CHINA TO CHINATOWN:

EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT, USE AND MEANING

OF THE CHINATOWN IN MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to determine what factors influenced the establishment of Chinatown in New York City; to examine Chinatown’s intangible aspects, especially lives and experiences of Chinese immigrant and their relationship with Chinatown; and to look at the places that were significant in the Chinatown’s history and important to people in the past. By analyzing its history, people’s lives, and physical spaces, I argue that New York’s Chinatown is and continues to be a major component in the lives of Chinese and a significant part of Manhattan. Chinatown works to guide its members into mainstream America society without losing their ethnic identity and solidarity.
Like immigrants of all nationalities tend to live together in their respective communities, cling to their old-world customs and to their native languages and revered traditions, the Chinese freshly-arrived immigrants seek refuge, comfort and communal needs among their already established compatriot community – Chinatown. Focusing on New York’s Chinatown, this thesis argues that the past structure of this immigrant area, and its transformation into what is seen today, cannot be explained by simple ethnic stereotypes. Instead, they must be understood through the lens of a rich and complex history and a specific set of social circumstances.

New York’s Chinatown emerged as a direct product of structural, legal and cultural barriers, and developed from the immigrants seeking economic and social

--- Chinatown, My Chinatown by William Jerome and Jean Schwartz, 1910.¹

¹ Chinatown, My Chinatown, a popular song written by William Jerome and Jean Schwartz in 1910, is considered one of the old-time favorites.
refinement. Differing from European immigrants and their ethnic communities, New York Chinese tended to establish their own ethnic enclave –Chinatown, with as little intercourse as possible with the larger society. In Chinatown, for example, they established their own schools, churches, clubs, media and shops.

However, the Chinese immigrants were not instinctively unassimilable. Both racial exclusion and cultural differences accounted for Chinese segregation. Until 1943, more than a century after the first group of Chinese immigrants arrived in this land, the Chinese were not permitted naturalization. As a result, thorough integration remained a very slow and tedious process, and cultural differences aggravated the difficulty. Excluded from all aspects of American life, from social and political to legal and economic, older Chinese developed their own insulated enclaves in response to the historical hostile environment.

Today, this situation has changed. As discriminatory immigration legislation was repealed in 1943, and Chinese immigrants began to adopt a more permanent lifestyle in the United States, New York’s Chinatown underwent a structural transformation from an isolated ethnic enclave to a prosperous economic enclave.² Today it has developed a structure of opportunities that works to channel immigrants into the larger American society. Although the new Chinese immigrants continue to converge in Chinatown as their first stop in their journey, their experience and the consequences of their participation compare are quite different than that of their predecessors.

My interest in New York’s Chinatown started on the Sunday morning that I was first introduced to Lower Manhattan, when I arrived in New York City from China one and a half years ago. Differing from Lower Manhattan’s modern skyscrapers and magnificent City Hall, the century-old Chinatown evokes images of a world of traditional China, and it immediately aroused my curiosity.

New York’s Chinatown, the largest Chinatown in the United States, is located on the lower east side of Manhattan. Its two square miles are loosely bounded by Broome Street, Grand Street and Canal Street on the north, Madison Street and Worth Streets on the south, Rutgers Street and Essex Street on the east, and Broadway on the west. (Figure 1.1) With a population estimated between 90,000 and 110,000, Chinatown is the favored destination point for Chinese immigrants, though in recent years the neighborhood has also become home to Dominicans, Vietnamese, and Filipinos among others.³

³ This is not an official census count. It is difficult to get an exact count, as neighborhood participation in the U.S. Census is thought to be low due to language barriers, as well as large-scale illegal immigration.
Figure 1.1 Map of Boundaries of New York’s Chinatown

Note: Map make base on Google map and source from Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.

New York’s Chinatown is a major component in the lives of many
Chinese, and all members of the population living in the city who self-identify as having and/or sharing the same cultural background. Since the establishment of this Chinatown, it has become a significant part of Manhattan, New York. As it absorbs the continuing new arrivals to the city, Chinatown gradually grows and evolves as it clings to its traditional and unique culture and adapts to the non-Asian environment around it.

While this area was indeed a place of refuge in its early years, it now is a residential area, as most immigrant neighborhoods or current inner-city ethnic enclaves are, and also a veritable enterprise area. It is a dynamic immigrant enclave that is constantly changing and developing. However, most of what has been written about this area is limited to two approaches. The first portrays Chinatown as a deteriorating slum surrounded by run-down housing with untidy streets and stuffy air. Poor newcomers are said to be exploited by fellow nationals for maximal benefit through extremely low wages, long working hours, and poor working conditions. Darker practices such as thefts, illegal gambling, and gang violence are depicted as common features of Chinatown.4 These negative writings represent the anti-Chinese literature of the last century. Another approach is to assimilate Chinatown into the category of early reception areas for immigrants. Most migrations have developed similar enclaves, where new arrivals can be protected in the beginning and provided with information to guide them in new social surroundings. New York had its Little

Italy, its Greektown, and its Harlem. In the end, these enclaves are left behind by successful immigrants. Chinatown is seen as no exception. These studies tend to view the existence of Chinatowns simply as a survival strategy, a means of self-reliance and self-defense.

In *The new Chinatown*, Peter Kwong sees the self-maintenance and self-reliance in Chinatown as sustained by the dynamics of “an informal politico-economic structure within the capitalism.” He argues that because of the capitalist need for an exploitable labor force, Chinatown has divided the Chinese into a small upper class and a large working class. Members of the elite class have managed to shift the minority disadvantages onto their co-ethnics and have built their fortunes on exploitation of the working class within the enclave. Although this book is limited to the economic circumstance of Chinatown in the 1980s, when restaurants and garment industries dominated in Chinatown, it provides a new view that in the end Chinatown is neither a declining urban ghetto nor a diminishing remnant of ethnic symbols.

The book *Chinatown: the socioeconomic Potential of an urban enclave* presents new approaches to the study of history and culture that breaks from traditional viewpoints. It takes a different stand from the past studies to approach Chinatown as a socioeconomic institution that provides Chinese immigrants with advantages and opportunities that are not easily accessible in the larger society, and

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helps them in their struggle to make it in the new land without losing their sense of identity. This book has challenged the traditional view. It shows that Chinatown as an economic enclave was actually quite unlike what scholars and the public at large believed.\footnote{Zhou, Min. 1992. Chinatown: the socioeconomic potential of an urban enclave. Conflicts in urban and regional development. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.}

Three important books involving Chinatown’s history are \textit{Chinese in American Life}, \textit{New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the shaping of American culture, 1776-1882} and \textit{Contemporary Chinese America}. These publications provide invaluable insights into the everyday lives of Chinese immigrant residents of the late nineteenth and twenty century. The book \textit{Chinese in American Life} is one of the most detailed and trustworthy historical accounts of early Chinese immigrants in American. The most important contribution it makes is in its collection of material on Chinese immigration to the United States. S.W. Kung, the author, has done a large amount of research into numerous texts and sources to discover facts and statistics. Although it is not easily grasped by the casual reader, the book presents a very detailed discussion of discrimination. It explains why the first Chinese in California met with less discrimination than those who came two or three decades later.

The book \textit{New York before Chinatown} presents new approaches to the study of history, archeology, and material culture. It challenges the mainstream New York history by pointing out that Chinese immigrants played a significant role in the formation of New York cultural identity and racism. While it draws little comparison with other Chinese communities in the United States, it offers a careful and...
meticulous study of New York City. With compelling evidence, it also offers a new look at Chinese cultural history before the 20th century.

The book *Contemporary Chinese America* collects research on a range of subjects, including the causes and consequences of emigration from China, demographic trends of Chinese Americans, immigrant entrepreneurship and ethnic enclave economies. It also include a historical overview of New York’s Chinatown, an analysis of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Chinese immigrants, and the gradual process of geographic decentralization that has become characteristic of the Chinese immigrant community since 1980.

**Methodology**

I conducted my Chinatown research using three sources of information: original fieldwork, documentary studies of historical data, and the U.S. census data.

The primary sources for this research are the fieldwork data, gathered between fall of 2009 and spring of 2010. Once I chose Chinatown as my thesis topic, I investigated the area during the course of several visits. My native language Cantonese, fluency in Mandarin, and family and kin connections to Chinatown were unique resources for my fieldwork. Fieldwork data comprise personal interviews and telephone interviews with eleven Chinese residents, and more than two hundred photographs that I took, on the streets of Chinatown. Visits to the local historic museum and commission, and interviews with professionals involved in local Chinatown development, also provided me with valuable information. I organized all
of this fieldwork material into several databases; it contributed to my understanding of the immigration of Chinese into New York, the decades of legal exclusion and political struggle, and the community’s resources involved in their preservation.

Secondary sources include published books, articles, population censuses, historic photographs, and unpublished personal work reports and papers. Although a few of these sources exhibit a certain degree of bias and are out of date, they nonetheless provide detailed information on how Chinatown developed, what it is now, and what its future might hold. All of the data, taken together, guide my research in exploring the significant concepts, identifying historical issues, and better understanding the phenomena under study.

Organization

Chapter two of this thesis provides a brief overview of the early history of Chinese immigration to the United States. This history is significant because it helps to better understand the reasons behind the establishment of New York’s Chinatown. This chapter also discusses the factors that led to large-scale Chinese immigration to the United State, early patterns of settlement of these immigrants in California, and, finally, the movement of Chinese immigrants eastward. The chapter concludes with a focused discussion about Chinese immigrants in New York City, and the factors affecting the establishment of a Chinatown there.

Chapter three contains case studies of Chinatown’s intangible aspects, especially lives and experiences of Chinese immigrants and their relationships with
Chinatown. By addressing the question of what caused Chinese immigrants to finally accept a permanent life in New York, this chapter describes the changing mentality and goal of Chinese immigrants after the 1950s. It also examines Chinatown’s economic system and addresses the question: what events made New York’s Chinatown thrive, and fostered its growth to become the largest Chinatown in the United States?

Chapter four looks into another dimension of Chinatown—the physical spaces: boundaries, streets and architecture. By investigating the role of spaces that were significant in Chinatown’s history and important to people in the past, the analysis focuses on how these spaces have developed and what they are now. It also examines the preservation and restoration issues of these spaces that are important to Chinatown’s distinction and identity.

Chapter five concludes by summarizing the main results and demonstrating how the data support, my thesis that the past and present structures of New York’s Chinatown result from a complex social and political history. The conclusions show how this rich and nuanced history impacts the current Chinatown and its inhabitants. In particular, the complex and often turbulent history of Chinese immigration in America directly impact issues such as the incorporation of immigrants into Chinatown and the larger American society, and the preservation of the physical spaces and cultural identity of Chinatown.
CHAPTER 2

THE CHINESE IN THE UNITED STATES—IMMIGRATION

For over two centuries, the United States has attracted immigrants from around the world, with opportunities abounding and freedom for all. Ever since the first documentation of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. appeared in the eighteenth century, and even before then, the United States attracted immigrants from China. This chapter will provide a brief overview of factors that led to large-scale emigration from China to the United States, early patterns of settlement of these immigrants in California, and, finally, the movement of Chinese immigrants eastward. The chapter will conclude with a focused discussion about Chinese immigrants in New York City, and the establishment of a Chinatown there.

Periods of Chinese Immigration

A study of the Chinatowns in the United States is closely related to the history of Chinese immigration, which can be divided into three periods: free immigration (1820-1882), discriminatory restrictions and exclusion (1882-1943), and gradual liberalization (1943 to the present). ³ This chapter will mainly focus on the first two periods in this chapter because they are closely related to the origin of

Chinatowns.

**Free Immigration (1820-1882)**

The first period of Chinese immigration to the United States began in 1820 and then ended abruptly with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Studies of early Chinese immigration serve as critical background sources for the study of historic and today's Chinatowns. Why did the Chinese emigrate in the first place? What caused so many people to leave their homes in China and emigrate to the foreign culture of the United States? Where in China did immigrants tend to come from?

Although the American Immigration Commission recorded 1820 as the year that the first Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States, the first major wave of Chinese immigration dates back to the California Gold Rush. Like early European immigrants who were driven by an American dream, the motivation for the early Chinese arrivals to come to the United States is similar – for the “gold dream”. In 1848, gold was discovered at John Sutter’s Sawmill, north of San Francisco. Shortly thereafter, a group of Chinese immigrants arrived in California. The number of Chinese laborers reached four thousand by the end of 1850, and then rose from four thousand to twenty-five thousand within the year of 1851. Although in the early years most Chinese workers were independent placer miners and some were only given the opportunity to work the poor and cheap claims abandoned by white miners, a small group of them did manage to build small fortunes, which encouraged more fellow
countrymen to come to California. The 1860 census counted 34,933 Chinese in the United State. In 1870, the number of Chinese in the United States reached 64,199, most of them residing in the West. At the end of the first period, the Chinese population in the United States was about 110,000.

![Number of Chinese in the United States in 1849-1920](image)

**Table 2.1 Number of Chinese in the United States in 1849-1920**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Number of Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>34,933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>64,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>105,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>107,448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>71,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>61,639</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Some scholars have suggested that rapid influx in this period was largely due to two main factors—Chinese desire to escape from poverty and the demand for cheap labor in the new country. Of course, these two factors may not fully explain

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actual emigration. Studies on U.S. international immigration history remind us that more intertwining variables need to be considered: Western penetration of China, emigration and immigration policies, and changes that influenced Cantonese emigration.  

The intrusion of Western colonial powers into China did not appear until the Opium War. Before the Opium War, China was practically free of Western contact and almost completely sealed off from the rest of the world. In the eighteenth century, Canton (now Guangdong Province) was the only port opened to the West.  

For a long period during the eighteenth century trade between China and Britain took place in Canton while British merchants sold manufactured goods to the Chinese and purchased tea, silk, and porcelain from China. However, by the late eighteenth century, in order to ameliorate the trade deficit with China, the British began to smuggle opium into China through Canton, and eventually declared war on China for the purposes of forcing China to open its doors to more trade. In 1842 China lost the war and signed the Treaty of Nanjing, which compelled China to open five ports, to cede Hong Kong and to pay Britain 21 million Spanish dollars for the destruction of opium. After the Opium War, further Western penetration proceeded. The wars and treaties disturbed the social stability and economic order in Canton and the Pearl River delta  


11 now Guangzhou and partial Quanzhou in southern Fujian Province
and affected people in this area more than others. An increased influx of imported consumer goods badly hurt the inhabitants’ small household industry.\textsuperscript{12} In the meantime, the increased taxes arising from the indemnities drove people into deeper suffering. The Cantonese began looking for new chances for economic survival. Since the early trade between Canton and Western countries had already broadened the exposure of many Cantonese to new ideas and informed them of the opportunities and prosperities outside China, impoverished peasants began “crossing the Pacific to improve their lives.”\textsuperscript{13}

While the aftermath of the Opium War speeded up the process of Chinese emigration, American colonialism also contributed to it. The development of capitalism influenced emigration from China as well as from Europe, of course in different ways. Dependent capitalism, represented by mining, railroads, and agriculture, rose before the first wave of Chinese immigration. During the 1860s to 1870s, an obsessive need for cheap labor caused the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific Railways to exploit Chinese labor. Paid less than white workers, they nevertheless undertook the most difficult jobs and moved faster than employers expected. As a result, Chinese workers became known as “the best road builders in the world.”\textsuperscript{14} Chinese labor constituted 90 percent of the working force when the

\textsuperscript{12} Chan, \textit{European and Asian Immigration into the United Stated in Comparative Perspectives, 1820-1920s}, in \textit{Immigration Reconsidered}, ed. Yangs-McLaughlin. P. 40-44.

\textsuperscript{13} Liu, Peichi, \textit{Mei Guo Hua Qiao Shi (A History of the Chinese in the United States)}, Taipei, Taiwan, 1981.

\textsuperscript{14} In a report to President Andrew Johnson in 1865, by the first president of the Central Pacific, Leland Stanford; Peichi Liu, \textit{Mei Guo Hua Qiao Shi (A History of the
construction of the transcontinental railroad reached its end. However, Chinese laborers soon became were regarded as new competitors, and Labor groups increasingly demanded legislation that brought new tax laws and exclusion laws that could be used against them. When Chinese workers became unwanted in the West, they turned to household services and building irrigation systems in the South, and some of them arrived in Massachusetts and New York for employment in shoe and cigar industries.

Other events also contributed to the early influx of Chinese immigrants into California. Historically, the Chinese government enforced various laws to forbid emigration. Emigrants could be punished by varied penalties that even included death. By signing the Burlingame Treaty in 1868, China and the United States reached an agreement on immigration issues. The treaty recognized the right of free migration and emigration for the citizens of both countries, with the Chinese government finally ending a three-hundred-year ban on overseas migration. Thousands of Chinese immigrants also took advantage of one crucial steam boat route operated by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company between Hong Kong and San Francisco. Some of these immigrants were sailors and skilled workers, often from

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16 When the Qing government (1644-1911) replaced the Ming Dynasty, many Ming loyalists fled to Southeast Asia where they could joint some anti-Qing organizations. In order cut off the connection between them, Qing government prohibited the Chinese from going abroad.

17 Suchen Chan, This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-
Hong Kong and Macao, coming with industry experience. Many of them chose New York as their destination. As a consequence of all these factors, the number of Chinese immigrants in the United States surpassed 100,000 by 1880.

Early emigrating Chinese going to the United States came from limited areas rather than from the whole of China. The Pearl River delta was the primary original emigrant region. Early Chinese from this region who left for America were primarily peasants from three areas: San Yi County, Si Yi County, and Zhongshan (map 2.1) in Canton.\textsuperscript{18} Close to the provincial capital of Guangzhou and the Colonial cities of Hong Kong and Macao, people in these areas had a longer tradition of receiving foreign merchants, contact with seafarers, and social networks associated with emigration than did inland residents. As mentioned earlier, areas in Canton suffered greatly from wars and natural disasters. As a result, many Cantonese were desperate to find new chances for survival and began to cross the Pacific. Many of those who went overseas to the United States were young men, mostly married men who left their families behind in their native villages. The emotional ties with their families, and the desire to earn enough money to purchase land at home and to live there comfortably motivated these Chinese to see themselves as short-term sojourners rather than permanent settlers. Before the 1860s very few Chinese applied for American citizenship, but they soon realized its importance when strong anti-Chinese

\textsuperscript{18} San Yi County is a traditional name and now is an area includes cities of Nanhai, Panyu and Shunde..Si Yi County now is an area includes cities of Xinhui, Taishan, Kaiping and Enping. Zhongshan now is a city in Guangdong.
immigration campaigns broke out. A Comparison based on the economic opportunities available to the Chinese in their homeland and in the U.S. will be provided in Chapter 3, to answer the question of why Chinese arrivals continued to return home from the initial immigration phase through the 1940s.

**Discriminatory Restrictions and Exclusions (1882-1943)**

As mentioned earlier, it was to California, not to New York, that the large groups of Chinese workers had originally emigrated. What caused increasing numbers of Chinese to depart for the East Coast, especially New York? How did the patterns of settlement for Chinese immigrants change when these large numbers of new Chinese immigrants arrived in New York City? What events fostered the development of New York City’s Chinatown from a ten-block “bachelor’s society” to the largest Chinatown in the United States and the largest concentration of Chinese in the western hemisphere? The second period of Chinese immigration provides some primary explanations.

The earliest Chinese immigrants came as part of the California Gold Rush. However, they eventually found themselves the objects of discrimination and exclusion instead of beneficiaries of the gold mines.\(^{19}\) For the first few years of emigration, the Chinese arrivals worked in mines providing basic services such as cooking and laundry, which were well received by the white workers who had left

\(^{19}\) Peichi Liu, 1981. 62-70
their families behind in order to seek a quick fortune in the gold mines. When richer surface mines were exhausted by the late 1850s, miners were forced to dig deeper into the ground to continue to find rich gold deposits. More and more Chinese laborers were employed in this difficult and dangerous work, as few white workers were interested.

At the beginning of the 1860s, when most of the gold mines were exhausted, Chinese laborers began to shift to employment in railroad construction. As time passed, resentment against the Chinese workers increased from those who could not compete well with them. In 1868, forty thousand Chinese miners were driven out by white labors on the west coast. Acts of violence against the Chinese continued for decades, mostly from white urban and agricultural workers. The Chinese became very unwelcome in the west, while at the same time attitudes towards Chinese immigrants on the east coast began to shift.

The demand for cheap labor in the second half of the nineteenth century attracted much labor form abroad, the arrival of so many new immigrants who would accept low wages had a detrimental effect on white workers’ economic situations, which served as another important cause of anti-Chinese movements. During the early 1870s, the United States underwent a serious economic depression. The decline of mineral production, speculation and panic in stocks, the rise of a labor movement all

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20 Peichi Liu, 1981. 62-70

contributed to the depression. Job opportunities for white workers were limited. Yet Chinese laborers still continued to be shipped into California.

Twenty-five thousand Chinese laborers were driven out by white laborers on the west coast just as the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, with those Chinese workers helping to keep labor costs at an unprecedented low. In the meantime, the white working class formed an anti-capitalist movement, which was joined by agricultural workers, and artisans, to fight for their “dignity of labor”. Unsurprisingly, the outcome of the conflict was that the capitalist management chose the cheaper labor, mostly Chinese workers. More and more white workers lost their jobs. This unemployment problem, occurring during an existing economic depression, created further anti-Chinese sentiments.

Although large landowners who hired Chinese workers, railroads and other large white-owned businesses, and Chinese workers themselves fought back against a growing call for anti-Chinese legislation, they were unsuccessful. The forces seeking issuance of laws that excluded or harassed Chinese from working in certain industries prevailed. For example, the Colorado legislature passed a joint resolution in February 1870, welcoming Chinese Immigrants “to hasten the development and early prosperity of the Territory by supplying the demand for cheap labor.” However, this policy did not work efficiently, as evidenced by anti-Chinese agitation that followed

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shortly thereafter.

The anti-Chinese movement which started in California gradually spread to other nearby states, particularly Oregon and Washington, and at last spread throughout the entire West coast. The Naturalization Act of 1870 restricted all immigration into the U.S. to only “white persons and persons of African descent,” meaning that all Chinese were placed as ineligible for citizenship from that time till 1943.\(^{24}\) Even before the act of 1870, Congress passed a law forbidding American vessels to transport Chinese immigrants to the U.S. In 1876, many Chinese were forced out of small towns in California and more than ninety Chinese were reported murdered. Many Chinese houses and business were burned.\(^{25}\) While white workers were still dissatisfied with the incomplete exclusion of Chinese laborers, Congress adopted the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, a federal law that excluded a whole group of Chinese laborers from the U.S. labor market for ten years and prohibited the naturalization of all Chinese immigrants already in the U.S. In 1892, Congress passed the Extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, known as the Geary Act, further prohibiting the entry of Chinese immigrants.\(^{26}\)

Due to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Chinese population in the

\(^{24}\) The law was the first significant bar making the Chinese the only culture to be prohibited from freely migrating to the United States for a time.


\(^{26}\) The act passed in May 5, 1892, named An Act to Prohibit the Coming of Chinese Persons into the United States.
United States was reduced by 15,360, a loss of an average of almost 2,000 people every year. The 1890 census reported the number of Chinese as 107,488 people. This number fell to only 62,000 people in 1920. In the 1880s the number of Chinese immigrants admitted to the U.S. decreased by fifty percent from the previous decade, and reached its lowest point at 4,928 in the 1930s.

These descending numbers reflected not only the severing effect of the legislation on the inflow of Chinese immigrants, but of the thousands of immigrants returning back to China to avoid further torment as well as the highly imbalanced sex ratio. Reports of the time noted that Chinese emigrants rarely brought families with them. “Chinese women never go abroad” because of discriminatory legislation such as the Page Law and the Chinese Exclusion Act that barred most Chinese females from entering the United States. The reason behind the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was to prevent an excess of cheap labor. However, the act froze the population of the Chinese community, leaving its already unproportional sex ratio highly imbalanced. In 1860, the sex ratio of males to females was already 19:1. In 1890, the ratio widened to 27:1. For more than half a century, the Chinese immigrants essentially lived in a bachelor society. It was not until World War II when wives of

27 Source from: William L. Tung 1974

28 Sources of Chinese Emigration (in Chinese), ed. Hansheng, Chen, Vol. 2 Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1991. The Page Law, passed by Congress in 1875, was initially meant to prohibit the migration of prostitutes into the US. However, the law excluded not only Chinese prostitutes but other Chinese women as well. The Chinese Exclusion Act completely denied Chinese women entry.

Chinese immigrants were allowed for the first time to join their husbands in the United States.

Violence steadily increased against the Chinese until even employers were at risk. In late 1880s, the anti-Chinese anger eventually flamed into large scale and premeditated “ethnic drive outs”. The Chinese were driven out of the mines, farms, woolen mills, and factories and forced to cluster in urban enclaves for self-protection. These enclaves later developed into Chinatowns. Facing such racial hostility, many Chinese were forced to return permanently to China. Others began to disperse out of the west and into other parts of the country. Most migrated to New York, hoping to avoid the harsh treatment they had faced in California and other western states. The 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad, up to twenty thousand Chinese found themselves out of work. Few could afford the tickets for the railroad, some actually walked eastward from Promontory Point. They settled in urban areas throughout the Midwest and eventually the East Coast.\textsuperscript{30}

The fact that Chinese immigrants were treated better on the East Coast than in California and other western states led many Chinese immigrants to depart for the East, especially for New York City. New York City could arguably claim relatively more racial tolerance toward Chinese immigrants than other areas. No large-scale anti-Chinese movements took place there as they had in many other cities.

Possibly the lack of anti-Chinese agitation might have been at least to some extent a result of the small number of Chinese immigrants living in New York.

\textsuperscript{30} Tung, William L. 1974, P.
before the 1880s. By the early 1870s, the New York Chinese population was about five hundred, just one percent of the number in the West. In addition, there were no anti-miscegenation laws in New York State. Although chances for Chinese immigrants to marry white women were scarce, some intermarriage between Chinese men and European-American women did occur in that city.\textsuperscript{31} School segregation was also not imposed on the Chinese in New York. In some western cities such as San Francisco, Chinese children were only allowed to attend Chinese-only schools. In contrast, the Public School No. 23 in the Lower East Side in New York City was an example where Chinese, Italian and children of other immigrant groups attended school together.\textsuperscript{32} In New York, Italians did not receive much discrimination, and comprised a relatively large proportion of the city’s labor force, and fewer Chinese immigrants were excluded from its mainstream labor market. \textsuperscript{33} Clearly, New York City represented tolerance for multiple immigrant groups, and a place where immigrants such as the Chinese laborers could live freer from overt discrimination.

\textbf{The emergence of Chinatown in New York City}

Economic development and racial exclusion defined the patterns of settlement for Chinese Americans. Before the Chinese Exclusion Act, the patterns of settlement followed the patterns of economic development in the western states. As

\textsuperscript{31} Peichi Liu, 1981.

\textsuperscript{32} B.L. Sung 1967. P.41

\textsuperscript{33} E. Bonacich and J.M. Modell P. 56-62.
mining and railway construction industries declined and anti-Chinese movement intensified, the Chinese fled into small import-export businesses and service manufacturing industries in such cities as San Francisco, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Seattle. When the Chinese laborers transferred from mining to domestic service, they migrated to urban low-rent areas in the large cities and, year after year, the segregation of the Chinese community developed. By the early twentieth century, approximately eighty percent of the Chinese population of the United States could be found in the Chinatowns of major cities in the United States. In the following, the main discussion could be what was the original idea and functions of the Chinatown? What kinds of occupations did immigrants engage in within the New York Chinatown? And also describe the original boundaries of the NYC Chinatown.

In his paper *Voluntary Segregation: A Study of New York’s Chinatown*, D.Y. Yuan notes that segregation in Chinatown is both voluntary and involuntary.\(^{34}\) On one hand, the emergence of Chinatown in New York City was a product of institutional exclusion, systematic racism and prejudice. The Chinese had no choice but to involuntary isolated themselves to avoid conflicts, hostilities and insults. On the other hand, the Chinese were also voluntary clustered in Chinatown for other reasons. First, the Chinese were unassailable and excluded from all aspects of American life because they motivated by their sojourning goal: stayed temporary and earned quick

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money. Thus, they remained and endured, tried to work as much as possible and for whatever wage were offered them. They endured the hostile from the majority by developing their own niches and ethnic businesses in Chinatown. Moreover, the preservation of their way of life is one important factor which might explain why the Chinese clustered in Chinatown. Since most Chinese had no families with them and led a bachelor’s life, they needed a kind of social life in which they could share hardships and rely on each other. Furthermore, many of them had come to the United States through kinship network or Chinese association. Upon arrival in an unfamiliar place, they naturally clustered round their network and thus guided into Chinatown. Other factors in the formation of Chinatowns included Language barriers. Most of the early Chinese immigrants were uneducated laborers. Language difficulties led them to stay in Chinatown to take the jobs such as they probably had done in China.

Like other Chinatowns in the United States, early New York’s Chinatown functioned as residential shelter, ethnic economic enclave and social support center. The most basic item has to do with residential shelter. During the time of exclusion, New York’s Chinatown was home for hundreds of laborers who were driven out of the west coast and forced to move New York to look for other means of livelihood. While it was a four-block enclave in 1880, New York’s Chinatown had grown into a ten-block bachelors’ society bounded by Canal Street on the north, Park Row on the south, Baxtre Street on the west and the Bowery on the east. It was an enclave for about ten thousand Chinese in 1940.\textsuperscript{35} Besides the residential shelter, it

\textsuperscript{35} Sources: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation; Department of City Planning, New York City.
also served as an economic enclave that would offer its habitants’ daily survival needs. Major types of economic activities included hand laundry, ethnic restaurant and small businesses as gift shops. The laundry and restaurant became the economic backbone of Chinatown. According to the 1930 census, more than 65 percent of the employed Chinese in New York City were engaged in restaurant or laundry businesses. Even by 1946, 60 percent of the New York Chinese still made their living by laundering. Chinese were allowed to pick up these marginal economic jobs simply because no white workers or immigrants were interested in such low-paying and unrewarding jobs. Furthermore, New York’s Chinatown also served as social support center. Under an unfriendly and uncertain situation, Chinese live together for mutual help and to preserve their ways of life and also to overcome the daily boredom of hard work and homesick. For example, the restaurants were not only the eating places but also provided a place to share the latest news in their hometown.

Large number of Chinese moved to the East Coast because anti-Chinese prejudice was strong along the West Coast. As a direct outcome of the Chinese Exclusion Act, New York’s Chinatown, which was a tiny enclave and first had been established as a sojourners’ settlement on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, became more consolidated as an immigrant community, insulated from the larger society for self-support and self protection and continued to attract more refugee. This community was gradually sealed off from the outside American society and was force

36 美洲華僑日報 (Mei Zhou Hua Qiao Ri Bao), 19 Dec. 1946. Sources: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.
to conduct marginal economic to support its habitants’ daily survival needs. Unlike former sojourners who worked for mining and railway construction industries, workers in New York’s Chinatown began to shift to non-competitive business: running laundries, restaurants and small gift shop, or working as domestic servants. These businesses can be supported by only the greater cities where have large cosmopolitan populations, thus New York’s Chinatown gradually flourished during the Restrictions and Exclusions period because of its special location.
CHAPTER 3

LIVES IN NEW YORK’S CHINATOWN

The Chinatown of New York comprised a ten-block area on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was originally developed as a defensive insulation that protected Chinese immigrants against anti-Chinese sentiment and the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act during most of the first half of the twentieth century. Most Chinese immigrants who chose New York as their destination did not intend to stay in the New World permanently. Although New York’s Chinatown in the 1930s and 1940s was a dreary place, it witnessed a dramatic change after 1940 and has flourished extensively in the past decades. This chapter contains case studies of Chinatown’s intangible aspects, especially lives and experiences of immigrant Chinese and their relationship with Chinatown. It also addresses two questions that form an underlying theme of these case studies. What caused increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants to accept a permanent life in New York? What events made New York’s Chinatown thrive, and fostered its development from a ten-block “bachelor’s society” to the largest Chinatown in the United States and the largest concentration of Chinese in the Western hemisphere?

From Sojourn to Settlement
The phenomenon that a permanent life in New York began to be accepted as a substitute for the traditional goal of returning to China deserves special attention, because this attitude formation and change strongly influenced the later development of Chinatown and created new immigrant residential patterns and new economic systems. It was not until the early 1950s that a majority of the New York Chinese began to abandon their sojourner mentality. For a long time prior to that, their goal was to accumulate wealth through hard work and then to return to their native villages to buy a house and lead a comfortable life. This tendency was best reflected in the unproportional sex ratio in New York City’s Chinatown which was mentioned in Chapter Two, and also reflected in the fact that New York City’s Chinese population lacked a significant senior group before the 1950s. Table 3.1. illustrates the pattern. An eighty-one year old Chinatown laundry owner, Xiajing Wang, recalled:

In those days, living in New York was tough. All Chinese wanted to return to our country [China] instead of staying in this alien land. We have never said “How are you?” when we met a friend, but always said “When do you get back to China?”… We never intended to bring family members and develop roots here. We just wanted to save enough money through no matter what we did, and then tried to go back. Many of my friends went back when they had money. They were very lucky…In those days old people went back, young men kept coming. Unlike today, just old men stay here...  

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Table 3.1. Percentage of Age Distribution of Chinese in New York City by gender, 1942

![Age Distribution Chart]

The table shows that most New York Chinese returned to China after retirement.\(^{38}\) Even as late as 1945, most Chinese still wished to return to China once the war was over.\(^{39}\) Why did they abruptly reverse their sojourner mentality and decide to settle in New York in the early 1950s? Comparing the economic


\(^{39}\) The Second Sino-Japanese War, the largest Asian war in the twentieth century, was a military conflict fought between China and Japan during July 7, 1937 – September 9, 1945.
opportunities available to the Chinese in New York and in their hometown offers a means to answer this question.

Chinese attachment to land and their desire to become small landowners are well known. Before embarking for America, most had already made plans for eventually going back to purchase land in their native villages. The desire to purchase land at home motivated former Chinese to migrate to the United States. Parallel to this argument is the fact that most Chinese immigrants have originated from areas where land was widely distributed and available for sale. For example, the areas of San Yi County, Si Yi County and Zhongshan, the primary original emigrant regions of China, witnessed a greater increase in the number of landowners during the 1920s to 1930s. Chinese emigrants often sent money home before their return. In 1930, the district of Taishan received about U.S. $ 22 million from the Chinese immigrants in the United States, and most of it was invested in land.\footnote{Hansheng Chen, “Landlord and Peasant in China: A Study of the Agrarian Crisis in South China,” \textit{New York: International Publishers}, 1936. Source: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.} However, this situation suddenly changed in 1950. The new Chinese Communists, who took control of the country in 1949, carried out an unprecedented land reform when they took over Guangdong from the Kuomintang in 1950. Many of the Chinese immigrants in New York, who had purchased land at home, became the targets of the land reform and their land was confiscated. According to one report, more than forty percent of the inhabitants of Guangdong were denounced and seventy percent of the family members of overseas
Chinese in Guangdong were wrongly punished during the land reform.\textsuperscript{41} By the end of 1951, the land reform placed the Chinese in New York as well as in the rest of the United States in a dilemma. They faced the reality that the land they had purchased had been confiscated and would no longer be available to them if they chose to return home. Terrified by the radical destruction of the traditional social order and the confiscation of private property by the new government, and further influenced by the slightly improved opportunities in New York from ten years before, the Chinese started to rethink their goals.

As the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, and the War Brides Act of 1945 was passed, for the first time since 1882, Chinese immigrants could be naturalized as U.S. citizen and could bring families with them to the United States.\textsuperscript{42} Women began to emigrate to the United States and join their husbands. By 1947, approximately nine thousand women had arrived, and eighty percent of Chinese immigrants who entered between 1945 and 1947 were women.

In the meantime, the Executive Order 8802 issued in 1941 to prohibit employment discrimination in the United States, combined with a labor shortage

\textsuperscript{41} Deping Mao, Guangdong Tu Di Gai Ge 1950 (Land reform in Guangdong, 1950), 1998, Guangzhou University Press.

\textsuperscript{42} An Act to Repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act, repealed most of the discriminatory legislation against the Chinese, passed on Dec. 17, 1943.\cite{chinese_exclusion_repeal_act_of_1943}
The War Brides Act of 1945 enabled many New York Chinese who had served in the U.S. military to bring their fiancées to the U.S. on a non-quota basis.\cite{war_brides_act}
during WWII, resulted in new economic opportunities for New York Chinese. Some New York Chinese gained employment in factories and skilled occupations. By 1942, some Chinese restaurants in New York had to close since many waiters went to work in factories that offered better wages.

In sum, the Chinese immigrants carefully weighed the choices at their disposal. The loss of their land and the political upheaval in their hometowns made returning to China unattractive. Upon discovering that opportunities in New York had become better than those at home, many decided to remain in the New York. Before the early 1950s, to return to their hometown provided the immigrants a better life. But after 1950, the loss of economic opportunities at home became even less endurable than the various hardships in New York. Most Chinese immigrants finally abandoned their traditional goal and chose to stay in their new adopted city.

Chinatown as a Residential Enclave

New York’s Chinatown has been a residential enclave for over a century. It is often assumed that prior to the mid-1960s almost all New York Chinese residents lived in Chinatown. The common culture as well as both housing discrimination and racial hostilities against Chinese led them to live together in Chinatown.

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43 Executive Order 8802 signed by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1941, It was the first federal law to promote equal opportunity and prohibit employment discrimination in the U.S. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_8802](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_8802)

44 Mei Zhou Hua Qiao Ri Bao (美洲华侨日报), 1943. Sources: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.
A common culture did indeed encourage many early Chinese to choose Chinatown as a place to live. Opened in 1878, Woo Kee, a Chinese grocery store located at 34 Mott Street, has generally been credited as the beginning of New York’s Chinatown. By the late 1880s, New York had more than thirty Chinese grocery stores, all located in, or near, Mott Street. These groceries provided the Chinese residents goods as well as serving as headquarters of Chinese social organizations, and many Chinese chose to live near them as they needed a place to socialize.

Lower rents also affected the concentration of Chinese residents. For many years in the late nineteenth century, Irish and Jewish immigrants concentrated in the Lower East Side of Manhattan because most of them worked in the garment industry and most factories were located there. In the 1910s when the garment factories moved to midtown Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx, the European immigrants following the jobs and pursuing better housing left the Lower East Side. Lower rents in this area lured the Chinese immigrants to settle in this ghetto that Irish and Jewish residents had recently vacated.

The difficulty of finding housing in non-Chinese neighborhoods also contributed to Chinese concentration in Chinatown. For many decades, the Chinese were subject to housing discrimination. In 1946, the New York Sun reported that the Chinese had great difficulty “procuring buildings for habitations and business purpose

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46 Chan, 1990, p 120-140.
in any desirable part of town” and Qing Lin, a longtime resident of New York Chinatown, recalled “Many landlords were reluctant to receive Chinese just because we are not whites, and we were charged higher rents than whites, if they paid $20 a month, we needed to pay $30…and we could not buy a house outside [Chinatown].”\(^{47}\)

As mentioned earlier, most Chinese immigrants in New York worked in limited types of jobs: laundries, restaurants, groceries and meat stores, and gift shops. These businesses (except laundries) mainly catered to the Chinese community and thus were located in Chinatown. Most Chinese worker could only work in Chinatown and needed to live close to their workplaces. One exception might be the laundry. Many Chinese laundrymen indeed worked and lived outside Chinatown during the 1930s and up to 1950, since the laundries mainly catered to the white customers and “nearly every street and avenue in New York became filled with Chinese laundries”. Many Chinese people working in a laundry in a white neighborhood also lived there.

After the mid-1960s, while racial discrimination was diminishing, increasing numbers of the New York Chinese nonetheless took up residence in Chinatown. A variety of factors contributed to this period’s Chinese residential pattern. First, by the mid-1960s, some older immigrants who had already moved out of Chinatown began to move back, because better housing had become available in Chinatown and they hoped to send their children to Chinese schools to be educated in Chinese. Second, as a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, New York witnessed the influx of thousands of new Chinese immigrants in the 1960s. The newcomers mostly

settled in Chinatown because of the language barrier and because of the lower rents in Chinatown. Third, the Chinese garment industry became the leading Chinese American business in the city. In order to find cheap laborers, the owners of the garment industries located their factories in Chinatown. Thus, the majority of the new immigrants worked in Chinatown’s clothing factories, along with its restaurants, and the proportion of Chinese immigrants living in Chinatown became higher and higher.

Although scholars argue that decentralization of the Chinese population began as early as the 1960s and the New York Chinatown indeed underwent a large migration to the suburbs during the last few decades, most new Chinese immigrants entering New York still make Chinatown their home. According to the U.S Census, in 1997, about 50,000 Chinese lived in the core area, up from 26,700 in 1970. In 2007, population estimates are in the range of 90,000 to 100,000 residents.

The majority of residents currently living in Chinatown emigrated from the traditional sending regions in South China and Hong Kong. In recent years, a noticeable group of Sino-Vietnamese has settled in Chinatown. They originally emigrated to Vietnam from Guangdong province, thus most are fluent in Cantonese and share many culture characteristics with earlier migrants. Since the 1990s, the vast majority of new Chinese immigrants have come from mainland China, especially Fujian Province. With the coming of Fuzhou immigrants, and cultural differences,

48 1997 U.S. Census Population

49 This is not an official census count. It is difficult to get an exact count, as neighborhood participation in the U.S. Census is thought to be low due to language barriers, as well as large-scale illegal immigration.
there is now a Fuzhou Community in the eastern portion of Chinatown which started on the East Broadway section and later emerged north onto the Eldridge Street section of Chinatown.

Although recently-arrived Chinese residents are culturally diverse, they share similar characteristics. Many of these recent arrivals have a low level of education, speak little or no English, work in low wage jobs and live in poor and deteriorating conditions. The elderly are a significant presence. Twenty-one percent of the household heads in the core area of Chinatown are over sixty-five years old. Many of them have chosen to stay in Chinatown even after their children and grandchildren have moved out to the suburbs. One main residential pattern is the overcrowding and poor living conditions. Over ninety percent of residents live in rental housing, and many housing units are in poor and deteriorating conditions. It is common to share an apartment with another family. For example, Mr. Su, who was an engineer in Shanghai before emigration and now works in a health center as a massaure in Chinatown, shared his living experience:

I immigrated two years ago. I share one small apartment with another man who works in a barber shop. The apartment is very old and small. My room is actually a cubicle separated from the living room. I can just fill one twin-size bed in it. My roommate and I need to share everything in that apartment, the bath, the kitchen...I know I could move out one day. I am pretty sure that this would change in a few years.


51 Wen, Phillip. 2002.

52 Mr. Su. Personal interview. Nov 25 2009.
Like Mr. Su, many immigrants came from relatively affluent middle-class backgrounds in China but were not wealthy enough to afford comfortable housing in New York. But they tolerate their situation and hope that someday they will live in better dwellings or move out of Chinatown. Indeed, many Chinese immigrants, especially the affluent, are now bypassing Chinatown to disperse into suburbs. In Chinatown, most of the residents are recent arrivals, including those undocumented, and the elderly. Very few second or third generation young people are living there. As a residential enclave, Chinatown has provided a cultural refuge and a viable living place for newcomers. Newcomers continue to converge in Chinatown as a first stop in the journey, and then many are now bypassing it and moving into affluent suburbs, situating themselves in middle-class American life. However, the disadvantaged conditions and residential changes are not associated with the disappearance or significant decline of New York’s Chinatown, which has actually grown and expanded. So what accounts for Chinatown’s resilience and growth? A close analysis of the economy in Chinatown is intricately related to the answer to that question.

Chinatown as an Economic Enclave

Until massive immigrations began in 1965, Chinatown had primarily served as a residential enclave for first generation immigrants. However, since 1965, the impact of the U.S. government’s revising of the discriminatory immigration law was strongly reflected in New York’s Chinatown. It created a mass influx of Chinese
immigrants, and an economic enclave has gradually developed. With the continuous arrival of new immigrants and the influx of foreign capital, Chinatown has become a community based on an increasingly strong ethnic economy. Its physical boundaries have expanded and now cover a much bigger area in Lower Manhattan than ever before. (Figure 3.1)
Figure 3.1 Map of Boundaries of old Chinatown and extended Chinatown

Note: Old Chinatown bounded by Canal Street on the north, Park Row on the south, Baxtre Street on the west and the Bowery on the east. (Map make base on Google map and source from Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.)
Chinatown’s Economic Development and Changes in the Ethnic Economy

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, manufacturing and construction were the two leading employment opportunities offered in New York. At that time, New York City’s economy was growing at an unprecedented rate with new employment opportunities constantly created in different job categories. However, the New York Chinese immigrants had very few economic opportunities available to them except for those concentrated in laundries and restaurants. The Chinese residents worked in these traditional businesses due to certain circumstances which they were subjected to: Before 1940, New York State banned aliens from engaging in almost thirty occupations. Most Chinese immigrants were not eligible for citizenship because of the Exclusion Act and were thus excluded from many occupations. Moreover, Chinese immigrants were relative latecomers in New York, where large numbers of European immigrants already had dominated all the major industries. Although early Chinese immigrants had a chance to engage in some other occupations, including shoemaking and cigar making, the efforts of organized labor to boycott goods made by Chinese and to force employers to dismiss Chinese workers caused them to withdraw from those occupations. The only economic niches left for the Chinese were laundries and restaurants. Both result in low wages, poor working conditions and long working hours, which did not interest white workers.
According to the 1930 census, more than sixty-five percent of the employed Chinese in New York City were engaged in restaurant or laundry businesses. Over three hundred restaurants and tea houses had opened in the core area of Chinatown by the late 1950s. For a long time, New York Chinese immigrant’s jobs were “almost synonymous with restaurant and laundry services.” This situation remained by the late 1960s.

By the 1970s the laundry business had declined, because of technological innovations in machinery, and home washers and dryers were becoming more prevalent. Although it is still run by first generation immigrants, the Chinese laundry is a “sunset business” right now in Chinatown. As the concentration in small laundry businesses began to decline, they started to give way to a new type of ethnic industry—the Chinese garment industry. New York City only claimed about forty Chinese garment factories by the mid-1960s. That number had grown to five hundred by the mid-1980s. Because many newcomers could not afford to leave Chinatown, many employers located their garment factories in Chinatown because they could more readily find cheap labor there than elsewhere in New York City. These garment factories are run by Chinese entrepreneurs and now employ more than twenty thousand immigrant Chinese. Although in the mid-1990s this industry showed signs of decline, as many factories moved out of the enclave, they have remained a strong

53 Mei Zhou Hua Qiao Ri Bao (美洲華僑日報), 19 Dec. 1946. Sources: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.
influence on immigrant women. It is estimated that more than sixty percent of Chinese women in Chinatown work in the garment industry. Working in garment factories is a central part of many Chinese lives, especially women, in Chinatown.

In addition, Chinatown had increasingly become a tourist attraction by the early 1970s. Chinatown’s exotic culture, famous food, and fine handicrafts have attracted thousands of non-Chinese visitors. This tourism has encouraged the establishment of many Chinese restaurants. Thus the restaurant business has continued to grow and prosper. Restaurants run by Chinese in Chinatown grew from about three hundred in 1958 to nearly seven hundred in 1988, employing at least fifteen thousand Chinese workers. At the same time, besides attracting tourists from outside into Chinatown, the tourism business also serves immigrant Chinese. For example, newer immigrants depend on Chinatown’s travel agencies to help them with their own travel itineraries. Other businesses in Chinatown have also experienced tremendous growth recently, including grocery stores, gift shops, jewelry stores, barber shops and beauty salons, herbalists’ clinics and Chinese medical health centers, banks, law firms, and insurance and real estate companies. This change in vitality indicates that New York’s Chinatown, which was originally an impoverished immigrant enclave with a narrow range of economic opportunities, has begun to adopt new functions and is becoming a consolidated community based on a strong ethnic economy. Meanwhile, the Chinese immigrants have been adapting to their changing

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community and have been able to support the enclave economy.

Since the 1965 immigration reform, an influx of Chinese residents has poured into New York, bring rapid growth to Chinatown. Today’s Chinatown is an over-crowded and sprawling neighborhood that continues to grow rapidly. The original boundaries expanded into Kenmore and Delancey streets on the north, East and Worth streets on the south, Allen Street on the east and Broadway on the west. (Map 3.1) What has made Chinatown thrive?

The rapid growth in immigrants, combined with economic organization and restructuring in Chinatown, account for Chinatown’s prosperity. Population growth was a basic item. A large influx of immigrants with different backgrounds provided a continuous supply of potential entrepreneurs and workers. Many new arrivals have known limited English and skills essential for competing in the open labor market. The availability of cheap immigrant labor, as well as the disadvantages of the immigrants, largely reduces the labor cost, thus stimulating ethnic industries and businesses. Also, the economic organization in Chinatown’s economy contributes to Chinatown’s current prosperity. The size and vitality of the enclave economy is greatly expanded to generate a structure of job opportunities for immigrants with varied backgrounds.
CHAPTER 4

PLACES IN NEW YORK’S CHINATOWN

This chapter discusses different types of spaces in New York’s Chinatown, including boundaries, streets and architecture. It investigates the places that those spaces hold in this Chinatown’s history, how they developed over time, and what they are now. Each type of space is suitable for different purposes, but all of them are necessary for Chinatown life and play an integral part of Chinatown’s past, present and future.

Boundaries and Streets

Chinatown was first established in the late 1870s near the Five Points slums, centered around what is today Mosco, Worth, and Baxter Streets. Although it was a four-block enclave in 1880, and less than one thousand Chinese had settled in this area, this little enclave steadily grew as a result of exclusion, strong anti-Chinese prejudice along the West Coast and The Chinese Exclusion Act which passed in 1882. Many Chinese continued to arrive and settle in Chinatown, the continued

57 Tchen, John Kuo Wei. 1999. Chapter 11

58 The census of 1880 reported 748 Chinese living in Chinatown, with another 143 living in Brooklyn and Newark.
racism and disdain of the rest of society further supporting the growth of Chinatown. By 1940, Chinatown had expanded to a ten-block area bounded by Canal Street on the north, Worth on the south, Baxter Street on the west, and the Bowery on the east. It was not until the Immigration Act of 1965 that the Chinese, along with other Asians, experienced a much greater rise in the percentage of total annual immigration. The Chinese population increased by 241.4 percent—a jump from 236,084 in 1960 to 807,027 in 1980. Chinatown, in turn, experienced much expansion in light of all these new people who sought to live and work there, looking for community and sense of familiarity. By 1980, as the result of the influx of immigrants from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Chinatown had encompassed an approximate quarter-mile square south of Canal Street, pushing at the Bowery on the east, Park Row on the south, and Centre Street on the west. Within the next decade, Chinatown has spread north of Canal and pushed its boundaries into Little Italy, which today has been reduced to a few blocks centered on Mulberry Street between Canal and Broome Streets. Today, Chinatown continues to grow; its approximate borders are Grand Street to the north, East Broadway to the east, Chambers Street to the south, and Broadway to the west. Chinatown is now moving into the fringes of the Lower East Side and pushing against SoHo and TriBeCa, and encroaches on City Hall.

However, just as Chinatown pressed at and shrank the boundaries of Little Italy, the other more affluent neighborhoods of downtown Manhattan appear to be placing stress on this old ethnic enclave today. Many of the new construction projects currently underway seem to be geared more towards middle-income or even upper-
income households, who would traditionally find themselves living comfortably in areas such as SoHo and TriBeCa, rather than for the old residents of Chinatown, who are mostly low-income and working class. One example is the Confucius Plaza, a forty-four stories (433 ft) tower block with 760 apartments, which was constructed in 1975 at a cost of $38,387,000. Confucius Plaza was constructed as a multi-use apartment tower at the end of the Manhattan Bridge, where the constantly expanding Chinatown and the Lower East Side meet. This tallest new tower consists of a subsidized housing cooperative and Public School 124(Figure 4.1). Inhabitants of Confucius Plaza are almost exclusively high-income Chinese Americans.

The immigrant face has changed as well: from the Eastern European Jews, Chinese, and Italians of the first immigrant wave of the late 1800s to early 1900s; to the majority of Chinatown residents today from the Guangdong, Toisan and Fujian Providences in China as well as Hong Kong, with their well established Cantonese community, of the second great immigrant wave; to the recent Fujianese immigrants of the last two or three decade, who come from the Fujian Province on the southern coast of mainland China.60

Cities and towns take their identity from their streets. “Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city’s streets look interesting, the city looks

59 美洲華僑日報 (Mei Zhou Hua Qiao Ri Bao), 10 Nov. 1976. Sources: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.

60 美洲華僑日報 (Mei Zhou Hua Qiao Ri Bao), 1 Feb. 2000. Sources: Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation.
interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull.”⁶¹ Jane Jacobs wrote in her book *The death and life of great American cities*. She argued that not only must the streets or the buildings that frame them be architecturally interesting, but a liveliness supplied by activity and people is essential for streets. One would never accuse the streets of Chinatown of being dull. On the contrary, streets of Chinatown are always considered to be exciting places. They have a preponderance of commercial shops, bakeries, groceries, beauty salons, and restaurants. Narrow sidewalks are crowded with fresh vegetable and fruit stands; restaurant windows show rows of barbecued ribs and roast duckling; the air is filled with sweet smells of dim sum and baked goods. Residents and tourists jam the busy streets, often wandering about restaurants and commercial shops (Figure 4.2.1, 4.2.2).

Jane Jacobs said that “one of the most important spaces in a town has been in its streets”. Not every community had a town square, forum or piazza, but every town had streets. As cities or communities take their identity from their streets, streets in Chinatown distinguish Chinatown from surrounding areas of the city and embody people’s lives and the history of Chinatown. If one street could be chosen to represent Chinatown as a whole, it would be Mott Street, the earliest commercial spine of the community (Figure 4.3). It is a narrow but busy thoroughfare that runs from Chatham Square in the south to Bleeker in the north. Like many streets that predated Manhattan’s grid, Mott Street meandered around natural features of the landscape rather than running through or over them. In order to avoid the now long

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since paved over Collect Pond, Mott Street bends to the northeast at Pell Street. It is also best known as Chinatown’s Main Street. Fei Lau, a landscape architect who worked for the Chinatown Design Lab said:

Chinese dragons traditionally symbolize auspicious and potent power and particularly control disease and sickness in Chinese culture. Chinese dragons play an important role in Chinese culture. Chinese often use the term “Descendants of the Dragon” as a sign of ethnic identity. Mott Street is like a Chinese dragon. Its head lies on Canal, at the pagoda-roofed headquarters of a secretive tong society. Its back curves down beyond Bayard, past restaurants and trinket salesmen. Its tail whips through Chatham Square and loops back around the Bowery to reach toward Mott again as two tiny lanes called Pell and Doyers.62

The dragon has grown far beyond these boundaries in the last decades, but the historic heart of Chinatown is still Mott Street between Canal Street and Chatham Square, the nerve center through which represents all the essential life of New York City’s Chinatown.

Mott Street existed in its current configuration by the mid-1700s. At that time, it passed just to the east of the Collect Pond.63 Known as Old Street or Winne Street for the section between Pell and Bleecker, Mott Street was renamed in the late 1700s to honor the prominent local family of the same name, likely a particular businessman, Joseph Mott.64


63 The Collect Pond was a body of fresh water near the southern tip of Manhattan, covering approximately 48 acres (194,000 m²) and running as deep as 60 feet. Also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collect_Pond_%28Manhattan%29

64 Tchen, John Kuo Wei 1999, Chapter 10.
In 1878, Woo Kee, a Chinese grocery store owner moved his store from Oliver near Cherry Street to above Chatham Square at 34 Mott Street. His store has generally been credited as the beginning of the old Chinatown. It is said that Kee started with an investment of forty dollars. With a partner, he soon bought the entire eight Mott Street building. In 1880, a *New York Sun* reporter described the role the store played in the life of the community: “Somewhere near a million different things were crammed into the front parlor and back room of a former residential building. Amid the Chinese medicines, foodstuff, teas, silks, jade bracelets, incense and Chinese clothing, Wo Kee presided over a space that would accommodate only a few customers a time. Some of the stuff exquisite and much more expensive than any American stores sale.”65 He and his partner’s stores provided a range of provisions that any laundry worker or house servant who did not live in the core area might need between visits. This lower Mott Street location and Chatham Square were relatively convenient.

Mott Street, Baxter Street and above Chatham Square also played a critical multipurpose role for the old Chinatown’s increasing number of Chinese immigrants. Merchants and their stores in this area were the hub of community activity. In addition to selling necessities, store owners accommodated those who needed to rent rooms, lent money, served as druggists and served other support functions. They were often literate in Chinese and English and handled the critical functions of letter writing for business and personal matters. Such stores would also

receive and send mail. The rapid increase of hand laundries and restaurants in old Chinatown made such stores indispensable lifelines to friends, family and community.

Mott Street may also have come to represent the beginning of Chinatown because it stood in the middle of a population and economy explosion. About five hundred Chinese were said to live in this area soon after the time of the opening of merchant Woo Kee store. The census of 1880 reported 748 Chinese living in Chinatown. This number had more than tripled by the beginning of 1900s. As described at Chapter 2, reasons that most likely accounted for this rapid increase in just twenty years include the increased anti-Chinese violence on the West Coast, and the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad, which left up to twenty thousand Chinese laborers out of work. Many of these relocating immigrants chose the East Coast, especially New York, as their destination.

Chinese immigrants were already living on Baxter Street as early as 1868. Boardinghouses, mutual aid associations, a shrine, and stores seem to have moved up into or first established themselves on Mott Street. By the late 1880s, old Chinatown had more than thirty Chinese grocery stores, all located in, or near, Mott Street. By the early 1900s, along Mott and Baxter Street, several pioneering organizations made up the foundation of contemporary New York’s Chinese community.

Today’s Chinatown has grown into the largest Chinatown in the US which encompasses a large swath of the Lower East Side, but Mott Street is still the most important commercial street and the historic heart of Chinatown for its residents and

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66 Tung, William L. 1974, P.
tourists. Lined with numerous gift shops, tea houses, salons and restaurants, Mott Streets as well as streets that cross it or run parallel to it, such as Canal Street, Hester Street and Elizabeth Street, are attractive to both Chinese residents and tourists (Map 3.1). It provides day-to-day necessities to Chinatown residents. For example, the section of Mott Street between roughly Canal and Broome Streets is famous for its seafood and famers markets proving fresh seafood and vegetables. Chinese herbal stores and health centers on Mott Street provide affordable health care to many residents, especially the newest arrivals who are unable to obtain access to Health Insurance. Each day tourists jam the busy street, wandering about restaurants, shops, and vendor stands to try to feel the sensation of an exotic culture. The distinctive features of Chinatown, such as the old tenement buildings and the typical American fire escapes on them, the Wo Hop restaurant located at 15 Mott Street, one of the most famous and long-lived restaurants in Chinatown and 32 Mott Street General Store, the longest continuously-operating store established in 1891, appeal to the curiosity of the tourists (Figure 4.4).

Street and shop signs

Chinatown’s street and shop signs also constitute a large part of the distinctive features of Chinatown’s architecture. They give clues as to the meaning of Chinatown landmarks. They are also the products of preservation of Chinese culture.

Language choice is one of the most important factors in understanding
signs in Chinatown. Many of the street and shop signs are bilingual. Because contemporary Chinatown is essentially situated in a largely English-speaking city, co-presence of English and Chinese in signs seemed to be a natural index of the geographic location of Chinatown. The bilingual signs “PARK ROW” and “WORTH ST” in Figure 3.5 provide a comparison with historic streets signs. It is said that the first streets signs, which were written in Chinese, appeared in core Chinatown as early as the 1900s. Mr. Wang, a resident who has lived in Chinatown more than forty years, recalled:

The streets signs were written in traditional Chinese character carved on a wooden piece and just hanged under the English ones in many streets [ in the core Chinatown]. Those signs were very popular and welcomed by old Chinese, because most of the old Chinese didn’t speak English and can’t understand even a single English word. Gradually, more and more Chinese streets signs appeared and finally both English and Chinese [were] printed on the signs.⁶⁷

As comparison, the photo (Figure 4.5) was taken at a corner of Park Row and Worth Street, and shows the English name of the street “PARK ROW” is placed in the center of the sign, with the Chinese word “柏路” at bottom. The Chinese word “柏路” literally means “a street named pine”. In Cantonese pronunciation, “柏路” sounds exactly the same as “PARK ROW”. All the Chinese streets names of Chinatown used the Chinese words that have the same or similar pronunciation.

As with the streets signs, most of the shop signs are written in both Chinese and English (Figure 4.6). However, the Lee’s Association located at Mott Street is an exceptional case (Figure 4.7). The name of the association “李氏總分所”

⁶⁷ Mr. Wang. Personal Interview. Dec.23 2009
(literally meaning “the Lee Association”) is written in traditional Chinese characters, which are placed vertically on the left side of the facade. In this case, the association sign excluded English speakers from its implied readers and positioned it as an association serving only the Chinese community.

In addition to the choice of languages, the making of a shop sign in Chinatown also involves the choice between simplified and traditional writing systems, or both. The simplified Chinese writing system is the predominant system used in mainland China as well as Singapore, while Hong Kong and Taiwan retain the use of traditional Chinese characters. The current simplified writing system is the culmination of a series of reforms in writing systems in mainland China since 1949.\(^\text{68}\) Given that many older Chinese immigrants left mainland China before the language reforms, and many Chinese immigrants in Manhattan Chinatown came from Hong Kong, traditional Chinese characters are still the dominant code in shop signs in New York’s Chinatown. In contrast, in Flushing Chinatown, shop signs written in simplified Chinese characters are as common as those in traditional characters (Figure 4.8). This difference suggests that the newer wave of Chinese immigrants from mainland China has not affected the Chinatown in Manhattan as much as in Flushing, NY.

In fact, more recent immigrants from China have chosen to live in Queens

\(^{68}\) Along with the promotion of a standard spoken language (Mandarin) and the Pinyin system, the simplification of Chinese characters was regarded by modern-minded scholars and the Chinese Communist Party as a critical step in modernizing the Chinese language to meet the challenges of the modern world as well as reducing the rate of illiteracy in the country (Language policy in the People’s Republic of China: Theory and practice since 1949.).
and Brooklyn in growing Chinese neighborhoods, where they can own bigger houses and send their children to better schools, rather than in Manhattan’s Chinatown. Notably, according to the 2000 Census, the Chinese population in Flushing, NY has increased by 60% since 1990. The absence of simplified Chinese shop signs of Manhattan Chinatown’s Chinese stores is an indicative of this changing socioeconomic status and lifestyle of Chinese immigrants.

Language and Chinese character choice in shop signs indexes the interactional order in Manhattan Chinatown. As indicated by the bilingual signage, it is more integrated into the surrounding neighborhoods of the city than Chinatowns were at the beginning of the past century. From the pervasive use of traditional Chinese shop signs, it is clear that this Chinatown has not absorbed the vitality of the more recent and younger immigrants from China. It is a community of the present as well as from the past.

**Buildings in Chinatown**

The built environment of Chinatown traditionally followed a generalized form: this community tended to be composed of standard American commercial and tenement buildings altered to suit a bachelor society, mainly multiple storied buildings containing residential spaces for single men as well as commercial and institutional spaces.69 Usually, residential rooms with communal kitchens and sinks along the corridors occupied the middle floors. The top floor was used to house one of the important associations or a shrine. Shops occupied the ground floors with merchants

69 Tchen, John Kuo Wei 1999, Chapter 10.
displaying their goods along the sidewalk. Storage, clubrooms and gambling establishments were squeezed into the basements.

During most of the 19th century, little effort was made to make these buildings look like buildings in China because the structures, overall shapes, settings and social situations were so different in New York City. With the inability to shift two major aspects of a building in the Chinese tradition, the frame and the foundation, the roof became the malleable aspect for renovation in pre-existing buildings. While the distinctive overhangs and brackets of Chinese roof design were originally aspects of a buildings frame, they are easily attached as superficial and non-structural elements. The combination of these details on distinctive original buildings would become a signature style for Chinatown. This style is due not only to the Chinese community that built them, but also the interaction with the texture and history of New York.

As Chinatown grew after WWII, with the lifting of the exclusion act and the continuing immigration of Chinese, more buildings were created in Chinatown. The combinational style began to characterize buildings and institutions in Chinatown. For example, the Chinatown McDonald’s was decorated with projecting pagoda roof with gold ornament and details, and the presence of a Chinese sign painted golden (Figure 4.9). Miniature pagodas appeared on the phone booths in the 1960's as a marketing scheme of the phone booth company. The pagoda facades on phone booths, fast food chains, and banks, with the distinctive gold and red roofs, have come to signify Chinatown to tourists over the past forty years. However, these attempts to
market a Chinatown aesthetic were not taken up by community and city planners because they saw the use of Chinese facade design as unauthentic. The pagoda phone booths came down in 1995 when the company responded to the Chinatown History Museum's opinion that “you can't just reduce an entire culture to a symbol”.  

Residential Buildings

The street took on a life and importance of its own, shaped and defined by the buildings that surrounded it. Chinatown’s commercial and residential streets developed when Chinese merchants set up commercial shops on Mott Street and Baxter Street, as well as above Chatham Square. Chinese immigrants crowded into the buildings surrounding these commercial shops because of the cheap rent, and because many people wanted to live close to their workplaces. Development patterns did not occur because of city planning processes, and rarely because of the intrinsic qualities of the properties of those streets themselves. The street’s meaning and use came primarily from its buildings.

Chinatown consists of residential and commercial buildings. The residential areas are typically tenement buildings. In the old day, hundreds of thousands Chinese settled in Chinatown. Having nowhere else to live, they crowded into rundown buildings known as tenements. Today, although there is electricity and plumbing, conditions in tenements continue to leave much to be desired. However, for many Chinese in Chinatown, especially the newest immigrants, living arrangements

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70 So long, it's been good pagoda Village Voice. September 5th, 1995.
were, and largely continue to be, tenement. One census conducted by The Chinatown Design Lab in 2000 pointed out, tenements, defined as “a pre-1929 building that houses three or more unrelated people who cook in their apartments and share a common hallway,” constitute more than 65 percent of Chinatown’s housing stock.\(^{71}\)

Tenement generally refers a multifamily dwelling with several apartment-like living quarters. Tenements were built as housing that “sought to maximize their owners' profits by squeezing the largest number of people onto a given site,” and were usually the standard row-house lot, historically prevalent in low-income neighborhoods, beginning particularly in the Lower East Side for the influx of immigrants in the late 1800s.\(^{72}\) In Chinatown, early Chinese immigrants usually lived and often worked in tenements. In these buildings, they rented small apartments that known as flats. They lived in squalid conditions. Usually eight to ten people shared a flat, cramped into tiny spaces with poor ventilation, lighting, and sanitation. All tenement buildings shared the same condition of too many people crowded into too little space. Here is a description of a typical Chinatown tenement of that time, 65 Mott Street, built in 1824, and the first building constructed specifically as a tenement:

This seven stories with basement building, was designed to house twenty four families. It has four flats per floor, two in the front and two in the back. Running through the center of the building is an unlit wooden staircase and narrow hallway. The largest room (about 12’ x 12’6”) is listed on plans as the living room or parlor,


it is the only room with direct light and ventilation. Behind it is the kitchen and bedroom (about 7’x9’). The entire flat, which often contained households of seven or more people, totaled about 325 square feet. No toilet, shower, or bath. All garbage is left outside the building (Figure 4.10).... Buildings such as this one later symbolized the evils of the tenement system with its crowded, and airless living spaces; and apartments that became fire and health hazards.  

Like other tenements on the Lower East Side, tenements in Chinatown were built side by side on narrow lots. They were usually made of brick, with stone trim around the windows and doors. Many of these tenements were erected after the Civil War, at a time when new construction was declining in other area of New York City. Much of the tenements’ facades were designed in an extremely simplified version of the Italianate style, which was the most common style of architecture for buildings erected in New York City during the late nineteenth century. Italianate style features, such as a general horizontal massing of façade elements and a use of arched openings, projecting stone lintels, and projecting cornice with foliate brackets, had been used on most buildings in Chinatown. Unlike the Italianate brownstone row houses erected for affluent households and the marble and cast-iron commercial building in SoHo and Tribeca, tenements in Chinatown (and in some other neighborhoods) were almost always faced with less expensive brick and stone trim was used frugally.

73 Source from Museum of the Chinese in the Americas.

74 Dolkart, Andrew. 2006.


76 Lubove, Roy. 1974. The progressives and the slums; tenement house reform in New
The earlier tenements were built on the twenty-five foot wide lots that were laid out as part of the city grid. Typically, each lot was just twenty-five feet wide and one hundred feet long. Tenements were dark and airless because little or no space existed between the jumble of buildings and there were few windows. Tenants scarcely felt the sun and fresh air. Typically there were 12 rooms on each floor, and only one room in each apartment had a window. The inner room and the second inner room had no windows and were the darkest rooms. Overlooking the fire escape in the back, the windows allow at least a little light into the room. Ernest Flagg, one of the great New York architects and tenement reformer wrote that "The greatest evil was the division of the blocks into lots of 25 x 100 feet. So true is this, that no other disaster can for a moment be compared with it. Fires, pestilence, and financial troubles are as nothing in comparison" This statement may be a bit excessive for today’s tenements in Chinatown, as much maintenance was done on the buildings and conditions are now much better. However, although electricity, plumbing, heat and air conditioning have been installed, conditions in tenements continue to leave much to be desired. People still live in enormously crowded situations. There is little space for a yard, front or back, and no parks, trees, or grass in Chinatown’s core. Tenement

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77 The Tenement As History And Housing
[http://www.thirteen.org/tenement/eagle.html](http://www.thirteen.org/tenement/eagle.html)

78 Ford, James, Katherine Morrow Ford, George N. Thompson, and I. N. Phelps Stokes. 1936. Introduction.
dwellers relaxed out on the sidewalks and streets that were already clogged with people. Inside the tenements and out on the streets, with people everywhere, the neighborhood was loud and crowded.

65 Mott Street is a seven-story brick building with a basement (Figure 4.11). The first floor originally consisted of one storefront, and is now a Chinese grocery store. Above the basement, the street façade was constructed of red brick with white mortar. The upper façade is four bays wide with horizontal bands of windows, each with a projecting limestone lintel and sill. Each window originally had a double-hung, two-over-two wood sash painted red. Some of the original windows were replaced by aluminum windows with white frame; others were re-painted blue or black. A fire escape was originally attached to the front elevation because of the requirement of The First Tenement House Act (1867). 79 Balconies and stairs on the fire escape were located outside of the two middle windows connected to each floor. Such balconies and ladders were once common on tenements erected in groups. Many can still be found on the Lower East Side and in other tenement neighborhoods of New York City.

13 Mott Street is another tenement building with a large basement. This building was furnished by the owner “in a manner which is no doubt agreeable to his

79 The First Tenement House Act (1867) required fire escapes and a window for every room. The laws mandated that there be a fire escape on a building, and that it have a strong, fireproof party wall. But very little else was mandated, and even those rules that were on the books were largely ignored by owners because there was no way of making sure that these rules were followed. Also see

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_State_Tenement_House_Act
peculiar customers, but which to an American mind certainly conveys no idea of
comfort.” Here is the description according to a *New York Times* reporter:

> Board partitions divided the space into six separate areas. The rear had a cooking
> and eating space with a long wooden table, greasy, and covered with innumerable
> dishes. The front had a general reception room with dilapidated sofa, broken-
> down cane bottom chairs and strangely colored and printed paper peculiar to the
> Chinese. The remaining four rooms were filled with ten wooden bedsteads over
> which a few coarse bed-clothes were thrown.  

Although these quarters were quite typical of poor, new immigrant living conditions
in lower Manhattan, reporters tended to equate them specifically to Chinatown.

> Today, although much of the past remains, Chinatown’s tenement
> buildings are rapidly changing. Old tenement buildings are being renovated and
> transformed into modern housing. Tenant numbers rise and fall and rise again in these
> building. Affluent younger people are now moving there from the suburbs. More and
> more new cafés, fancy restaurants and artist’s studios have recently opened in these
> buildings and have found the venue attractive and profitable.

**Religious Buildings**

Walking along Mott Street, the storefront temple and the old Catholic
church distinguish themselves as religious spaces. The Church of Grace for Fujianese,
the Church of Transfiguration, and the Sung Tak Buddhist Association are examples
of such religious spaces. They are unified by a style that is based on the reworking of
immigrant institutions into Chinese religious buildings, and are part of the multi-

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80 Tchen, John Kuo Wei 1999, Chapter 10.
layered experience of Chinatown. The religious buildings and facades in Chinatown also show creativity of religious material expression.

The Catholic Church of the Transfiguration on Mott Street was originally home to the Zion English Lutheran Church, and later an English parish. Bought by the Roman Catholics from the English parish, the church was run by a highly influential Cuban priest who framed the church as the “Church of Immigrants”.

The church served a mostly Italian community but also ministered to Chinese. In the wake of the massive 1960s immigration of Chinese to New York the church began to offer sermons in Chinese. Today the church is used mostly by Chinese and holds services in Mandarin and Cantonese. Chinese children from all different religions, including Buddhism, attend the school attached to the church. The church is in the design of its original English Lutheran parish with elegant tall windows and a green copper steeple.

Color in Chinatown is a prime mode of announcement, and in the case of the church, the lack of color is just as effective. This brown stone building set back from the street has a sense of heavy disengagement. The use of copper in the steeple, which has become green, is a sign of its prestige and age. These details refer to monumentality: that of the government and its style of building, which is easily referenced in the near by City Hall district. The English church contrasts and negates the style of Chinatown, creating a specific spectacle in the context of colorful Mott St. Although the facade of the original building is stable, the school attached to it instantly integrates the community (Figure 4.12). Through Chinese sign and its white cement, the style is

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reminiscent of the stonework of the church but softer and more similar to the brick tenements next door.

In contrast to the unchanged structure of the Church of Transfiguration, the True Light Lutheran Church is an example of the style that transforms American motif through the use of Chinese motif. The tall building is an urban space that has been adapted from a tenement to a Lutheran church (Figure 3.13). The roof of the building is softened and annulled by the superficial overhang motif from the Chinese tradition of Tailiang framework.\footnote{Steinhardt, Nancy Shatzman. 1984. The Tailiang framework is utilitarian response to the need to carry rainwater off eaves.} The tall brick front exterior is the frame for a large cross. Under the cross are the red doors of the church. Both the cross and the doors are of particular stylistic heritage, leading to a beautiful synthesis of traditions, context, and imagination.

As an exterior motif, the reveal is a development of modern architecture that solves the problem of ornamentation without using classical western images. Congregations building churches after the World War II often chose the modernist aesthetic and the use of reveal in those churches was very prominent, as symbols such as the cross were integrated through brickwork or concrete. The reveal in this Chinatown church shows some of the same instincts. It solves the problem of remodeling the exterior of a brick tenement into a religious space with minimal effort. Like the motif on the roof of the eaves, the red doors of the church are distinctive in their color and detail. The True Light Lutheran Church does not recede from the streetscape as historical churches like the Church of the Transfiguration do. Its brick,
red paint and green eaves do not look like many American churches did in other places, but all announce the church as obviously Chinese.

The Sung Tak Buddhist Temple, located at 13 Pike Street near East Broadway, was the home of B’nai Israel Kalwarie, designed by Alfred E. Badt in 1904. The building was in the style of many other New York synagogues built before it. Known as the Kalvarier Schul, its facade is dominated by tall slender Romanesque arched windows recalling the synagogues of Shaaray Tefila. Although it was a designated landmark and thus safe from demolition, the congregation became increasingly smaller until in the 1970’s the synagogue was abandoned, and the building became derelict in its disuse.

In 1994 the Sung Tak Buddhist Association bought the building and transformed it into one of Chinatown’s most prominent temples. The Romanesque facade is made imposing by a double stairway leading to a front balcony that then leads into the building (Figure 4.14). Creating three layers of the building’s form, a street level door and windows sit under the balcony, while the main level is separated from the top by a separate set of windows. The Buddhists have transformed the top level into residential quarters, and transformed the bottom level into a commercial area with a little bookshop. A large incense burner is set on the balcony, which looks over one of the busiest streets coming off of East Broadway. A large statue of the Buddhist goddess Guanyin is placed alongside the door on the balcony. People visit,

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83 Source from Museum of the Chinese in the Americas. Personal interview.

84 Source from Museum of the Chinese in the Americas. Personal interview.
shop and look at the well displayed rituals performed on the balcony.

Like the True Light Lutheran, the Sung Tak Buddhist Temple is notable for its combination styles, tradition, and usage. The easy melding of commercial, residential, and religious space transforms the synagogue that was once isolated from its neighboring buildings, more similar to the neighboring tenements as its basic structure of living space above retail space. The remodeled building also plays on the Romanesque grandeur of the original facade by making the Guanyin in the same stone material and placing her within the symmetry of the buildings existing ornament.

The Church of the Transformation, the True Light Lutheran Church, and the Sung Tak Buddhist Temple are connected by the architectural overlay manifested in their facades. While representing different religious aesthetics, different public visibility and different moments in Chinatown’s history, these buildings create a broader visual experience that shows the characteristic of Chinatown’s buildings: buildings in Chinatown have managed to integrate distinctively European immigrant structures into temples and churches, despite their original function.
Figure 4.1 Confucius Plaza, a forty-four stories (433 ft) tower block with 760 apartments, which was constructed in 1975 at a cost of $38,387,000.
Figure 4.2.1 the commercial shops, bakery, groceries, beauty salons, restaurants on Mott Street.

Figure 4.2.2 the vegetable stand on Mott Street.
Figure 4.3 Mott Street, Mott Street, the commercial spine of Chinatown.

Figure 4.3.2 Wo Hop restaurant, located at 15 Mott Street, is one of the most famous and longstanding restaurants in Chinatown.
Figure 4.5 This photograph was taken at a corner of Park Row and Worth Street, show the English name of the street “PARK ROW” is placed in the center of the sign, with the Chinese word “柏路” at bottom.

Figure 4.7 the Lee’s Association located at Mott Street.
Figure 4.8 the Chinatown’s McDonald’s was decorated with projecting pagoda roof with gold ornament and details, and has a Chinese sign painted golden.

Figure 4.9 the pagoda facades on Chinatown’s phone booths.
Figure 4.10 A tenement house was a four or five storey row of modules. The floor plan in a module:

The 25-by-90 strip was split down the middle and cut in two to make apartments for four families. The ones in front had two bedrooms, a kitchen and a living room -- twelve feet wide and forty feet long. The units in back were similar, with only one bedroom. The bigger ones were just over 400 square feet, the smaller, around 340. Four families shared two toilets and a sink in the hallway.

Source: http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2137.htm

City of New York Municipal Archives
Figure 4.12 the Catholic Church of the Transfiguration on Mott St.
Figure 4.13 the True Light Lutheran Church
The purpose of this thesis was to determine what factors influenced the establishment of Chinatown in New York City; to examine Chinatown’s intangible aspects, especially lives and experiences of Chinese immigrant and their relationship with Chinatown; and to look at the places that were significant in the Chinatown’s history and important to people in the past. By analyzing its history, people’s lives, and physical spaces, I argue that New York’s Chinatown is and continues to be a major component in the lives of Chinese and a significant part of Manhattan. Chinatown works to guide its members into mainstream America society without losing their ethnic identity and solidarity rather than setting barriers to immigrant incorporation.

New York’s Chinatown is and continues to be a major component in the lives of ethnic Chinese people in the United States. Why should Chinese people be concentrated in New York City or other large cities? It is generally presumed that immigration patterns are subject to enhanced job opportunities offered by large cities.85 However, in contemporary American cities, large-scale industrial transition

has occurred, and many jobs that used to fit the immigrants have declined significantly. Nevertheless, many immigrants still tend to cluster in big cities.

Moreover, New York City is still the most attractive destination for many Chinese. The oldest Chinatown in San Francisco has only about a quarter of the Chinese population in California, but more than eighty-five percent of New York State’s Chinese are concentrated in New York’s Chinatown. The population in New York City’s Chinatown has grown at an unprecedented rate in the last few decades. Why should people continue gathering in Chinatown, despite poor living and working conditions, low-wage job, and long working hours? They do so not only because of jobs offered by the larger labor market, but because Chinatown provides them with a familiar work environment, in which the immigrants are shielded from immigrant disadvantages and barriers: lack of English ability, marketable skills or knowledge background of the new country. Moreover, for most Chinese, Chinatown is a pre-existing community comprised of family networks, which not only create jobs that fit their needs and skills, but provide them with necessary help and support, not accessible in the larger society. The family and kinship connections affect both Chinese choices for destination and business operations such as marketing, financing and employment. The other reason why Chinese prefer working and living in Chinatown is they perceive certain benefits that compensate for the disadvantages.

First, New York’s Chinatown is unique in terms of its residential pattern although today’s Chinese are much more spread out than their predecessors, and more and more of New York City’s Chinese now live in Chinese neighborhoods in Queens
and Brooklyn. The rapid residential dispersion does not have to equate with the disappearance or significant decline of Chinatown. An important difference between residential changes within New York’s Chinatown and population changes in other ethnic enclaves resulting from large-scale migrations should be noted. The role of ethnic enclaves in general has long been recognized, since new immigrants tend to cluster in such enclaves upon arrival and rely on them to find housing and jobs. In the end, however, these enclaves are left behind by successful immigrants to decay into ethnic ghettos or to host a new wave of another country’s immigrants.86 In fact, some ethnic enclaves and some Chinatowns have experienced decline or even dissolution as the more successful co-ethnic members become assimilated and move out. Unlike other ethnic enclaves or Chinatowns accompanied by decline, New York’s Chinatown has actually grown and expanded. The reasons include the fact that New York’s Chinatown continues to receive newcomers despite it no longer serving as the only residential center for new Chinese immigrants, and it continues to attract new economic investment as well as development of Chinatown's tourism. This characteristic is also different from the old Chinatown districts in Canada, which have been much reduced in size because of post-war development during the 1960s and 1970s. Many businesses and residents in Canadian Chinatowns moved out and new ethnic communities- emerged outside central cities. In Toronto, for example, nearly two-thirds of old Chinatown on Elizabeth and Chestnut streets was razed to provide

space for Nathan Phillips Square and the New City Hall.\textsuperscript{87}

As one of the most notably functional Chinatowns in the United States, New York’s Chinatown remains a veritable living place, rather than a cultural relic or a temple to a bygone history. Although the decentralization of the Chinese population and the New York Chinatown indeed underwent a large migration to the suburbs during the last few decades, most new Chinese immigrants entering New York still make Chinatown their home. According to the U.S Census, in 1997, about 50,000 Chinese lived in the core area, up from 26,700 in 1970.\textsuperscript{88} In 2007, population estimates are in the range of 90,000 to 110,000 residents.\textsuperscript{89} Because of the continued growing population, the community is expanding beyond its traditional boundaries, bringing life to the decaying areas surrounding core Chinatown.

Moreover, New York’s Chinatown is not only a residential area, as most immigrant neighborhoods are, but a veritable enterprise zone. It is the place where Chinese immigrants and their descendants have founded a host of independent small businesses. Despite low-wage jobs, poor working conditions and long working hours, these ethnic businesses provide familiar work environment, in which the immigrants are shielded from immigrant disadvantages and barriers. These jobs may include exploitation but provide immigrants the chance of someday opening their own

\textsuperscript{87} Chan, 1990, Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{88} 1997 U.S. Census Population

\textsuperscript{89} This is not an official census count. It is difficult to get an exact count, as neighborhood participation in the U.S. Census is thought to be low due to language barriers, as well as large-scale illegal immigration.
business. These ethnic businesses give Chinatown a bustling ambiance, and present newcomers an alternative to labor in the mainstream labor market.

How do Chinatown and its social institutions create resources that guide immigrants into mainstream society? First, Chinatown is no longer an isolated bachelor society. It is an integral part of American society, having changed its original sojourning goals to settlement and integration. In the past, the racial exclusion and Chinese immigrant’s sojourning goal led the Chinese into a mode of adaptation that separated them from the main society. Unlike their predecessors, recent immigrant Chinese have given up the sojourning goal and are motivated to integrate into American society. Second, the well-developed enclave economy and a range of social institutions provide convenient and easy alternatives to the mainstream economy with goods and services. On the one hand, the demand for goods and services that are not easily accessible in other areas gives rise to a larger and more protected sector supplying good and services. On the other hand, the large pool of labor helps Chinatown to develop an export sector that can compete with the larger economy and generate income to reinvest it. Such opportunities provided by the community tie co-ethnic members from diverse backgrounds to Chinatown despite their spatial dispersion. These ties have broadened the ethnic interaction and thus increased ethnic cohesion and a sense of identity and community. Third, the presence of multiple avenues for involvement in Chinatown allows its members living in or outside it to reinforce common values and create new ways for mutual support. The working woman is an example. Immigrant Chinese women with little English ability and few
job skills often work in Chinatown, because the enclave enables them to fulfill their multiple roles as earners, wives and mothers. In Chinatown, jobs are easier to find, working hours are more flexible, and private child care within close walking distance of work is accessible and affordable. Convenient grocery shopping and takeout foods make housework easier. At work, women are able to socialize with other co-ethnic women, who share similar goals and concerns about family and children. Moreover, despite their lack of English skills, Chinatown’s residents and workers get valuable information from personal interactions such as Chinese workshops, culture centers, churches or temples, but also from the extensive Chinese-language media: radio, television and print. These ties, built on multiple involvements, serve as sources of support for connecting this community and its population to American society. Fourth, Chinatown and its institutions also have a lasting impact on the adaptation of immigrant children. The pressure on children to achieve in school comes not only from their families but also from the whole community. In Chinatown, children have access to a wide range of afterschool tutoring and academic programs offered at Chinese-language school and various ethnic institutions. Involvement in the community gives immigrant children support for school success.

This study of Chinatown grew out of love of Chinese history, curiosity about Chinatown’s historical and present structure and Chinese lives in this ethnic community that has existed for a century and a half. Being in Chinatown in a city far away from China opens up another dimension of place for me, what I take away from New York’s Chinatown when this thesis is done, is a strong sense of why Chinatown
still matters. After a century and a half of Chinese immigration, Chinatown is still the first step for new immigrants into the United States, and for American-born Chinese into their Chinese heritage. By writing about this place, I discover what Chinatown means to its people and also contemplate the question of what lie ahead, beyond its borders: whether the structural conditions that sustain the community will persist in the next century, and what effect they will have for the children and grandchildren of today’s Chinese immigrants.
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APPENDIX

EXEMPTION LETTER/
CERTIFICATION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS TRAINING

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

DATE: January 14, 2010

TO: Ying Xu
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [151617-1] Research on New York City’s Chinatown
IRB REFERENCE #: New Project
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: January 14, 2010

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Please remember to notify us if you make any substantial changes to the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Elizabeth Pelosi at 302-831-8619 or epelosi@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.
Certification of Human Subjects Training

The University of Delaware certifies that Ying Xu
(Name of researcher)

attended an institutional training session on the use of human subjects in research on

December 9, 2009. (Date)

The session included the following topics:

- The Belmont Report
- Federal regulations for using humans in research (45 CFR 46)
- The University's Federalwide Assurance
- Informed consent
- Institutional procedures
- Sources for additional information.

Elizabeth Duggins Peloso
Director of Compliance

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