run from 3:00 to 6:30 P.M. daily after regular school hours. Students usually spend one hour on regular school homework and two hours on Chinese language or other selected specialties. The school also has English classes for immigrant youths and adult immigrant workers (Zhou 1997).

The Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC), established in the late 1960s in Chinatown, is another important civic organization. The CPC has become a rival organization to the CCBA, representing an assimilationist and mainstream agenda similar to that of other labor organizations such as the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and the Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association. Led by educated second- or 1.5-generation (foreign-born, arriving in the United States at young ages) Chinese Americans who are devoted to the community, the CPC challenges the traditional patriarchal structure and conservative stance of the CCBA through grassroots class mobilization and the support of federal and local governments and private foundations. The CPC offers a broader array of services to families and children than the CCBA (though the CCBA’s Chinese school has a much larger enrollment than the CPC’s). Its aim is to provide access to services, skills, and resources toward the goal of economic self-sufficiency and integration into the American mainstream” (Chinese-American Planning Council 1993). During the 1970s, the CPC, then known as the Chinatown Planning Council, initiated a number of youth-targeted programs in such areas as drug prevention, outreach, and recreation to help immigrant children and youths adapt to their new environment. These programs targeted high-risk youths not only by offering counseling and opportunities for young people to voice their concerns and problems, but also by providing places for them to engage in recreational activities, such as reading, having parties, and playing pool or video games, and sponsoring free field trips, shows, and museum visits (Kuo 1977). Most of these programs have continued, expanded, and diversified in the 1990s.

Many smaller civic and voluntary ethnic organizations have also been established to address concerns and demands of new immigrants and their children. The Chinatown History Museum, now the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, was established in 1980 primarily as a history project for reclaiming, preserving, and sharing Chinese American history and culture with a broad audience. The member-supported museum offers historical walking tours, lectures, readings, symposia, workshops, and family events year-round, not only to Chinese Americans but also to the general public. The museum also provides school programs for grades K to 12, guided and self-guided visits for college-level students, and a variety of videotapes, slide presentations, and exhibits.

Ethnic religious institutions have also played an important role in helping immigrants adjust to life in the United States. Although Chinese immigrants are mostly nonreligious, many initially affiliate with religious institutions for practical support and later are converted through intense participation. In the larger Chinese community in New York City, the number of churches or temples has doubled since 1965, including over eighty Christian churches and eighteen Buddhist and Taoist temples; about three-quarters are located in Manhattan’s Chinatown. While
Buddhist and Taoist temples tend to attract adults, including some college students and the elderly. Christian churches generally have well-established after-school youth programs in addition to their regular Sunday Bible classes.

Overall, the growth of the ethnic economy and community-based ethnic institutions has strengthened and expanded existing community social structures. The ethnic community, in turn, furnishes a protective social environment, helping immigrants cope with racism, unemployment, family disruption, school dropouts, drug abuse, and crime and providing access to resources that can help immigrants and their children to move ahead in mainstream American society (Zhou 1992). A counterargument is that Chinatown’s enclave economy reinforces the traditional patriarchal social structure, privileging the elite while exacerbating intraethnic conflicts and trapping the working-class immigrants into permanent subordination (Kwong 1987, 1997; Lin 1998).

Flushing

Before the surge in contemporary immigration, the Flushing neighborhood in north-central Queens was mainly a white, moderate-to-middle-income area whose residents were of Jewish, Irish, Italian, and German ancestry. In 1960, 97 percent of the population was non-Hispanic white. Flushing shared in the postwar development that affected the entire borough of Queens, resulting in a mixture of housing types. The downtown area, especially the blocks within walking distance of the subway and the Long Island Railroad station, was a mixture of multifamily apartment buildings and low-density units, occupied by young-person households, families with small children, and elderly people. The prevalence of single- or two-family houses, originally built for middle-income families, increased with distance from downtown.

Before the 1970s, nonwhites were not welcomed into the neighborhood. A long-time Chinese resident who was married to a white American had arrived from China in 1946 to join him in Jamaica, Queens. When they decided to move to Flushing she had to send her husband to look for housing. She explained, “... because they [whites] didn’t want to see Chinese here. At that time, there were few Chinese around in the community. I was not the only one, but there weren’t many...” According to this resident, the business district in Flushing had only one Chinese restaurant and one Chinese laundromat in the early 1960s. In more affluent parts of Flushing, there were incidents of neighborhood action as residents attempted to block Chinese families from moving into the area in the 1950s.

Today’s Flushing has a different face. It is often referred to as the “second” Chinatown, the “satellite” Chinatown, or “Little Taipei.” However, Flushing does not match Old Chinatown in ethnic density. Also, the ethnic label, whether “Chinatown” or “Little Taipei,” is highly contested as Flushing is not dominated by a single ethnic group. In demographic terms, it is clearly a neighborhood that has experienced rapid transition and that contains a variety of ethnic and racial groups. Between 1970 and 1990, in the general Flushing area (defined as Queens’ Community District #7), the non-Hispanic white population fell by 31 percent while the area’s total population increased by 5 percent. As table 5.3 shows, in the general Flushing area, whites were still a majority in 1990, but the presence of Hispanics and Asians was noticeable. About 40 percent of the residents were foreign-born, half having arrived after 1980. Compared to those living on the Lower East Side, Flushing’s residents displayed a better socioeconomic profile, with much higher levels of educational and occupational attainment, lower rates of poverty, and higher median household incomes. Overall, this is a relatively affluent urban area.

By 1990, the area surrounding downtown Flushing had become multiethnic. At the core (defined by eleven census tracts), the proportion of whites in every census tract decreased drastically since the 1970s; only one tract still maintained a white majority. In 1990, whites constituted only 24 percent in the population of the eleven-census tract area, Asians 41 percent (Zhou and Kim 1999). Among the Asians, 41 percent were Chinese, 38 percent Koreans, and 15 percent Indians. Representatives of these three Asian groups are clearly visible in the central business district. The concentrations, however, are rarely more than a few blocks in extent. Indeed, only two of the eleven tracts had an Asian majority (no single ethnic group dominated); nine tracts in the core area contained 25 percent or more Asians.

Reflecting national trends, Flushing’s Chinese immigrants come from three major regions: Taiwan, mainland China, and Hong Kong. Although most Taiwanese prefer Los Angeles—only 16 percent of the Taiwanese immigrants in the United States live in New York City—Taiwanese are very visible in Flushing. Among Chinese immigrants, those from Taiwan are significantly better educated and are concentrated more in professional occupations. Many Taiwanese immigrants first came to Flushing because they did not identify with Manhattan’s Old Chinatown, which is dominated by the Cantonese and by Cantonese culture. Moreover, Taiwanese had the educational backgrounds and economic resources to build their own enclave away from the existing center of Chinese settlement (Zhou and Logan 1991). Once the Taiwanese movement to Flushing began, other Chinese followed, and after a while a new type of immigrant enclave emerged that includes many from the mainland as well.

With the injection of massive amounts of capital and the influx of affluent, entrepreneurial, and highly skilled immigrants from Taiwan, Flushing’s Chinese enclave economy began to develop in the 1980s. According to the Downtown Flushing Development Corporation, property values in Flushing increased 50 percent to 100 percent during the 1980s, and commercial vacancy rates plummeted from 7 percent in the late 1970s to less than 1 percent today (Parvin 1991:22). Since 1975, new retail and office development has rejuvenated the downtown area. Today, the business center has expanded in all directions from the core. Commercial development is extraordinarily active, with new businesses springing
up literally overnight. Modern office complexes house banks and service-oriented firms owned by Taiwanese immigrants and transnational Taiwanese, as well as subsidiary firms from the Asian Pacific. In the heart of the downtown commercial and transportation hub, the multilingual signs of several mainstream bank branches and Asian-owned banks stand at the busiest intersection. Just a few blocks from the subway station, in what was until recently an aging neighborhood rapidly falling into decay, is a fourteen-story pink granite and limestone tower—the Sheraton La Guardia East Hotel. Such a sight in downtown Flushing would have been unimaginable in the 1970s. The hotel is Taiwanese-owned and is the only full-service hotel in Queens outside the airports (Parvin 1991b:22). In the immediate vicinity of the subway station, stretching up and down Main Street and onto the side streets, Chinese restaurants and shops, interspersed with greengrocers, drugstores, and fast-food restaurants, give the area an unmistakable look of Chinatown.

But it is not quite a new Chinatown. Flushing’s commercial core is also filled with Korean, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi restaurants and stores, packed into shop fronts along the main streets. Korean, Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants think of Flushing as their own community, just as the Chinese view Flushing as a distinct Chinese community. Suburban Chinese come to the neighborhood for multiple purposes. For example, many suburban Chinese families bring their children to Flushing’s Chinese Cultural Center for Saturday afternoon language classes and recreation. While children are at the center, their parents usually shop at the local grocery and specialty stores. Others come to Flushing to study or browse in the crowded municipal public library that owns books, magazines, and newspapers in different Asian languages, staying afterward to do some shopping and perhaps eating at one of the many ethnic restaurants.

The business expansion of the Chinese community is particularly noteworthy. A 1982 survey of Chinese-owned businesses in Flushing counted five grocery stores, three restaurants, two supermarkets, one real estate agency, a professional building, a drug and herbal store, and a beauty salon (Hom and Smith 1982:343). Just ten years later, Chinese businesses are booming, and the rate of turnover and expansion is so rapid that it is virtually impossible to keep an accurate count. No longer are Chinese restaurants the only or even the predominant form of business activity. There are as many Chinese realtors today, and two-and-a-half times as many doctors’ offices and pharmacies, as restaurants. An ethnic market survey conducted by the Flushing Chinese Business Association in 1990 found that over half of the consumption needs of Chinese residents in the area were being met by local food and grocery stores. The development of Flushing as a comprehensive business center means that suburban Chinese residents no longer have to go to Manhattan’s Chinatown to visit a restaurant, to shop, or to satisfy their need for Chinese cultural activities. Flushing’s Chinese enclave economy also maintains strong ties to Old Chinatown. Although it is quite far from Old Chinatown, it provides convenient access to the subway, which makes the commute relatively easy. Many Chinese immigrants living in Flushing still commute to Chinatown to work or shop.

Flushing’s Chinese community is relatively free from the constraints of traditional social structures in Old Chinatown. In recent years, the immigrant Chinese in Flushing have become more actively involved in local politics, mostly through direct political participation (Lin 1998). For example, they have formed various civic organizations, the most prominent being the Chinese American Voters Association, that work closely with ethnic businesses and other non-Chinese community-based organizations. Such efforts were initially prompted by specific business concerns such as the lack of municipal services, confusing rules and regulations, and insensitivity of public officials to specific needs of the business community. Common economic concerns also encouraged different immigrant groups to work together to improve the neighborhood’s image and to mediate interethnic misunderstandings and conflicts. New ethnic associations organized street-cleaning campaigns and voter-registration drives and lobbied the city on a wide range of issues. In the early 1990s, eight of forty-eight members of Community Board #7 were Asians. The Chinese played an important role in the Downtown Flushing Development Corporation and other community organizations, such as the Friends’ Reconciliation Project, which served to mediate and resolve neighbor disputes (Chen 1992).

Even though the Chinese are a visible presence in Flushing’s economy and are the largest immigrant group, they have not been able to muster enough clout to exert much political influence. In 1990, Asians made up almost a third of the population of the 20th Council District but only 7 percent of registered voters. City Councilwoman Julia Harrison was twice challenged by Asian American candidates—one Korean and one Chinese—but won both elections in the 1990s (Dugger 1996; Lii 1996).

Over time, Flushing’s Chinese community has become more diverse in terms of class. The ethnic economy has attracted growing numbers of low-skilled working-class immigrants. For example, many mainland Chinese, mostly of urban working-class background, have settled in Flushing because of the conveniences and job opportunities offered. Also, middle-class neighborhood pioneers have sent for their relatives, many of whom are less skilled and have fewer resources than their predecessors. The shift in class status has become increasingly visible since the mid-1990s. Nowadays, Chinese immigrants often refer to Flushing as the second Chinatown rather than “Little Taipei,” implying the increasing visibility of immigrants from the mainland. The class diversity among Flushing’s Chinese has a number of implications. For Chinese immigrants, class segmentation means greater social service burdens and higher risk of bearing a dual stigma—foreign and poor. For their part, more Chinese immigrants see Flushing as a temporary home on the route to suburbia. Since the mid-1990s, there is evidence of secondary migration among the more affluent Chinese immigrants from Flushing to bedroom communities in Long Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut.
Sunset Park

Sunset Park is a working-class neighborhood originally settled by European immigrants who lived in two-story houses and brownstones that line surrounding streets. It is conveniently located along the B, N, and R subway lines and is just about thirty minutes by subway from Old Chinatown. As in Flushing, the earlier European immigrants and their children have gradually moved to the suburbs since the late 1960s, leaving many absentee-owned houses and many vacant stores. As white residents slowly abandoned the neighborhood, ethnic minorities and new immigrants, first Dominicans, then Puerto Ricans, then Asians and Arabs, began to move in (Winnick 1990). The third column of table 5.3 indicates that Sunset Park, defined as Brooklyn Community District #7, is dominated by renter-occupied housing. Most of the housing structures were built before 1950. Unlike in Old Chinatown, there has been little new real estate development in the neighborhood. Like Flushing, Sunset Park is a new multietnic immigrant neighborhood but with a different racial/ethnic makeup. Of some 102,000 residents in the district in 1990, about 34 percent were non-Hispanic white; 4 percent were black; 51 percent Latino; and 10 percent Asian, 78 percent of whom were Chinese. Between 1980 and 1990, the Chinese experienced a population growth of 319 percent, compared with a 26 percent loss among non-Hispanic whites (New York City Department of City Planning 1992b).

Sunset Park is more an outpost or extension of Old Chinatown than a newly founded Chinatown with its own unique character as in Flushing. It houses recent arrivals as well as Chinatown's out-movers, who are mostly working-class background. Among Chinatown out-movers, some families resettled in Sunset Park as they attained a measure of economic mobility, whereas others were pushed out of Chinatown merely because of overcrowding and because of the fear that their teenage children might be pressured into joining gangs.

Sunset Park offers affordable housing and easy access to Chinatown. More upwardly mobile immigrant Chinese are unlikely to move to Sunset Park because of the neighborhood's working-class characteristics, but they may purchase a home as rental property. Less upwardly mobile, hard-working immigrants are often able to buy a house in Sunset Park on the condition that they rent out part of it to coethnic immigrant families to help meet the hefty monthly mortgage payments. A former member of Brooklyn's Community Planning Board explained that with continued high immigration from China and Hong Kong, “more and more Chinese will be coming to New York. There is no more room in Manhattan, and Queens is too expensive for newcomers. Brooklyn, being affordable and easily accessible, is the logical place to be” (Zhou 1992: 191-92). In fact, most immigrant Chinese in Sunset Park share similar socioeconomic characteristics with non-coethnic residents in the neighborhood. The arrival of immigrant Chinese families has helped revitalize the dying neighborhood by means of homeownership, and in turn this has attracted more immigrants from Old Chinatown and from abroad.

Today, most of Sunset Park’s Chinese immigrants are Cantonese from the mainland and Hong Kong. A sizable number of Fuzhou people have also moved into the neighborhood, mostly in basement units rented from coethnic homeowners (Kwong 1997).

As increasing numbers of Chinese immigrant families moved into Sunset Park, so did ethnic businesses. The ethnic economy that has developed along Eighth Avenue between Thirty-ninth and Sixty-fifth Streets can trace its origin to the opening of Fung Wong Supermarket, owned by Hong Kong immigrant Tsang Sun (Sunny) Mui, on Eighth Avenue in 1986 (Aloff 1997; Mustain 1997). In recent years, the number of garment factories has grown along with ethnic service-oriented businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, beauty salons, herbal medicine stores, health clinics, and accounting and legal offices. By the early 1990s, there were an estimated 300 stores and 250 garment factories in the neighborhood (Gladwell 1993). Chinese immigrant now call Sunset Park “Bat Dai Do,” a Cantonese translation of “Eighth Avenue,” which means the road to good fortune and prosperity. Although Bat Dai Do is not as well developed as Flushing and the basis for ethnic social organization is not as solid as in Old Chinatown, Sunset Park has certainly served to accommodate the pressing needs of new immigrants for jobs, housing, and child rearing.

Causes and Consequences of Settlement

Chinese New Yorkers have consolidated and expanded their ethnic community in Old Chinatown, Flushing, and Sunset Park. Ethnic clustering is also visible in other neighborhoods of Queens and Brooklyn. As seen in figure 5.3, Chinese are found in Jackson Heights and neighborhoods south of Jackson Heights in Queens, and Sheepshead Bay and neighborhoods southeast of Sunset Park in Brooklyn. Several factors contribute to this paradoxical pattern of residential dispersion and concentration.

First, there is the class status of immigrants along with the availability of relatively decent and affordable housing. The more affluent segment of the immigrant Chinese population can often bypass Chinatown to buy homes in outer-borough middle-class neighborhoods with their family savings and with incomes secured by well-paying professional jobs in the mainstream economy. These affluent individuals are likely to purchase homes in Flushing or other Queens neighborhoods, where they can enjoy a semisuburban life while also living close to Manhattan. Those without well-paying jobs have to find places with multifamily housing units and apartment buildings so that they can rent out part of their homes to help pay monthly mortgages. For many Chinese immigrants, purchasing a home, rather than improving English or advancing to a more desirable occupation, is considered a major achievement and a symbol of success in life.

The second factor is ethnic networking. Where one lives depends on whom one knows. Because of limited English proficiency, many immigrants depend on
family or friendship networks to find work and housing. Family members and friends can spread the word or obtain information about housing availability through informal social contacts. Chinese homeowners prefer Chinese renters because of language and cultural convenience and put advertisements in Chinese language newspapers to find renters. The reliance on family members and friends has a direct effect on the concentration of immigrant Chinese from the same dialect group. As mentioned previously, Chinese immigrants from different places of origin do not necessarily speak the same language. The language barrier often separates Cantonese speakers from Mandarin speakers from Taiwan and the mainland. As a result, few Taiwanese- and Mandarin-speaking mainlanders are interested in living in Old Chinatown. Mandarin speakers are also less likely to settle in Sunset Park than in neighborhoods in Queens. Ethnic realtors play an important role, too. For newcomers, coethnic realtors are indispensable in the housing business. Realtors not only help immigrants purchase housing but also steer them into particular neighborhoods.

A third factor explaining the residential patterns—dependency of immigrants on the enclave economy—is perhaps the most important. Regardless of where they live, most immigrant Chinese are tied to the opportunities offered by ethnic economic enclaves (Zhou and Logan 1991). An important consideration in residential location for many Chinese immigrants is convenient access to public transportation; the neighborhood must be within easy walking distance of bus and subway lines that can get them to work quickly. In the enclaves, immigrants can find jobs, information about jobs in other places, and even transportation to get to jobs elsewhere. Also, ethnic banks and credit institutions in the enclave facilitate home financing for coethnic immigrants. In terms of time and distance, Flushing, Sunset Park, and most of the neighborhoods with sizable Chinese populations are reasonably close to Manhattan’s Chinatown and other job centers and ethnic communities in the city.

Contemporary patterns of Chinese immigration and settlement are quite distinct from those of the past. By sheer numbers, the arrival of the newest New Yorkers injects the old metropolis with new blood, contributing to the economic and social vitality of the city. Also, the settlement of new Chinese immigrants has brought large numbers of people with higher-than-average education and economic resources that enable them to create their own ethnic economy (Logan forthcoming). But growth is not without pain and potential risks.

The development of the ethnic economy in Chinatown, Flushing, and Sunset Park has been accompanied by rising house prices, overcrowding, noise, traffic congestion, and crime, causing one longtime resident in Flushing to lament that the new Flushing “looks like hell. . . . It’s really a disaster. There is too much traffic, filth, and chaos.” Among established residents, there is a deep-seated fear that their neighborhoods are turning into another Chinatown or into a microcosm of Taipei, Shanghai, or Hong Kong, which they imagine are among the most crowded and polluted cities in the world. Established residents worry about increased density and the destruction of what were once tranquil neighborhoods but now draw more and more crowds of cars and people. In Flushing, for example, some longtime shopkeepers in the neighborhood are openly angry about the changed business environment and waste no time telling the new immigrants what they think (nor do they spare a thought for political correctness in assigning blame). They complain not only about the soaring rents from heavy Asian real estate investment, but also that Asian customers often want to bargain over prices, which they say has forced many non-Asians out of business. The real estate frenzy has had other impacts on the appearance and the physical character of the neighborhood. According to some residents, many churches, mosques, temples, old homes, and other community buildings have been either torn down or converted into private homes.

Ethnic networking, serving as a primary means to channel immigrants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds into middle-class neighborhoods throughout the city, has contributed to class segmentation of new ethnic enclaves. Flushing started out as a new type of ethnic enclave: Mandarin-speaking and rich in financial and human capital. Most of the earlier Chinese immigrants into Flushing were from Taiwan. Investors from Hong Kong and mainland China, as well as non-Cantonese-speaking professional migrants from China (e.g., foreign exchange students who obtain permanent residency status through employment), gravitated to Flushing. These professional migrants or investors used their economic and human-capital resources to build up the area into the status of an enclave. The neighborhood pioneers invested heavily in real estate and business development, which helped to provide the finance capital, housing, and employment opportunities for subsequent immigrants who in turn paved the way for later arrivals. After a while, these middle-class neighborhood pioneers began to send for their families, many of whom were not as resourceful as their sponsors and experienced downward occupational mobility. Also, the ethnic economy drew in low-skilled working-class immigrants from Manhattan’s Chinatown and Sunset Park. The class segmentation has reinforced the negative stereotypes of Chinese immigrants as foreign and poor and has added to social-service burdens in Flushing.

The development of new ethnic enclaves has also intensified interethnic relations. When immigrants and businesses cluster in ethnic enclaves, they impact coethnic members disproportionately but cause little concern among non-coethnic outsiders. Only when ethnic businesses expand outside the enclave is there the possibility of interaction and confrontation (Tseng 1994; Min 1996). Today, multiethnic neighborhoods are a central feature of the areas where Chinese concentrate outside Old Chinatown. With the increasing presence of Chinese immigrants, a certain amount of interethnic conflict has inevitably surfaced in community life. Longtime residents feel that they are being locked out of their own neighborhoods. Some complain bitterly about non-English signs on the local shops. In Flushing, Became and Hispanics often report that they are automatically considered to be criminals by certain Chinese and Korean shopkeepers. Chinese immigrants also
often complain that blacks and Hispanics are hostile. It is important to note that ethnic frictions manifest themselves differently in different neighborhoods. Flushing—a multiethnic neighborhood in the truest sense of the word—has not witnessed anything like the level of tension that has already exploded into pitched battles on the streets of other New York neighborhoods. This of course is good news for Flushing residents, but we would do well to remember that ethnic hostility is unpredictable and can flare up without much notice. In this sense, the existence of any level of interethnic tension is a cause for concern (Zhou and Kim 1999).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the past, Chinatown was a bachelor society sheltering immigrants from racism and discrimination, hence reinforcing the stereotype of “the unassimilable alien.” Even today, many immigrants continue to cluster in Chinatown, work in the ethnic enclave economy, and socialize among their coethnics. Since the ethnic community provides jobs, housing, services, and a familiar cultural environment, immigrants can conduct their daily lives without learning English and communicating with the outside world. As a result, the stereotype of “unassimilability” has prevailed in the public mindset. However, today’s Chinese immigrant community is not quite as isolated and immigrants are not quite as unassimilable as many think. There are several significant ways by which the ethnic community shapes the lives of Chinese immigrants as they strive to become American.

First, participation in the ethnic enclave economy facilitates upward social mobility for immigrants while also keeping them at arm’s length from the mainstream society. The experience of working women in Chinatown provides a prime example. In New York, immigrant Chinese women comprise over half of the workforce in the enclave garment industry. Most of the garment workers lack English proficiency, have few job skills, and are married to other immigrants similarly handicapped. Since their husbands alone cannot provide for the family, these women must work to support their families. They often find working in Chinatown a better option than working in low-wage jobs in the larger secondary economy, because enclave employment enables them to fulfill their multiple roles more effectively as wage earners, wives, and mothers. In Chinatown, jobs are not hard to find, working hours are flexible, employers are tolerant to children’s presence, and private child care within walking distance from work is accessible and affordable. Chinatown also offers convenient grocery shopping and various takeout foods. These amenities enable women to juggle work outside the home and household responsibilities. Moreover, women socialize at work with other coethnic women, who come from similar cultural backgrounds and share similar goals and concerns about family, child rearing, and mobility. By the sewing machine, they can brag about children, complain about insensitive husbands or nagging relatives back in the homeland, share coping strategies, and comfort each other over hardships. These ties serve as a source of emotional support and psychological comfort.

The enclave economy is a double-edged sword, however. While it undoubtedly facilitates upward mobility for many immigrant families, enabling some to buy homes or set up their own businesses, and provides various resources, such as after-school programs that help children get ahead, working in the enclave economy does not help immigrants gain English proficiency or learn American ways. And many will be struck with low-wage jobs there. A good many who arrive with little knowledge of English and few transferable job skills and those arriving as undocumented may find themselves “trapped” in Chinatown, toiling in dead-end jobs under poor working conditions and seeing little hope of ever making it in America.

Second, involvement in the enclave economy heightens rather than reduces the salience of ethnicity. For one thing, jobs created in Chinatown, Flushing, and Sunset Park and goods and services provided there tie immigrant Chinese from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds together despite spatial dispersion. Put another way, the ethnic enclave has directly or indirectly increased the degree of ethnic cohesion that cuts across class lines, thereby sustaining a sense of ethnic solidarity. At the same time, living and working in the ethnic enclave reinforces common values and norms and creates new mechanisms for sanctioning nonconformity among Chinese immigrant workers from diverse class backgrounds. As one immigrant worker replied to the question of why Chinatown workers were seemingly reluctant to stand up for their rights, “I don’t think you people get it. In Chinatown, if you fight, you lose your job. Nobody will ever hire you. When factories close down, other workers will blame you, and your family will blame you.” In a sense, the survival and success of many ethnic businesses depend on cheap immigrant labor as well as unpaid family labor. In Chinatown, the economic behavior is embedded in an ongoing structure of social relations. Ethnic entrepreneurs depend on a motivated, reliable, and exploitable coethnic labor force. In return, they create job opportunities to serve the short-term goals of coethnic workers who must choose between low wages and joblessness (Zhou 1992). However, ethnic cohesion is not inevitable and does not inhere in the moral convictions of individuals or the value orientations in which they were socialized in the country of origin. Rather, ethnic cohesion is contingent on structural disadvantages that immigrants confront in the host society. Immigrant Chinese from various dialect groups, especially those from rival groups, do not display much solidarity in the homeland, nor did they need to stress the consciousness of being Chinese (Zhou and Kim 1999). On arrival in the United States, however, ethnic cooperation becomes a logical strategy for social mobility.

Third, the development of ethnic social organizations broadens the interaction between the ethnic community and the larger society while it also intensifies intraethnic competition over who governs the community. To many New Yorkers, Chinese immigrants seem to be socially isolated in their own ethnic circles
with little interest and knowledge about metropolitan affairs. This is no longer true. In fact, Chinese immigrants are increasingly connected to other New Yorkers through Chinese-language newspapers, such as the World Journal, and Chinese-speaking television and radio stations that feature news and stories about America and international affairs. There is no shortage of information about the larger society that is particularly relevant to Chinese immigrant life thanks to the well-educated, well-informed, and dedicated members of the first and second generation who work with coethnic immigrants in various community-based organizations. Unlike the old ethnic associations, new civil organizations do not require membership based on family, kinship, or place of origin; they serve the entire Chinese community. Their leaders are interested not in translating power into economic self-gain, but in helping the ethnic community to integrate into the larger society and affecting public policy. However, new leaders and their civic organizations, with good intentions, often find themselves struggling with little money and the problems of generating grassroots support. The new leaders are sometimes criticized as being naïve; insensitive to cultural specific needs; and ignorant of the power of family, kin, and friendship bonds; they are also often accused of using white middle-class formulas to solve Chinese immigrants’ social problems (Zhou and Kim 2001). Indeed, one reason that they have had so much trouble building their organizations is their transient status and dependency on outside funding. Residing outside of the community, the new leaders lack a shared identity with new immigrants based on a common struggle for survival (Kuo 1977).

In sum, recent Chinese immigration to New York City has led to dramatic changes in the metropolitan Chinese community, and these changes in turn have had far-reaching effects on the way the immigrants come to see themselves in New York and the way they relate to their coethnics and other New Yorkers. Many Chinese New Yorkers revere the Statue of Liberty with high hopes for a better life—sharing the same dream as those who came before them from Europe or other parts of the world. However, as the quotes cited at the beginning of the chapter indicate, the new life in New York involves divergent destinies. Many newcomers have continued to head to Old Chinatown as their first stop in the journey to attain the American Dream, but others have bypassed the traditional staging place, moving directly into outer-borough neighborhoods. This phenomenon challenges the conventional wisdom about immigrant assimilation, which has it that residential mobility is associated with acculturation. Chinese immigrant residential patterns also suggest that the newcomers are not birds of passage. Like most earlier European immigrants, they too want to become American. However, their sheer numbers and economic power do not automatically translate into social acceptance and political power. Indeed, Chinese immigrants’ desire to assimilate, no less than ethnic succession, can be perceived as a threat to white middle-class neighborhoods. Resistance from established residents, intertwined with the Chinese way of making it in America, reinforces immigrant ethnicity, complicating the direction of assimilation.

Notes

1. Personal interview, August 1999.
3. The estimate is based on the 1990 census population plus the number of new arrivals recorded by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), an estimate of natural births, and a rough estimate of undocumented immigrants.
4. The number of illegal immigrants would have offset that of the returnees, most of whom left the United States during the harsh years of Chinese exclusion.
5. Sze Yip includes four counties—Taishan, Kaiping, Enping, and Xinhui—and the people share a similar local dialect. Sam Yip (counties of Nanhai, Panyu, and Xunde) and the Pearl River Delta counties (such as Zhongshan) were main among sending communities in the Canton region.
6. These are the figures for principal metropolitan statistical areas in New York, N.Y.; Los Angeles–Long Beach, Calif.; and San Francisco, Calif.
7. Old Chinatown in 1980 and 1990 includes fourteen tracts: core area—6, 8, 16, 18, 27, 29, and 41, and extended area—2.01, 2.02, 14.02, 22.01, 43, 15.01, and 25 (Zhou 1992). The total population in these tracts was in 92,873 in 1990; over half were Chinese.
10. The actual number of community organizations in Chinatown was approximately twice as many as this list because many were not listed in this particular directory.
12. Flushing in this chapter refers to the core area in downtown Flushing, which is officially defined by the Queen’s Community Board #7 as an area including eleven contiguous census tracts in both 1980 and 1990 censuses: 797, 845, 851, 853, 855, 857, 839, 865, 867, 871, and 875.
14. The development of the enclave economy is of course full of cutthroat competition and intense internal conflicts, making the sanctioning of nonconformity one of the key functions of ethnic economic institutions. Whether this function is effective or not, however, is the topic of another paper.

References


