THE NEW CHINATOWN

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FOR DUŠANKA

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INTRODUCTION

THE Chinese in this country have gained considerable prominence in recent years. Their image has undergone a drastic transformation. They are no longer viewed exclusively as workers in the restaurant and laundry trades. Today some commentators say they are "overrepresented" in Ivy League universities. Moreover, Chinese have earned distinction in elite professions, such as engineering and computer technology.

Chinese communities have mushroomed. Old Chinatowns in New York City and San Francisco have increased dramatically in population since the mid-1960s. New Chinatowns have been built in Miami, Houston, and San Diego, and suburban Chinese communities (Flushing in Queens, New York; Monterey Park in Los Angeles; Oakland in the San Francisco Bay area) have sprung up as satellites of long-established Chinatowns.

The success of so many Chinese and the growth of their communities have happened in a very short time. The increase in population alone is impressive. Beginning with the Immigration Act of

1965, the Chinese have come to this country in large numbers. Their population has increased by 241.4 percent—a jump from 236,084 in 1960 to 807,027 in 1980. In 1985, according to one study, the Chinese population reached 1,079,400, a 32 percent increase in just five years.[1] Today the Chinese are the second-largest immigrant group in this country after the Mexicans.

The increase in population has been extremely rapid since 1979. In 1965 the immigration quota for Chinese nationals was set at 20,000 per year; that quota included immigrants from both Taiwan and the People's Republic of China; there was an additional quota of 600 for immigrants from Hong Kong. Since the United States did not then recognize the government of the People's Republic, immigrants came mainly from Taiwan and from among Hong Kong residents who could claim mainland origin. In 1979 the United States and the People's Republic of China established formal relations and the country was given a separate annual quota of 20,000. The quota for Chinese has since been raised to 40,600 per year. However, since the children and parents of U.S. citizens and refugees are exempt from the quota, the total number of new immigrants may exceed that figure by 10 to 20 percent. And, of course, these numbers do not take into account immigrants of Chinese origin from Vietnam, Cambodia, and other parts of the world. At current rates of immigration, the Chinese population in this country will double every ten years. Few can keep up with the growth of Chinese immigrant communities; even fewer can foresee the impact of the Chinese on American society. Dealing with this question is as difficult as shooting at a moving target.

The influx has already brought misgivings. Some Americans believe that the Chinese should no longer be considered a disadvantaged minority eligible for affirmative-action programs. Others fear that immigrants are taking jobs away from Americans. Still others believe that the new immigrants are not interested in being assimilated into American society; they are often thought to prefer to live in ethnic enclaves, learning no English and putting up commercial signs in Chinese. The backlash has contributed to the passage of

English-only ordinances in many states, notably Proposition 63 in California in 1986, which stipulated English as the state's official language.

To many others it seems that the Chinese are doing so well precisely because they stick together. Most of all, the Chinese, unlike certain other minorities, are believed to be "making it" without depending on public assistance. They are willing to start at the bottom and help one another to get ahead. Thus, Chinese Americans are perceived as the "model minority."

This perception grossly simplifies reality. The Chinese today basically consist of two distinct groups. More that 30 percent are in the professional category (in contrast to less than 17 percent of the total U.S. population).[2] These Chinese, some of whom are American-born and others new immigrants, have more education and higher incomes that the national average. They do not live in concentrated Chinese ethnic communities. They are the "Uptown Chinese."

While the Chinese may be heavily represented in the professions, they are also overrepresented as manual and service workers; this group constitutes another 30 percent of the Chinese population. A significant proportion tend to be new immigrants, who are likely to live in Chinatowns, speak little English, and work at low wages in dead-end jobs. They are the "Downtown Chinese," who work as waiters and seamstresses.

The prevailing notion is that the Downtown Chinese willingly settle and work in Chinatowns, where they are protected by kinship and mutual-aid networks. Through hard work and cooperation, they create dynamic commercial and manufacturing centers in Chinese communities all across the country. The prosperity of these centers is thought to benefit all residents. Their successes have attracted entrepreneurs and investors from the Far East who, in turn, stimulate more growth and opportunities. The vitality of these communities can be measured by the increasing number of local banks and the remarkable jump in real-estate values, which in many instances are comparable to the highest in their respective cities. Some social scientists are so impressed that they consider Chinatowns "ethnic en-

claves," a new route into the American middle class. It is a new route because immigrants can succeed without learning English and without joining the American labor market.

However successful Chinese communities may appear to outside observers, most residents are actually not succeeding. Hong Kong investors are attracted to Chinatowns because they provide ample cheap labor. Residents in the Chinese communities are still mainly working-class. A typical waiter employed by a Chinatown restaurant works sixty hours a week, for $200 a month, with no overtime pay, no health benefits, and no job security. Chinatown families live in run-down, roach-infested, three-room railroad flats, with usually three generations living together. They are not advancing economically; in fact, with the continued influx of immigrants, wages are falling and working conditions are worsening.

Economic hardship is to be expected for new immigrants who do not know English, lack marketable skills, and work in unstable industries. But many Chinese are also working for Chinese employers in an "underground economy": they are not protected by American labor law. Factory owners dodge social-security payments for their workers, landlords charge key money, Chinese-owned banks ignore banking regulations, youth gangs extort protection money from shop owners, and tongs intimidate—and even murder—dissenters.

Nobody dares to complain, because Chinatown is still dominated by a traditional political elite which, despite change, rules with the acquiescence of outside authorities. This structure was transplanted from feudal China during the late nineteenth century. Family, village associations, and secret societies were initially formed to defend immigrants against racial attacks from whites. However, these associations, once established, developed a strength of their own; they came to rule the working people in the communities. Today, this traditional order has been modified, but it continues to exist. It has adapted to modern conditions to serve a new class of owners and landlords in Chinatown.

By stressing the importance of the informal political structure and its firm grip on the destiny of many Chinese in this country, I do

not wish to suggest that Chinatowns are so isolated that they are immune to outside influences. In fact, the militant civil-rights struggles of the 1960s had a major impact on Chinatowns, pressuring the federal government to set up Great Society-type programs. At the same time, a rising political consciousness among minorities has pushed for change. New political ideologies have penetrated deeply into Chinese communities. Civil-rights activists, social-welfare agencies, unions, and political parties are slowly eroding the power of the traditional order, but they have not yet displaced the hegemony of the Chinatown business and political elite.

The limited impact of forces for reform on the traditional order has to be seen in a larger national context. The American economy has entered a post-industrial stage, moving away from manufacturing into service and high-tech industries. Simultaneously, the American labor force is being reorganized, and the balance of power between business and labor has been altered. In this transitional period, employers are seeking cheap, immigrant labor. Thus, the American economic system has precipitated and encouraged exploitative working conditions. However, this exploitation is well disguised when Chinese work for a Chinese employer. Adding to this situation is the attitude of the American officials who generally do not intervene in the internal affairs of the ethnic communities. This benign neglect has only strengthened the dominance of the community's informal political structure.

To a certain extent, the situation facing Chinese immigrants is unique. Modern Chinatowns are not like black and Latino ghettos, which lack jobs and capital. Nor are they like the earlier European immigrant communities, which were essentially way stations leading to integration. The Chinese confront not only the racism of the larger society but also the dominance in their communities of a traditional political order.

Nevertheless, social change is taking place in Chinatown. Polarization has increased due to conflicts pitting Chinese working people against the Chinese elite. It is my intention to discuss the nature of this polarization and how changes are developing.

Overall, this book is optimistic, because I firmly believe, contrary

to popular perceptions, that the Chinese are not docile. As new immigrants, the Chinese came to seek economic betterment, political stability, social justice, and equality. But, in fact, most end up having to work for others, own no property, and suffer exploitation and discrimination. Such circumstances require a certain show of docility or, at least, an ability to accommodate to situations created by others. Yet because most immigrants come to the United States under the most difficult circumstances, the average immigrant is likely to be both resourceful and assertive. The new immigrants, unlike their forebears, are not ashamed to receive social services and public assistance. While they may not be politically conscious in the conventional sense, they react strongly when confronted with injustice. Given able leadership, they are organizable. In 1978, 20,000 residents of New York's Chinatown demonstrated against police brutality.[3] In 1980, workers at the largest restaurant in Chinatown organized a successful strike which lasted over three months. Hundreds of supporters joined the picket lines. In the summer of 1982, 20,000 Chinese women garment workers demonstrated in support of their union contract when Chinatown factory owners refused to raise the minimum-wage level. This activism may lack persistence, but it is pervasive.

The working people of Chinatown are aware that they must rely on their own strength to solve their problems. They must build their own grass-roots organizations, independent of traditional forces. As their interests increasingly diverge from those of the elite, they must reach out to the larger society and form alliances with labor and political groups with similar class interests. Eventually they will be strong enough to challenge the dominance of the traditional Chinatown order.

I do not know whether Chinatowns will become integrated into the larger society, but I do challenge those who see this integration as inevitable, and I shall describe how many factors favor the maintenance of Chinese communities. Powerful interests in and out of Chinatowns are served by keeping the majority isolated from American society.