

# Ethnoburb

THE NEW ETHNIC COMMUNITY  
IN URBAN AMERICA

WEI LI

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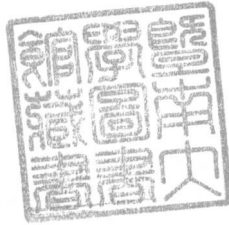
# ETHNOBURB

The New Ethnic Community in Urban America

Wei Li



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# **ETHNOBURB**

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IN MEMORY OF MY LATE PARENTS,

Li Linmo and Chen Chan,

for their infinite love and sacrifice;

To all those who love me and whom I love, and

To my homeland and adopted homeland

## PREFACE

The inspiration for this book can be traced to a conversation I had in Washington, DC, in 1991 with a Euro-American professor from the University of Southern California. The conversation took place on the eve of my departure for Los Angeles, where I was going to do graduate work in geography at USC:

“So,” said the professor, “you have never been to LA before? I would be very happy to answer any questions you might have.”

“Great,” I said. “First and foremost, where can I find a relatively decent area with reasonable rent to live around USC?”

The professor looked at me about thirty seconds, then said “You are Chinese, right? Why don’t you live in Monterey Park, a city in the San Gabriel Valley? That’s a Chinese area, you would feel very comfortable.”

“But I’ve heard that Monterey Park is quite far from the school,” I protested.

“Not at all,” the professor replied, “it is only a ten-minute drive east from USC.”

This conversation first oriented me to the geographic location of Monterey Park and to the perception of Angelinos that Monterey Park was a “Chinese area.” During my first weekend in Los Angeles, the memory of this conversation prompted me to take a bus from USC to Monterey Park, where some friends of mine lived. Transferring in downtown’s Chinatown, then touring Monterey Park, I saw sharp differences between these two Chinese communities. Downtown LA Chinatown appeared to be a geographically compact tourist attraction, with Chinatown Gate dominating the streetscape. Monterey Park neighborhoods, on the other hand, were typical suburbs, with beautiful lawns and low-rise structures, but they also had an overlay of obvious Chinese elements. Chinese “signatures” appeared on business signs as well as in the residential

architecture. I strolled along Garvey Avenue, seeing Chinese characters on signs, listening to people speaking Mandarin, and hearing Chinese songs emanating from nearby stores. Had it not been for the heavy automobile traffic and frequent gas stations, I could almost imagine that I was back walking in Beijing.

Nine years later I had finished my dissertation on the Chinese community in Los Angeles and was working as an assistant professor at the University of Connecticut. I began a new research project on Asian Americans in Silicon Valley, comparing them with the San Gabriel Valley community. During my research I interviewed a fourth-generation Chinese American suburbanite who had moved from San Francisco's Chinatown to the city of Cupertino more than thirty-five years ago. As soon as I mentioned Monterey Park, she exclaimed, "Monterey Park? Isn't that a Chinese ghetto in LA?!" A short time later, I received a somewhat different perspective from a Chinese American lawyer in San Francisco who told me that he and his wife had recently visited Monterey Park. "We had thought Monterey Park was an upscale area," he said. "To our surprise, it is not like that at all—it's solid middle-class neighborhoods, with congested shopping areas and strip malls." But at an academic conference about the San Gabriel Valley in late 1997, every speaker, academics and community activists alike, claimed that the San Gabriel Valley was the future of our nation for its rapid demographic transition and ethnic diversity.

What contributes to these very different understandings? Why, after three scholarly books, many research articles, and extensive media coverage, does Monterey Park still evoke contrary images and perceptions? I was puzzled by these questions as well as by the larger question as to why minority groups form ethnically distinct suburban clusters. Why have the Chinese clustered in this area? Why did they choose Monterey Park and San Gabriel Valley over Chinatown?

As I began my investigations, I frequently read and heard references to Monterey Park as the nation's first "suburban Chinatown," a designation implying that Monterey Park was the same sort of place as downtown Chinatown, only located in the suburbs. Just as Los Angeles has always been thought "atypical" of the American urban experience, so Chinese settlement in the San Gabriel Valley was considered an isolated case of urban ethnic community formation. But the more I experienced the differences between these two Chinese communities, the more uneasy I felt about such a labeling of Monterey Park. The residents of these two communities appeared to me to be distinctly different in terms of where they came from, when they came, what languages they spoke, what jobs they held, and their socioeconomic class. For instance, since I do not understand or speak Cantonese, I personally felt estranged in Chinatown but was more comfortable in the San Gabriel Valley area, where Mandarin is com-

mon. My observations of these differences made me wonder why this suburban concentration had formed in recent decades? Had such a community existed before, or elsewhere? What forces underlay its formation?

As I learned more about economic restructuring and globalization on the one hand and about LA's regional circumstances on the other, I was able to piece together the information I had gathered and link my findings to broader socioeconomic and geopolitical contexts. I became convinced that the ethnic concentration in the San Gabriel Valley does not represent a suburban Chinatown, but is, instead, a new form of ethnic settlement, which I call an ethnic suburb or "ethnoburb." I also realized that the processes driving ethnoburb formation are not unique to the Chinese in LA, but appear to affect other ethnic minority and immigrant groups in other localities and even other countries. My findings about the new Chinese community in San Gabriel Valley form the substance of this book.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without input and support from the Chinese community of Greater Los Angeles, it would have been impossible for me to complete my research. I greatly appreciate the help of this community, whose spatial transformation motivated my book and whose friendliness made the research a gratifying experience. I thank all of my interviewees for the time they spent with me and the personal experiences they shared with me. In particular, I want to express my thanks to Judy Chu, Lucia Su, and Wilbur Woo, who not only provided important information, but also key assistance by acting as my bridges to the community. Henry Hwang, founder of the Far East National Bank, who passed away in 2005, provided key insights when I interviewed him during a critical moment in his professional life in 1999. This book will, I hope, help to commemorate his life. Many local Chinese and Asian American institutions and organizations have also supported me in various ways. Asian System Media, Inc. and its general manager, T. C. Wu, and Jason Chu granted me free access to their database of Chinese businesses in Southern California in the 1990s. Joss Chu, vice president of Promotions and Advertisement of Tawa Supermarket Companies, offered important information on the establishment and development of the company. I was a volunteer for Asian American Economic Development Enterprises Inc. for several years; its former executive director, Dr. Phillip Borden, and former program development director, Mercy Murphy, provided opportunities for me to work with community members in both Chinatown and San Gabriel Valley.

The completion of this book would not have been possible without support and help from many institutions and individuals. I enjoyed my years at University of Southern California as a PhD student and subsequently as a visiting scholar. I owe my greatest debt to Jennifer Wolch. Over the years she has broadened my thinking, guided me in the right direction, and provided critical

advice and inspiration. More than an academic advisor, she has been a role model, mentor, and friend who has been there for me in times of personal difficulty and professional challenges. I also benefited greatly from Thomas Jablonsky, whose residency in Monterey Park and then Temple City for more than two decades allowed him to witness the dramatic ethnic transition in San Gabriel Valley communities. His tours of the area, advice, and insights into key community changes helped guide my early thinking about ethnoburb formation. I am truly grateful to Edward Park, who provided me with sociological insights into the literature of Asian American studies, and Laura Pulido, whose critical views on race and ethnicity helped to shape my understanding of the American racialization process. I also want to thank Michael Dear and Curtis Roseman of the USC Department of Geography, who helped me better ground my ideas in theory and strengthen my research design. Other people at USC also contributed to my research in various important ways: Dowell Myers of the School of Urban Planning and Development and Cynthia Crawford provided critical technical guidance in SAS programming, while Laura Lee-Chin in Development Research helped edit an earlier version of the manuscript and made important suggestions as a friend and a fellow Chinese American.

The University of Connecticut's visionary establishment of an interdisciplinary Asian American Studies Institute created my first tenure-track academic position in the United States, which also made me the nation's first jointly appointed assistant professor in Asian American Studies and Geography. Support from UConn in the form of grants and fellowships from the Chancellor's Office, the Research Foundation, and the Dean's Office of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, has been critical in expanding my research. The then Geography Department Head, Dean Hanink, and the Asian American Studies Institute (AASI) Director, Roger Buckley, provided guidance and supported my research agenda. My research assistant Paul Fernald did a superb job of recreating all the original maps and in creating the spatial mean maps using his extensive statistical and GIS training. My undergraduate assistants, Karen Hoang, Daniel Wright, and Zheroo Li, did superb work transcribing interviews and handling other labor-intensive tasks. Fe Delos-Santos and Janice Law Trecker read and edited an earlier version of this manuscript. My deep gratitude goes to my former colleagues in the Department of Geography for moral and intellectual support; Karen Chow and Fe Delos-Santos at AASI, and Allison Thompson at University Relations for academic camaraderie and easy friendship. Thanks also go to Rose Kaposi at Geography and Anne Theriault at AASI for handling tedious paper work and offering administrative support. Karen Chow (now at De Anza College) and I have been close professional and personal friends since 1997. We enjoyed enormously the few hours we spent together at a Borders

bookstore in San Francisco in a sunny August afternoon when she edited the last few chapters of the final version of this manuscript. I have benefited a great deal from her insights growing up as a Chinese American Southern Californian in La Puente and Hacienda Heights and her family's witnessing the transformation of San Gabriel Valley.

My work has continued since I joined Arizona State University. The former director of Asian Pacific American Program, Thomas Nakayama, and its current director, Karen Leong, and the former director of the School of Geographical Sciences, Richard Aspinall, rendered much needed support and guidance to my research. The collegiality of Carol Caruss, Melinda L. de Jesús (now at the California College of Arts, and editor of a portion of this manuscript), Karen Kuo, John Rosa, and Roisan Rubio accompanied my advancement from a junior scholar to a tenured associate professor. I now benefit from the growth of the School of Geographical Sciences, under the leadership of Luc Anselin, and the collegiality of my colleagues there with my new joint appointment. Barbara Trapido-Lurie, in particular, recreated the final version of all maps in this book in timely fashion and superb quality; she was a pleasure to work with. I am also truly grateful for the invaluable assistance of Hanh Nguyen, Kedi Wang, Dan Wang, Wei Zeng, Wei Zhong, and Yun Zhou during the finalization of the manuscript.

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A group of American and international scholars who are interested in and working on immigrant and integration issues have served as an inspiration to me. In particular, I thank James Allen, Thomas Boswell, Cindy Fan, Susan Hardwick, Evelyn Hu-Dehart, David Kaplan, Lawrence Ma, Janice Monk, Gary Okihiro, Kavita Pandit, Christopher Smith, and Lois Takahashi in the United States; Daniel Hiebert, Audrey Kobayashi, David Ley, Peter Li, Lucia Lo, Valerie Preston, Carlos Teixeira, and Lu Wang in Canada; Kevin Dunn in Australia; Richard Bedford and Elsie Ho in New Zealand; Jane Pollard in the United Kingdom; and Zhang Jing Zhe (C. C. Chang, my M.S. advisor at Peking University) in China for their long-term mentorship and friendship.

Being an immigrant scholar and an ethnic Chinese, I have also benefited from a cohort of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian scholars who share similar professional and personal backgrounds and academic interests in globalization, transnationalism, immigration, and a changing China. Some of these individuals are long-time Southern California residents themselves. To Huping Ling, Haiming Liu, Qingfang Wang, Zuoyue Wang, Feng Gang Yang, Phillip Fei Yang, Xiaohuang Yin, Da Zheng, Xiaojian Zhao, Min Zhou, and Li Zong, my thanks for your friendship and the opportunity to learn from you.

Masako Ikeda, an editor at the University of Hawai'i Press, has recognized the potential importance and impact of the ethnoburb phenomenon for American urban landscapes and has placed her trust in my presentation of it. Her editorial vision has greatly benefited this book. We have had a pleasant working relationship since my first edited collection titled *From Urban Enclave to Ethnic Suburb: New Asian Communities in the Pacific Rim Countries*. I am also indebted greatly to the two reviewers of this book and Cheri Dunn, managing editor at the press. Margaret Black did a superb job in copyediting this book while sharing her interests of immigration and settlement with me during the process.

Last, but certainly not least, my deepest appreciation to my extended family, especially my beloved late parents. I was born to an academic family. Both my paternal great-grandfathers were among the last cohort of Chinese scholars who passed the imperial examinations. One was appointed a scholar-in-residence at the Hanlin Academy, the country's highest academy, by Emperor Guang Xu of the Qing dynasty. My father was a professor, and my mother was an administrator, at the two top universities in Beijing; all my close relatives in my parents' generation worked as university professors or high school teachers. My late aunt, who completed her college education in the early 1930s, a rare accomplishment among Chinese women during the time, was a life-long high school English teacher. She started to teach me English when I was a little girl, a pursuit interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. My extended family of aunts,

uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews helped me every way they could, especially after my mother passed away when I was only fourteen years old. I remember as a kid watching my parents working late at night reading or writing. Witnessing such effort and dedication eventually led to my own desire to work as an academic. Although I can hardly remember my mom's face, I do recall that she was an intelligent, independent woman and a loving mother. She was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and died of cancer at the age of forty-six. After my mother passed away, my father decided he would raise me by himself and never remarry. He was a mentor, a teacher, as well as a caring father to me. After I came to the United States in 1988, he lived by himself. He never let me worry about him, but encouraged me to pursue my studies toward a doctoral degree. He saw that dream come true but succumbed to illness a year after I became the first PhD in my extended family. Although my parents will never be able to hold this book in their hands and read it, I am convinced that they both look down at me from heaven with smiles and are proud that I did what they hoped for me to do. My parents' dedication to their work and society made them my role models and guided me to work hard and to respect other people and cultures. So I dedicate this book to them, to my extended family and friends who love me and whom I love, as well as to my homeland, China, and my adopted homeland, the United States of America. I sincerely hope that this book will contribute to foster mutual understanding among various ethnic groups and cultures in Los Angeles and beyond.

## CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1
<b>PART 1: Exploring the Ethnic Suburb</b>	
1. Ethnicity and Space	11
2. Ethnoburb: An Alternative Ethnic Settlement	29
<b>PART 2: The Los Angeles Chinese Ethnoburb</b>	
3. Changing Chinese Settlement	53
4. Building Ethnoburbia	79
5. From Ethnic Service Center to Global Economic Outpost	100
6. Anatomy of an Ethnoburb	118
7. Portraits of Ethnoburban Chinese	150
<b>PART 3: Ethnoburbs of North America</b>	
8. Opportunities and Challenges for Ethnoburbs	171
Notes	185
References	193
Index	209

# INTRODUCTION

This book is about the creation of a new ethnic landscape in North America and a new model of the contemporary urban ethnic community: the ethnoburb. Ethnoburbs have emerged under the influence of international geopolitical and global economic restructuring; changing national immigration and trade policies; local demographic, economic, and political contexts; and increasing transnational networks and connections. Suburban ethnic clusters of residential areas and business districts in large metropolitan areas, ethnoburbs are multiethnic communities in which one ethnic minority group has a significant concentration but does not necessarily constitute a majority. Such suburban clusters replicate some features of an ethnic enclave and some features of a suburb that lacks any specific minority identity. Ethnoburbs coexist with traditional ethnic ghettos and enclaves in inner cities in contemporary American society.

Ethnic geography, a discipline influenced by traditional theoretical frameworks developed within cultural geography, demography, ethnic studies and sociology, has sought to explain the social and spatial integration of immigrants into the fabric of mainstream American society. Recent critiques, however, argue for a greater sensitivity to the social construction of race and to the dynamics of racialization, the sociospatial structures of ethnic communities, the role of ethnic economies in ethnic community development and globalization processes, and the transnational connections of immigrants. The new cultural geography, under the influence of postmodern thought, has responded to multiculturalism in contemporary society by refocusing on those groups traditionally excluded from Western society and often related to as the “other,” groups that include women and minorities. This new perspective informs the geographical understanding of the Chinese community in Los Angeles that is the focus of this book.

Los Angeles County is considered one of the most ethnically diverse places in the United States (Allen and Turner 1989, 1996, 2002). Not only is the county the most populous in the nation, but it also includes the largest number of Chinese residents. As was true of many other cities, LA's Chinese population was historically centered in a downtown Chinatown, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Contemporary Chinatown in Los Angeles remains a congested neighborhood and ethnic business district, as well as a tourist attraction. Ethnic Chinese comprise a majority of all residents, including an older generation of Cantonese-speaking Chinese and new immigrants from Southeast Asia. Many are poor and have limited formal education.

Since the 1960s, many upwardly mobile Chinese have moved out of Chinatown and adjacent inner-city neighborhoods to the suburbs in search for better housing, neighborhoods, and schools. Some of them dispersed spatially and became socioeconomically assimilated into the mainstream society. However, a new trend began occurring during the same time period, which saw many new immigrants with higher educational attainment, professional occupations, and financial resources settling directly into the suburbs without ever experiencing life in the inner city. This is different from prior generations of immigrants, Chinese included, who normally settled first in the inner city and moved out to the suburbs only after they moved up socioeconomically. This traditional pattern, as described by scholars of the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s (see Park and Miller 1921), has been widely accepted by and deeply rooted in the minds of most Americans. However, in this new immigrant influx, another form of Chinese settlement, complete with distinct economic activities, social institutions, and cultural life, has emerged in the suburbs. By 1990 there were more than 158,000 Chinese in the San Gabriel Valley,<sup>1</sup> making it the largest suburban Chinese concentration in the nation.

On a geographical scale, the settlement of Chinese in the San Gabriel Valley far surpasses that of the Chinatown model. It includes cities, Census Designated Places (CDPs), and unincorporated areas in the Valley. Many of the Chinese people are Mandarin-speaking recent immigrants from Taiwan, Mainland China, Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and other parts of the world. They are a heterogeneous, highly polarized population in terms of educational, occupational, and economic status, and they have generated rapidly growing Chinese residential areas and business districts in which Chinese residents actively participate in local politics and social life.

The emergence of a suburban Chinese community in Los Angeles over the last several decades has generated a good deal of interest among scholars, the mass media, and the general public. Timothy Fong's *The First Suburban Chinatown* (1994) traces the changing demographic composition and economic



structure of the City of Monterey Park; John Horton's *The Politics of Diversity* (1995), which is partially based on UCLA's Monterey Park Project, documents political changes in the city; Leland Saito's *Race and Politics* (1998) discusses the politics of racial representation and coalition-building in congressional redistricting that has resulted due to changes in the community. Other academic journal articles and dissertations from a variety of disciplines reveal the broad extent of scholarly interest in this area.<sup>2</sup> The mainstream media, including *The Los Angeles Times* and *Forbes*, have also carried extensive coverage of this subject.<sup>3</sup>

Past studies provide valuable information and insights about the San Gabriel Valley Chinese community, but it has drawbacks. Some analysts have referred to this new ethnic concentration as a "suburban Chinatown,"<sup>4</sup> implying a continuation of the traditional ethnic enclave in a different geographical location: the American suburbs. In the popular American imagination, "Chinatown" evokes a crowded inner-city enclave inhabited by ethnic Chinese of a lower socioeconomic profile and an ethnic economic district marked by garment shops, Chinese restaurants and stores, or touristy areas with an exotic "Oriental" flavor. While some academics and the popular media have embraced the notion of "suburban Chinatown," such a characterization appears to me to be quite inaccurate, for the San Gabriel Valley communities do not exhibit many of the characteristics of traditional Chinatowns. This conviction is shared by many community leaders and activists inside the suburban Chinese community, who consider any labeling of Monterey Park as a "suburban Chinatown" to be inappropriate and misleading.<sup>5</sup> Clearly there is a need for more research on the nature of new suburban ethnic settlements and the contexts and trajectories of their development. With increasing recognition of Asian suburbanization across the Pacific Rim,<sup>6</sup> it is time to reflect upon this process as it has occurred in the nation's first large-scale suburban Chinese community. I attempt to address the pertinent issues in this book, especially documenting the process and forces that transformed the San Gabriel Valley into multiethnic suburbs in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is particularly imperative to understand now because census data reveals that at the beginning of the twenty-first century American racial minorities, immigrants included, increasingly call American suburbs their home. Clearly, both the traditional inner-city ethnic enclaves and the multiethnic suburbs have become new immigrant gateways (Singer, Hardwick and Brettell 2008).

Based on the Chinese experience in San Gabriel Valley, I propose a new model of ethnic settlement: the ethnoburb.<sup>7</sup> While patterns of immigration to the United States and the formation of ethnic communities have always been shaped by socioeconomic and political contexts, the creation of an ethnoburb