

Chinatown no more:

Taiwan immigrants in contemporary New York /

Hsiang-Shui Chen.

Chinatown No More

TAIWAN IMMIGRANTS IN
CONTEMPORARY NEW YORK

Hsiang-shui Chen

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reface

The term “overseas Chinese” has been familiar to me since I was in elementary school, and during my university days some of my classmates belonged in that category. At that time, our general impression of Taiwan was that the overseas Chinese had become rich and that many of them, it seemed to us, had not really studied hard in Taiwan. I first saw a Chinatown in 1975, after Yih-yuan Li, director of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, recommended that I study at the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok. There I talked with the *ing-ren* (overseas Chinese in Thailand call themselves people of the Tang Dynasty, one of the most powerful dynasties in Chinese history), and with Taiwanese who worked in Bangkok as technicians and as United Nations members.

In 1979 I came to the United States for advanced studies, sponsored by the Institute of Ethnology and the National Science Council, Taiwan. Arriving the following year in New York City and enrolling at City University, I soon became acquainted with Manhattan’s Chinatown. I did not visit it often, however, because the subway trip took about an hour. Besides, I could buy Chinese foods in Flushing Meadows, where I lived.

During the early 1980s, all of a sudden, many Chinese migrated to Queens. Before 1982, I rarely heard Chinese spoken during the five-minute walk from my home to the subway station in Flushing. After 1983, on the same walk, I could hear many Chinese languages, includ-

ing Taishanese, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Taiwanese and the Darghichern, Shanghai, and Chaochou (Teochiu) dialects.

Since then, even more Chinese immigrants, from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, Southeast Asia, and South America and the Caribbean, have arrived in Queens. Chinese businesses and organizational life have flourished. One often sees a non-Chinese store owner greeting customers one day and a new Chinese owner at the same store the next day. The more I came in contact with these newcomers, the more I felt a desire to conduct research on this emerging overseas Chinese community.

In spring 1983 a research assistantship gave me the opportunity to analyze 1980 Census data on Queens neighborhoods for Roger Sanjek, who was beginning a research project on relations between immigrants and established residents.

When Professor Sanjek applied for City University of New York funding to begin fieldwork in 1984, he entered my name in the proposal. The New Immigrants and Old Americans Project received funds from the City University of New York, the National Science Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, and our team members conducted research among the white, African American, Chinese, Latin American, Korean, and Indian populations. I also received a Wenner-Gren Foundation grant and financial support from the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, for my research. Since completing my intensive fieldwork, I have continued to follow the Chinese Queens community as Research Anthropologist at the Asian/American Center at Queens College, City University of New York.

The New Immigrants and Old Americans Project selected Elmhurst-Corona (Community District 4) for its research base because it is the most diverse community in Queens, and perhaps in the world. Its residents come from more than 110 countries (*New York Times*, September 27, 1982). For my own work I selected households from Elmhurst and also from Flushing, just across a large municipal park from Elmhurst-Corona. Flushing also has many Chinese immigrants and businesses and is the headquarters of most Chinese voluntary associations in Queens.

Research on urban Chinese in the United States in the past has treated Chinatowns as isolated, homogeneous, and hierarchically or-

ized communities. Chinese immigrants changed with the passage of the immigration bill, which gave equal quotas to all countries and was oriented toward reuniting families. As a consequence, the structures created for the "bachelor society" of the Chinatowns of the past were replaced by those for households and families. But more important, most of the new immigrants do not live in isolated Chinese communities. They scatter and mix with other ethnic groups—Jews, Poles, Latin Americans, Indians, Greeks, and others are their neighbors. Compared to the old Chinese immigrants, the new are more highly educated and more diverse in economic and class backgrounds. They speak Mandarin, Taiwanese, and other languages, in addition to Cantonese or Taishanese, and do not represent a homogeneous ethnic group. (Most are from Taiwan, some from Hong Kong and the rest from the overseas Chinese world, because until recently the People's Republic did not permit emigration.) Like the old Chinese immigrants, they have developed a complex organizational life, but it does not include all immigrants, and the new Chinese community in Queens has no hierarchical structure.

This book describes these new Chinese immigrants and their lives at the household and community levels. Part I provides general background: Chapter 1 reviews the history of Chinese immigration to the United States and various scholars' interpretations of overseas Chinese communities. Chapter 2 describes the older Chinese immigration to New York City, especially Chinatown, and the new Taiwanese migration to Queens. I emphasize the class differentiation within the latter group, and I explain how my own approach for this study uses these class concepts and my resultant methodology for the examination of households, businesses, and community organizations in Queens to find new patterns of settlement.

Part II is concerned with Chinese households in Queens. Chapter 3 is an analysis of 100 household interviews, providing basic information on immigration, social class, household size, work, religion, and other issues. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 each present three portraits of particular households—of working-class people, of owners of small businesses, and of middle-class professionals.

Part III turns to community activities. In Chapters 7 and 8 I discuss new Chinese social-service and religious institutions and the voluntary associations in Queens. These associations function not only

inside the Chinese community but also beyond it: they try to help the Chinese immigrants understand American society, but they also serve as contact points with non-Chinese government officials and politicians. Although they cooperate, each association is independent of the other. In Chapter 9, I tell how the Chinese community worked with the general Queens community in celebrating the annual Queens Festival.

One of my aims is to show that such common stereotypes as "Flushing is a new Chinatown" are not appropriate. When people talk about a Chinatown, they refer to a compact homogeneous Chinese settlement, with a core of Chinese businesses. This concept does not describe the Queens Chinese communities in the mixed neighborhoods of Flushing and Elmhurst.

I have used the Kwoyeu Romatzyh pronunciation system for Chinese terms; see *A New Practical Chinese-English Dictionary*, ed. Shih-chiu Liang 2d ed. (Taipei: Far East Book Co., 1972). All the photographs are my own.

Many people have provided help and guidance for my research and for this book. First of all, I am greatly indebted to Roger Sanjek, Department of Anthropology at Queens College, City University of New York, who put enormous effort and encouragement into guiding my fieldwork, provided valuable suggestions in discussions, and devoted much time and energy to editing my writing. I also extend my appreciation to Jane Schneider, Burton Pasternak, and Rubie Watson, who read my manuscript and provided many valuable comments.

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Preface

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HSIANG-SHUI CHEN

ishing, New York

Chinatown No More

Taiwan Immigrants in Contemporary New York

Hsiang-shui Chen

Focusing on the social and cultural life of post-1965 Taiwan immigrants in Queens, New York City, this book shifts Chinese-American studies from ethnic enclaves to the diverse multi-ethnic neighborhoods of Flushing and Astoria. As Hsiang-shui Chen documents, the political dynamics of these enclaves are entirely different from the traditional closed Chinese communities; the immigrants in Queens think of themselves as living in "world city," not in another Chinatown. Chen's discussion of households is set out in terms of class differences among workers, small business proprietors, and the professional middle class. Drawing on interviews with members of a hundred households, he brings out key aspects of demography, immigration experience, family life, and gender roles, and then turns to vivid portraits of three families in each class. A natural storyteller, he writes of the invisible overcrowded housing situation in "middle-class" neighborhoods, the practicalities of operating such small businesses as newsstands and bakeries, and the comfortable life, but also the Asian discrimination, experienced by the professional group. In the second section of his book Chen describes the organizational life of Chinese in Queens, introducing us to several community leaders and to a range of groups, including religious, sports, social service, and business organizations, with a lively account of the power struggles and social interactions that occur within them and with the outside world. He highlights the characteristics of these voluntary independent associations that do not form the traditional hierarchical structure typical of old Chinatowns. With its depth of reportage and strong narrative qualities, *Chinatown No More* brings a different set of observations of immigrant life and a critically important corrective to the customary picture of America's "model minority."

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[I]

**Chinese Immigration
and Scholars' Models**

Patterns of Chinese Settlement in the United States

Most Americans have the impression that the Chinese in the United States live in Chinatowns, isolated from the broader community. Indeed, this stereotype was fairly accurate during the first hundred years of Chinese immigration, between 1850 and 1950, when most Chinese immigrants were single men who lived in Chinatowns under a hierarchical social structure. With Queens as its area of focus, this book aims to introduce a new type of Chinese community.

A brief survey of Chinese immigration and Chinese settlements in the United States and the interpretations scholars have developed about them will, I hope, give context to my observations of the Queens Chinese and my conclusions about this new pattern of settlement.

Many works dealing with Chinese in the United States show that the Chinese immigrated to the United States in three major waves. The first wave, before 1882, came mainly from Kwangtung Province in Southeast China, primarily because of unrest caused by the Taiping Rebellion in China and because labor was needed for mining and railroad construction in the United States (G. Barth 1964; Coolidge 1968; Kung 1962; Lee 1960; Lyman 1974; Sung 1967). At first these Chinese laborers were welcomed, even praised, and were considered almost indispensable by white Americans, especially the entrepreneurs involved in the economic development of California, where many Chinese also became agricultural workers (Barth 1964; Coolidge 1968; Liu 1976). Chinese workers were nonetheless exploited by their em-

ployers, who paid them the lowest wages possible. These mostly male "bachelor society" Chinese sent most of their earnings back to their home country instead of spending them in the United States.

The anti-Chinese movements that soon followed were due to economic factors but played on cultural differences. The economic depression in California in 1870 had created 50,000 to 100,000 jobless people and the drought in the winter of 1876 caused a heavy loss of wheat, fruit, and cattle farms. Thousands of Chinese and other farm laborers drifted into San Francisco to swell the ranks of these already unemployed. People who had invested in stocks had lost their savings and their jobs and were looking for a scapegoat. The Chinese, with their long black queues and loose black suits, were one of the most visible minorities (Chen 1980). White workers attacked them precisely because they accepted the wages forced on them.

Cultural distinctions reinforced the conflict. The whites justified violence with accusations: "Chinese do not wear our kind of clothes, . . . and when they die, their bones are taken back to their native country." "Chinese are heathens and do not bring their wives and families." "Chinese gamble, and smoke opium. They eat rice but not bread." "Chinese do not want to be assimilated in our culture" (Liu 1976:491).

Physical violence directed against the Chinese had occurred even earlier in the mining areas. Before 1870, when campaigns became coordinated, there were spontaneous outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence, such as the Tuolumne riot in 1849. Politicians joined the anti-Chinese movement, even those who had earlier appreciated the Chinese contribution. The Democratic party passed its first official anti-Chinese resolution at its convention in Benicia in 1852. In 1876 they staged a special anti-Chinese rally that attracted a crowd of 25,000 people (J. Chen 1980:136). In 1879 the Henry Grimm play *The Chinese Must Go* was first performed in San Francisco. Finally, on May 6, 1882, President Chester A. Arthur signed into law the first of a series of Chinese exclusion acts (Fessler 1983:142, 145). The free immigration of Chinese laborers came to an end. Under this act, only merchants, teachers, students, and clergy were allowed to enter the United States.

Usually scholars treat the period between 1882 and 1943 as the second phase of Chinese immigration history, ending when the Chi-

nese exclusion acts were repealed in 1943. After 1943 a quota of 105 Chinese were admitted to the United States annually. I prefer to extend this second period to 1964, one year before immigration policy was again amended, because this small quota was still discriminatory compared to quotas for western European countries. Under the Chinese exclusion acts not only did the number of the Chinese immigrants coming to the United States decline, but many Chinese in fact left America. Between 1908 and 1943, 90,199 Chinese left the United States versus 52,561 recorded as new arrivals. The total number of Chinese in the United States declined from 107,488 in 1890 to 74,954 in 1930. Only after 1950 did the number rise past 107,488, to 117,629.

During this period of decreasing numbers of Chinese Americans, there was also a change in their geographic distribution. In the early years, almost all the Chinese lived on the West Coast. The anti-Chinese movement pushed many either back home to China or to the central and eastern parts of the United States. In 1880, 96.8 percent of the Chinese population lived in the Mountain and Pacific states. By 1940 the share of the U.S. Chinese population in the New England and the Middle Atlantic states had risen from 1.6 percent in 1880 to 25.4 percent (Fessler 1983:187). The heterogeneity of the eastern cities afforded Chinese a safer place to live than did the more homogeneous West. The dense population in the eastern cities also provided job opportunities to these Chinese immigrants. A marked phenomenon after 1890 was the urban-oriented migration of Chinese in the United States, who left rural areas for the cities. In 1890, New York contained the largest Chinese population in the East with about 3,000 people. By 1940 over 90 percent of the Chinese in the United States were urban dwellers. This percentage was higher than that of the Japanese (54.9%), and even higher than that of the total American urban population (56.5%) (Fessler 1983:188).

When the Communist party came to power in mainland China in 1949, many Chinese, including government officials, businessmen, scholars, and scientists, fled to the United States to seek political asylum (Sung 1980). Today many of these highly educated immigrants teach in universities and work in public research institutes and private industry. During most of the 1882–1964 period, racism, reflected in laws, professional practice, and labor unions, barred the Chinese from many occupations in the civil service, teaching, medicine, dentistry,