CHINATOWN in BRITAIN

Diffusions and Concentrations
of the British New Wave Chinese Immigration

Wai-ki E. Luk

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Chinatown in Britain

For my family

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PREFACE

The 1980s saw the beginning of a major transformation in Chinese immigration to Great Britain, and indeed in that of many other countries. It is a transformation which is still going on. In Britain, the scale of ethnic Chinese growth has been so recent and rapid that its population rose from just over 12,000 in 1951 to nearly 250,000 in 2001. Beginning in the early 1980s there has been a substantial increase in and diversity of Chinese immigrants. This new wave immigration is characterised by Chinese not only from Hong Kong but also from China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Some have come as first-time immigrants or remigrants, others as students, and still others as refugees and illegal immigrants. The regular channels contain family reunification, work-permit or short-term work contracts, business investments, education, and the need for specialists (including qualified nurses and Chinese cooks); whereas the irregular channels contain human trafficking or overstaying a visa.

Many of these changes occurred as a result of the fundamental restructuring of the political and economic environments in both sending and receiving countries. In China, emigration is a political consequence of the government's shift towards more liberal emigration policies. With China's progressive integration into the world's economy, emigration is increasingly seen as a political and as an individual right. In Hong Kong and many of the Southeast Asian countries, emigration is a response to perceived political and social instability. In Britain, Chinese immigration is seen as an economic consideration subject to the cyclical fluctuations in demand for labour. Immigrants were admitted when they were useful and excluded when they were perceived as no longer useful. In this respect, the Chinese experience is similar to that of the Caribbeans and South Asians: They were admitted as a replacement labour force in response to the postwar economic recovery but subsequently excluded by restrictive immigrant laws (Peach, 1966). The closed labour market was, however, reopened in the 1990s to the highly skilled Chinese immigrants to meet skill shortages and to increase the competitiveness of the British economy.

Notwithstanding this immigration history, there is an implicit and often explicit tendency to view Chinese immigrants in a negative light. The media has unfailingly recycled the myth of the "un-British" nature of the Chinese, who entered without changing their way of life to suit British social expectations. As early as 1977, Watson argued that the Chinese are the least assimilated among the various ethnic minorities in Britain. An extension of this same myth is the view that Chinese immigrants are "somewhat isolated and certainly unobtrusive, and yet anything but "invisible" (Freeberne, 1981, p. 707). This voluntaristic separateness from members of the host society has been documented in the literature (e.g., see Tam, 1998). All these

myths draw attention to the white perception that the Chinese are seen as a silent minority *because* they are concentrated in Chinatowns, and therefore, they are separated from the host society. Culturally and socioeconomically, the Chinese prefer self-help and do not need the intervention of social services, nor do they compete for jobs with members of the host society. Associated with this is their strong representation in the restaurant sector, where waiters, cooks, and kitchen helpers have to work the long and unsocial hours that the trade requires (Holmes, 1988; Parker, 1994). This voluntary self-isolation, at residence and/or workplace, created a stereotype of an inability to assimilate, that in turn reinforced the community's irrelevance to the larger society.

Such thinking is entirely credible, but it appears to deny much of the reality that the Chinese in Britain are heterogeneous; that different Chinese populations have different premigratory experiences, demographic profiles, and educational qualifications; that place of origin affects socioeconomic attainment and spatial integration. Underlying this strong subethnic difference is the fact that the Chinese are pursuing different modes of integration in the British social geography. In view of this, Chinatown not only functions as a primary reception area for newcomers, it also distributes old-timers and replicates its port of entry function across the British space. What we have seen in recent decades is that the Chinese have been rapidly changing the face of the British urban landscapes. We have seen the continued existence of traditional Chinatowns; we have also seen the development of suburban Chinatowns and new forms of Chinese settlement (Li, 1998; Li, Dymski, Zhou, Chee, & Aldana, 2002).

The fact that this book is being written about ethnic settlement and integration implies that there is a kind of relationship

between them. For some 80 years since Park's (1926) revolutionary idea of the physical analysis of social relations in spatial terms, we have known from most productive empirical work that social and spatial changes are intimately interwoven: A high degree of spatial integration is indicative of social integration. But surprisingly, in the Chinese case, shifts of physical space and their social implications have received little attention from British social geographers. How do we understand the settlement patterns of the (sub)ethnic Chinese population in Britain? What is the relationship between social distance and spatial distribution in this new wave of Chinese immigration? It is against this background that this study is carried out.

Acknowledgments

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