



Reconstructing Chinatown

Ethnic Enclave, Global Change

Jan Lin

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Cover photograph of paperback edition shows the pedestrian view down East Broadway facing south toward lower Manhattan. The banner marks the founding of the People's Republic of China. A municipal building of the City of New York is visible in the middle background; the General Services Administration building of the federal government is in the middle right background; and the twin towers of the World Trade Center are in the far background. Photograph by Jan Lin.

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Globalization and Community

Dennis R. Judd, Series Editor

Volume 2

Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change

Jan Lin

Volume 1

The Work of Cities

Susan E. Clarke and Gary L. Gaile

This book is dedicated to
my mother, Fu-yun Pan Lin, and
father, the late Ching-yuan Lin

Preface

Chinatown is a site that structures and also signifies the incorporation of Chinese immigrants into American society. As an urban space, New York's Chinatown is familiar for its residential tenement buildings, loft-manufacturing sweatshops, restaurants, and street markets. The district is jammed vigorously into the southern pocket of Manhattan's Lower East Side, the urban portal in which a succession of immigrant groups have settled and worked since the mid-nineteenth century. The labor power and small-business capital of its industrious people have constructed an ethnic enclave that is the center of economic and social life for the Chinese population throughout the New York City metropolitan area. To these denizens, Chinatown represents not just a productive arena but a place of cultural significance and a community of symbolic and sentimental attachment.

In the public imagination, however, Chinatown has historically been inscribed as an overcrowded, dilapidated place, plagued with social wretchedness and vice. The virulent anti-Oriental images of the late-nineteenth-century "yellow peril" era have faded, but the ongoing durability of negative mental constructions is evident in a variety of contemporary media representations including formulaic news reporting (the "Chinatown beat"), prime-time television serials (*NYPD Blue*, *Law and Order*), and classic Hollywood films. Though many people comfortably tour the district for its visual exoticism and culinary delights, this voyeurism is often backgrounded by the persisting suspicion and insinuation of a mysterious clanish quarter. This conception implicates Chinatown as a place beset with social problems such as sweatshops and undocumented immigrants, and urban pathologies such as ill sanitation, poverty, and organized criminal syndicates. The local government, similarly, treats Chinatown as a neighbor-

hood that requires cleanup, correction, and redevelopment. In the semiotic realm, then, Chinatown as a negative symbolic representation signifies and legitimizes broader interpenetrating social projects of law and order, modernization, and cultural assimilation. In this discourse, Chinatown and Chinese Americans appear timeless, insular, and resistant to change.

As an urban "place," then, New York's Chinatown exists as a social construction as much as a material construction of circuits of immigrant labor and capital. As I interpretively deconstruct the livelihood and social life of this ethnic enclave, I will reconstruct a conception of a place that is experiencing profound economic and cultural change. This social change is both externally influenced and internally guided. At their apex, these external forces include recent global economic shifts in the structure of advanced capitalism in which the mobility of labor and capital (facilitated by innovations in transport and communications) has been heightened both temporally and geographically. Within the new global economy, these processes are locationally concentrated in particular nodal centers, or "global cities" such as New York City, as evidenced by the increasing presence of transnational banks and corporations as well as labor-intensive immigrant small-business activities in a structure of growing socioeconomic polarity (Sassen 1988, 1991). These trends are marked in microcosm in the central-city enclave of Chinatown, a district that has experienced the growth of sweatshops and foreign investments in the past three decades.

Some additional factors, notably political uncertainty, capital surplus, and economic transition in East Asia, motivate these transpacific flows of labor and capital, which both augment the supply of workers and finance new constructions of bricks and mortar in New York's Chinatown. The impacts of these flows in New York City and Chinatown occur through the intermediation of the state in a sequence of descending levels, from federal to municipal government. The federal government at the broadest level regulates the volume of foreign labor and capital inflow through its immigration policy and economic policy (particularly its trade and monetary policy). The local government manages the urban policies (in areas such as trade, banking, industry, land use and redevelopment, and social policy such as policing) that affect Chinatown. During the recent phase of New York City's ascendance to "global city" status, the local government has been prone to encourage capital inflow through banking deregulation and land-use redevelopment policy to generate revenue. These efforts have been balanced in districts such as Chinatown, however, to advance the interests of labor through an industrial policy motivated by priorities of job retention. The local government also makes periodic intrusions into the

social life of the enclave through police surveillance, street-trader clearance campaigns, and redevelopment schemes.

These external processes on the level of state-labor-capital interaction in the Chinatown "politics of place" are matched by significant internal dynamics within the community power structure. The hegemony of a traditional mercantile elite from Guangdong Province has receded with the ascendance of new labor and community organizations, as well as the emergence of new Fujianese merchant associations. This considerable factionalism within the Chinatown polity turns to solidarity during the course of periodic collective actions, which have disrupted the recent social life of the district, including tenacious community-based labor disputes and community conflicts with the policing and urban renewal agencies of the local government. As the apparatus of social control and redevelopment, the local government is also the main focus of protest and collective action. These very public moments of claims-making executed by the workers and residents of Chinatown were often the formative incidents in the growth of new labor and community organizations. Besides this internal dynamic, community mobilization and social change contribute further toward a reconstruction of the public image of Chinatown among New Yorkers and the broader American public.

This book thus examines community change in Chinatown in global context through the conflicts and interactions of labor and capital, the community, and the state. Community change is considered on the material, social, and symbolic levels. I employed U.S. Census of Population and Housing statistics compiled by the U.S. Department of Commerce, and Immigration and Naturalization Service data compiled by the New York City Department of City Planning in examining the demographic characteristics and urban ecology of the enclave. To analyze the enclave economy, I utilized the Chinese American telephone book and microlevel data on business establishments compiled by the New York State Department of Labor. To develop profiles of banking activity in the enclave, I employed financial data published by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and a special tabulation on regional mortgage activity collected by the New York State Banking Department in the 1980s (these data are very similar to the federal Home Mortgage Disclosure Act reports standardized by the Community Reinvestment Act).

In studying the social and political life of the enclave, I worked as a participant observer with Chinatown history and community action organizations including the Chinatown History Project, the Joint Planning Council of the Lower East Side, and the Chinese Staff and Workers' Associa-

tion. While affiliated with these organizations, I was involved in a variety of tasks including research, recording of minutes at private meetings, transcribing of proceedings at public conferences, organizing of events, and participation in collective actions. As a result of my work with the Chinatown History Project (now the Museum of Chinese in the Americas), I was later invited to serve on the board of It's Time, a Chinatown housing and community organization.

In my social research as a participant observer, I make no claims to have attained the kind of objective social science intended by survey researchers. Furthermore, my ethnographic technique involved active participation in addition to neutral observation. My active "positionality" privileges what Michael Burawoy has identified as the hermeneutic dimension in social science, which seeks interpretation and understanding through a dialogue between the participant and the observed, rather than the scientific method, which is more concerned with the dialogue between theory and data in seeking explanation (1991: 3). Following Burawoy et al., I furthermore identify my fieldwork as following the extended case method (1991: 6), which investigates how micro- or community-level social situations are influenced by external forces, a methodology that also clarifies the contours and consequences of macrolevel processes by specifying their outcomes in the local context.

In addition to fieldwork, I conducted formal interviews with over sixty representatives of Chinatown economic, community, labor, and political organizations, Chinatown business leaders, and New York City urban planners, public servants, and public officials. My initial fieldwork contacts provided me with an initial cluster of interview subjects, who by association referred me to others.¹ The methodological diversity I pursued in my research is typical of the urban case study or community study and is of great utility in uncovering the manifold interconnections among individuals and institutions in these social systems, their links to other systems, and changes in these characteristics over time (Bahr and Caplow 1991).

Finally, I read or viewed a variety of novels, journalistic accounts, television serials, and films (produced by both outsiders and insiders to the Chinese American culture) in order to understand how Chinatown as a place and Chinese Americans as a people have been signified in American urban life. Through this case study of an urban immigrant community, I have attempted to inject some cultural studies into a political-economic perspective to illuminate how structural and semiotic constructions of urban places or race and ethnic categories are mutually reinforcing and necessarily intertwined. Thus, social change implicates not only a restruc-

turing of the material foundations of the urban political economy but also a reconstructing of internal community dynamics and ethnic identities as well as the way they are externally signified.

I begin with an introduction that reviews orthodox and emerging academic literature on immigrant communities in urban sociology and race and ethnic studies. Ranging over a considerable terrain of scholarship, I forge some theoretical bridgework between academic conceptualizations of community and ethnicity as applied to urban space. These literatures are then related to cutting-edge scholarship on globalization, "global cities," and the "new urban sociology." Finally, I discuss emerging work on the political construction of race and ethnic categories.

Chapter 1 introduces the historical parameters surrounding the development of the lower-circuit ethnic enclave economy in New York's Chinatown. Chinese immigration to the United States was suspended for several decades by exclusionary legislation, a period that froze New York's Chinatown in the status of a "bachelor society" until 1965, when the lifting of the exclusion allowed the district to become a family-centered immigrant enclave. The complex internal dynamics of the enclave economy and the residential conditions of its workforce are examined. Criminal activities are seen as a historical outgrowth of the bachelor society and an outcome of recent social change.

Chapter 2 details the struggles of the working people of Chinatown in the "sweatshops" of the garment and restaurant industry and in street trading. Special features of the garment industry mediate the growth of sweatshop subcontracting. Garment sweatshop workers have by no means been quiescent; organized by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), these workers made great gains through public collective action. Organizers have struggled to organize workers in the restaurant industry with somewhat less success.

The impact of overseas Chinese capital on the Chinatown banking industry and land market development is considered in chapter 3. These new pressures of "globalization" are set within the broader historical context of the accumulation of capital in East Asia, and the political and economic parameters surrounding its reinvestment in the United States are discussed. The structure of the Chinatown banking industry is examined in detail; locally oriented banks are gradually losing deposit share and mortgage activity to transnationally oriented banks. The Chinatown built environment is gradually being transformed with the construction of bank office headquarters, residential towers, and hotels. Close scrutiny of deposit growth

rates in the mid-1990s, however, indicates somewhat of an economic slowdown. I make fine distinctions between local, regional, and global forces while interpreting recent economic change in the enclave.

Chapter 4 considers the emergence of satellite Chinatowns, which are the combined outcome of residential and commercial congestion at the core, the desire for more space and privacy, and a desire for upward mobility. Socioeconomic characteristics of residents in some outer-borough Chinese communities are compared. Ongoing growth in the satellite communities is spurred by both global and local forces. Flushing, Queens, has attracted considerable foreign capital, particularly of Taiwanese origins. Sunset Park, Brooklyn, by contrast has become a new sweatshop zone for garment shops escaping regularized union industry standards enforced in the core. The ILGWU has employed a tactic of “community-based organizing” in organizing these new underground sweatshops.

Chapter 5 moves on to detail the recent internal social changes in Chinatown's community power structure. A traditional expatriate mercantile elite bound by ties of clan kinship in China's Guangdong Province (but friendly to the anti-communist regime in Taiwan) has been supplanted since the end of the Chinese exclusion era by new Asian American workplace and community organizations that broker relationships with the broader society. A new mercantile elite of immigrants from China's Fujian Province, with a pro-Beijing orientation, has also emerged in the past decade. There is thus a considerable factionalism in the enclave polity, which fades in occasional bouts of public collective action, particularly on issues that involve state encroachment, for example, police brutality and state-led redevelopment projects such as prisons and courthouses. The organizational solidarity engendered by public collective action contrasts with weak participation among the Chinese in electoral politics. Future electoral participation promises to be deepened by voter education efforts and court-ordered implementation of bilingual balloting materials.

Community-state relationships are explored in chapter 6. The federal government was historically hostile to Chinatown until the civil rights milieu of the 1960s, when immigration exclusion was lifted and the federal presence in low-income communities was expanded through antipoverty programs. As federal revenue sharing has gradually been curtailed, however, local governments have become more reliant on local economic growth and real estate development for their revenues. New York public officials, along with regional planners and local finance capital, achieved growth through the building of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, which greatly augmented the metropolitan position in the global economy. The local gov-

ernment has similarly sought to stimulate the investment of overseas capital in Chinatown through special land-use zoning. These prerogatives of revenue enhancement have been balanced by job retention efforts in the garment industry through a unique experiment in state-labor-capital cooperation. Street traders have been cleared by a state bent on sanitary priorities. The state sanctions tourism as a revenue-generating initiative; store merchants, community development groups, and arts organizations have been involved in community preservation activities to support these efforts. The "security state," however, continues to make redevelopment incursions into Chinatown land for prison and courthouse expansions.

Chapter 7 examines the political construction to representations of Chinatown and Chinese Americans, which has shifted through the years and clearly reflects the changing ideological purposes of federal policies concerning Chinese immigration and social policy, as well as U.S. diplomatic relations with China. These representations are changing, however, through the efforts of community activists and artists. Cultural change is thus bound up with political-economic change, as I discuss in chapter 8 while revisiting questions of globalization and community change. I also make predictions of prospective trends that may be experienced by New York's Chinatown and conclude with some comparative implications that may be drawn by urban managers.

Acknowledgments

My interest in New York's Chinatown was initially sparked in 1987 by Janet Abu-Lughod in a class she taught at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research called "Analysis of Change in World Context." Passing me a galley proof of Saskia Sassen's book *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*, Janet suggested that the garment sweatshops and overseas investors of Chinatown comprised an exemplary context to examine conceptual hypotheses regarding the influence of global forces on community change. If the dramatic socioeconomic polarization evident in postindustrial New York City increasingly converged with the dual structure of third-world cities, then these trends were also evident in the microcosm of the central-city enclave of Chinatown. Chinatown became the topic of my dissertation, and a condensation of the thesis was subsequently published as an article titled "Polarized Development and Urban Change in the Global City: New York's Chinatown," in *Urban Affairs Review*. Portions of that article have been integrated into this book.

I gratefully acknowledge Lonnie Sherrod, Dean of Student Affairs while I was a graduate student at the New School for Social Research, for approving use of federal work-study funds to affiliate with the Chinatown History Project (now the Museum of Chinese in the Americas) and to conduct research supporting an oral history project and museum exhibition on women garment workers. I later worked with the Joint Planning Council of the Lower East Side as an organizer and recording secretary. These work-study relationships were of vital importance in familiarizing me with the historical and political intricacies of a range of local issues, and helped me gain access to an initial pool of community informants. Peter Lin of the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association acquainted me with community

labor issues and enlisted my participation in their campaigns. Dorothy Rony, Charlie Lai, and Sam Sue of the Chinatown History Project opened many doors and connected me with neighborhood issues. A Housing Conference held at the Chinatown History Project in June 1988 exposed me to the significant community development and planning issues affecting the neighborhood. Sam Sue later brought me onto the executive board of It's Time, a housing and community development organization.

The Community Service Society of New York gave me critical financial support as a doctoral intern during the 1989–90 academic year as I entered dissertation research. I finished writing my dissertation during my first year of teaching at the University of Houston, where I spent three congenial and productive years. Anita Bohm, Quetzil Castaneda, Janet Chafetz, Gary Dworkin, Helen Rose Ebaugh, Jacqueline Hagan, Karl Ittman, Joe Kotarba, Nestor Rodriguez, and Bill Simon were crucial to my personal and professional development while I was there. I then moved to Amherst College, which graciously extended a sabbatical after a year of teaching. I was thus able to return to New York's Chinatown in the fall of 1995 to conduct vital follow-up research and to begin writing this book.

I conducted formal interviews with dozens of individuals representing Chinatown labor, community, and political organizations, garment industry managers, Chinatown banks and realtors, Chinese businessmen, and public-sector employees who worked in Chinatown. I want to extend particular thanks to Richard Chan, David Chen, May Chen, Peter Cheng, Margaret Chin, Sherman Eng, Danyun Feng, Cristobal Garcia, Peter Kwong, Corky Lee, May Lee, M. B. Lee, JoAnn Lum, Andy Pollack, Henry Yung, John Wang, Edison Wong, Graham Wong, and Edmund Yu for sharing their knowledge and insight. I must thank photographers Corky Lee and Robert Glick for contracting with me and granting permission for reproduction of their photographs in this book.

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Introduction

Chinatown has traditionally occupied a chimerical position in the American popular imagination. As an urban locale, Chinatown has historically represented an extreme archetype of the clannish closed society, an immigrant enclave crowded with unassimilated newcomers who live a life of marked separation from the American mainstream.¹ An Orientalist patina of mystery and danger surrounds Chinatown; people are somewhat fearful and wary when walking there. Popular films such as Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1975) and Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985) have contributed to this iconic representation. Urban residents often mentally situate Chinatown alongside the "combat zone" or "red light district" and the African American "ghetto" in the transitional zones that surround the central city. As a district of crime and social problems, the vice industries of Chinatown are associated with the cultural insularity of a provincial, overpopulated foreign colony rather than with the adolescent predators of a deprived, socially disorganized underclass. At the century's end, New York's Chinatown is commonly envisioned as a congested warren of tenements and squalid sweatshops in which deprived illegal immigrants labor in slavlike conditions under the watchful grip of organized criminal smuggling rackets.

The other image that the general public carries of Chinatown is that of the exotic foreign enclave, a dense rookery of restaurants and street emporiums tucked within the vestigial tenement recesses of the modern metropolis. Chinatown is a common stop for tourists to New York City intent on a culinary experience of foreign delicacies outside of their normal experience and a chance for shopping in a low-cost pedestrian bazaar of street hawkers, curio shops, and imported-goods stores. This view, though more