

## **BEYOND CHINATOWN: DUAL IMMIGRATION AND THE CHINESE POPULATION OF METROPOLITAN NEW YORK CITY, 2000**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Chinese immigration to the United States is in fact a “dual immigration” in which poor migrants from Mainland China, in accordance with standard migration theory, come into the United States to improve their economic standing. Immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, more affluent and better educated, come to the United States for a complex of interrelated political and cultural reasons. The two streams of migration cross paths in Metropolitan New York City where, on the one hand, most poor immigrants from Mainland China settle in Chinatown or along the subway line across the East River in Brooklyn. The bulk of affluent immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong, along with better educated Mainlanders, settle among diverse ethnic groups throughout the metropolitan area. Chinese communities beyond Manhattan’s Chinatown include the Sunset Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, Flushing in Queens, and a loose collection of suburbs in northern New Jersey centered around the township of Edison. These populations have shown greater growth over the past decade than Chinatown itself. The Chinese immigrant community in Metropolitan New York City is restructuring in a more dispersed, diverse ethnic landscape.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since discriminatory quotas were removed from United States immigration law in 1965, Chinese have become one of the largest immigrant groups coming to the United States. The quotas were gradually removed in the late 1960s. Then, between 1971 and 2001, 1,272,300 Chinese<sup>1</sup> immigrated to the United States, the third largest total behind only Mexico and the Philippines (INS, 2001). The 2000 Census shows a Chinese population for the US of 2,432,585, the largest of any Asian ethnic group (US Census Bureau, 2001; 3). In this paper I argue two main points, interwoven with the fundamental issue of why people migrate. First, I argue that the Chinese influx is in fact a “dual” immigration with one stream of poor immigrants coming from emigrant districts of Mainland China, and one stream of affluent immigrants coming mostly from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Both groups speak and read Chinese, and most such immigrants consider themselves ethnically Chinese. Second, these two streams show distinct settlement patterns after arriving in the

United States, specifically in metropolitan New York City. Poor immigrants from the Mainland have clustered in long-standing, urban ethnic neighborhoods, while the more affluent are scattered throughout the metropolitan area. Throughout the paper, in order to understand the motivations for this complex migration, particularly of the affluent migrants, I will critically examine traditional migration theory. The goal is to suggest how to extend current notions of why and how people uproot themselves to resettle thousands of miles from home.

### **DUAL IMMIGRATION**

During the past three decades, the spatial distribution of Chinese population in the United States has become more complex. In the 1960s, the United States was emerging from over 80 years of tight government restrictions on Chinese immigration. At the time, some second generation Chinese-Americans were continuing small family businesses such as laundries or restaurants spread

throughout major cities, but with strong ties to distributors, family members, and other institutions in the local Chinatown. Other young Chinese-Americans were slowly being absorbed by the broader American population after attending college and moving away from their parents. Most could trace their ancestry to World War II or Cold War refugees, or even to laundrymen or merchants who had come prior to World War II.

The Immigration Act of 1965 made the United States accessible to potential immigrants from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, helping to create a much larger, multi-nodal Chinese population distribution. These Chinese are predominantly first generation immigrants or the children of post-1965 immigrants, and more and more of them are living outside traditional Chinatowns. The suburban Chinese population of cities such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York has grown tremendously. To understand this distribution we must focus not only on the geography of the United States, but on the culture of and the links to regions in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan from which they emigrated.

In order to highlight the socioeconomic distinctions between Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong, and those from Mainland China, I examined 1990 PUMS 5% sample data for the five states with the largest Chinese population: California, New York, Texas, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. The sample consists of over 56,000 records taken from a population of 1.7 million Chinese (Ruggles and Sobek, 1997). Measures of both income and education show an obvious distinction between the two flows of immigrants.

Households headed by a post-1970 immigrant from China had a median income of \$28,800 in 1990, while Hong Kong/Taiwan-immigrant-headed households had a median income of \$43,100, compared to the US median of \$30,056. This distinction is even more significant considering that households of Mainland immigrants typically have more adult members than Hong Kong/Taiwan households. Thus, it is not surprising that per capita income for adult Mainland immigrants was only \$13,236, compared to the \$22,585 of Hong Kong/Taiwan immigrants.

There is also a clear distinction between the two source regions in educational background. 43% of post-1970 adult immigrants from the Mainland in

the sample had not finished high school, while only 12% of adult immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong fell into that category. On the upper end of the spectrum, only 10% of adult Mainland immigrants had received advanced degrees in 1990, compared to 26% of those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This bimodal distribution reflects a region-wide trend in immigration. In the early 1990s, 27% of all male immigrants and 36% of all female immigrants to New York were classified as professional/executive, while 40% of immigrants had not graduated from high school (Foner, 2000; 15). These values reflect the fact that around the world, most middle-class individuals have neither the economic incentive of the poor, nor the international connections of the well-to-do to make emigration a viable choice.

Migration theory has evolved greatly in the century since Ravenstein's "Laws of Migration." However, standard explanations of international migration still focus on economic "push" factors from poorer countries and "pull" factors to countries with stronger economies (Wood, 1999; 156). Massey (1998;8) argued that the two "pillars" of traditional migration theory are: 1. rational individuals responding to economic imbalances, and 2. the attraction of economic opportunity helping establish a balance between regions of labor supply and demand (1998, 8). These concepts are important in explaining most large-scale international migrations, but they only capture a portion of Chinese immigration to the United States.

Chinese coming from Mainland China to work low-paying jobs in restaurants or garment factories in the United States fit the labor supply/demand model. They are young men and women with friends or relatives already in the United States who can make significantly more here as a bus boy or as a seamstress than they could make at home. Many come illegally, pooling money from family and friends to pay for the trip, a Chinese tradition (Wong, 1987). After arrival, they then typically remit money back to family in China. On the other hand, most of the immigration stream coming from Taiwan and Hong Kong over the past 30 years has consisted of well-educated, often affluent individuals and families who had already experienced economic success at home. Members of this group do not need to come to the United States for economic opportunity; they have opportunities at home but still choose to emigrate. In some cases, the families of business

leaders emigrate to the United States while the leader himself or herself continues to run the business in East Asia where profit margins are high and regulations are few. Such business people have been termed "spacemen" or "astronauts" because of their frequent trips by plane across the Pacific.

The short answer to why many affluent from Taiwan and Hong Kong have migrated is political uncertainty in the shadow of Mainland China's saber rattling and 1997 take over of Hong Kong (Skelton, 1994; 185). In fact, this threat is only part of the answer. The importance of links between Chinese East Asia and the United States should not be underestimated. In fact, I would argue that Taiwan, Hong Kong, and parts of Southeast China have developed a "culture of emigration" in which social status depends in large part on family connections to countries like the United States and Australia. Wang (1999) explains the role of changing values in professional emigration from China, from more collectivist in the past to more individualistic at present. That individualistic pursuit of a better quality of life developed much earlier in Taiwan and Hong Kong where capitalism has been entrenched for two generations. In addition, among many professional families now in Hong Kong and Taiwan, there is not a strong sense of attachment to place. They are transitional places perceived as small and crowded, places where earlier generations fled to escape Communism, but which are still within arm's reach of the fickle government in Beijing. The ancestral link to China has been broken, and new ties to family and friends in places like Australia and North America have been forged.

On the American side, despite a history of official Chinese exclusion until 1943, US visa policy now welcomes skilled immigrants and their families as a preferred category (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; 18). The United States also welcomes international students from East Asia, most of whom have affluent backgrounds. For the students who return home, an American graduate degree is coveted by employers in East Asia. For many more Chinese who do not qualify for US immigration coming out of East Asia, graduate school in the US can be a stepping stone to immigration. In turn, Asian immigrants are forming the backbone of American technical expertise, a milieu which native-born Americans have largely abandoned. This array of connections across the Pacific is part of the international flow, or

"transnational circuit" (Faist, 2000; 195-96) of popular culture, advertising, capital, goods, and people that has increased so dramatically over the past 35 years.

## REGIONAL SETTING

The Middle Atlantic States (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania) are second only to California as a destination for Chinese immigrants to the United States. The region has a combination of large cities, suburbs, small cities and college towns that have proven attractive to incoming Chinese. The Chinese population in the region has grown by an average of 6.3% per year since 1970 (1970-97,748; 1980-184,511; 1990-373,390; 2000-575,779) only a small portion of which is natural increase.

Chinese restaurant owners and workers live in almost every town and small city in the Middle Atlantic Region. In addition, major colleges attract significant numbers of Chinese graduate students, researchers, and faculty members. For instance, the Chinese population in State College, PA, the home of Penn State, totaled over 1,300 in 2000 (3.5% of population), while Ithaca, NY, home of Cornell University, recorded 1,659 (5.6% of population), far more than nearby cities of similar size without a major university, such as Williamsport, PA or Elmira, NY (both 0.1% Chinese).

Metropolitan New York City has been the overwhelming choice of Chinese immigrating to the Middle Atlantic. In fact, it has been the number one US destination for Chinese outside California since the 1800s. The spatial distribution of Chinese within metropolitan New York is worthy of close examination because it has changed dramatically since the easing of immigration laws in the 1960s and continues to evolve as new immigrants arrive and new generations of Chinese-Americans grow.

## METROPOLITAN NEW YORK CITY

The Chinese population of metropolitan New York City has never been confined to Chinatown as it was in some cities of the West.

Early Chinese immigrants were only a small group who were generally tolerated by New Yorkers. The need to retreat to the enclave for protection was not present here. Even at the height of Chinese exclusion prior to World War II, most Chinese actually lived outside the enclave in laundries throughout the city where they served the predominantly white population as “middleman minorities” (McGlenn, 1995; Bonacich, 1973). Over the last 35 years, Chinese immigrants and second-generation Chinese-Americans have dispersed throughout the metropolitan area, as far east as Long Island, and as far southwest as central New Jersey (Figure 1). They have spread into a diverse ethnic landscape,

particularly in Queens and Brooklyn where segregated enclaves like a traditional Chinatown are unlikely to form (Foner, 2000; 57-59). The Bronx and Staten Island have not yet become major destinations for Chinese immigrants.

**Manhattan**

New York City is home to the largest Chinatown in the United States with a counted population of over 56,000, not including a likely significant undercount (Figure 2). Since its beginnings in the late 1800s, New York's Chinatown

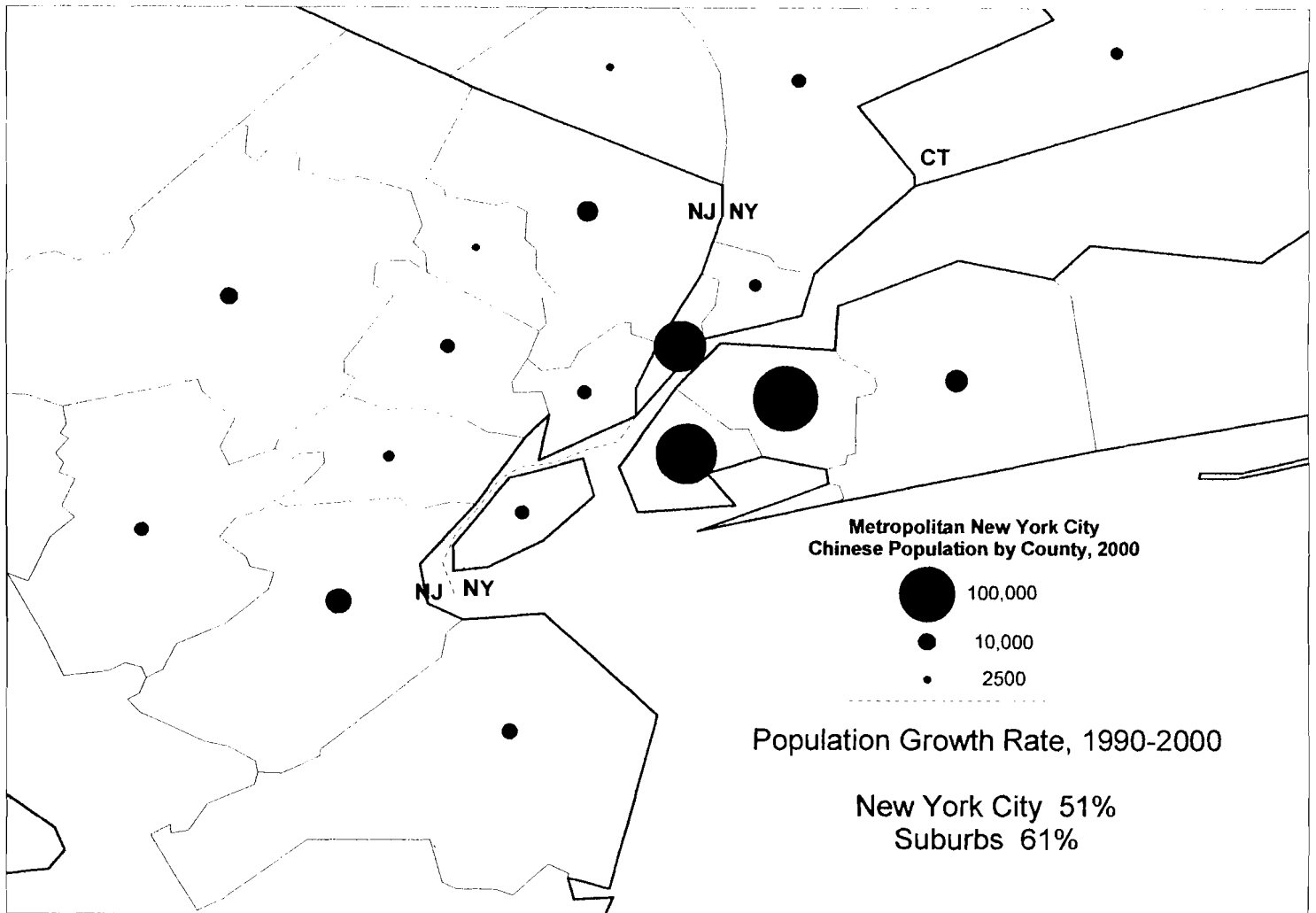


Figure 1. Chinese population by county, 2000.

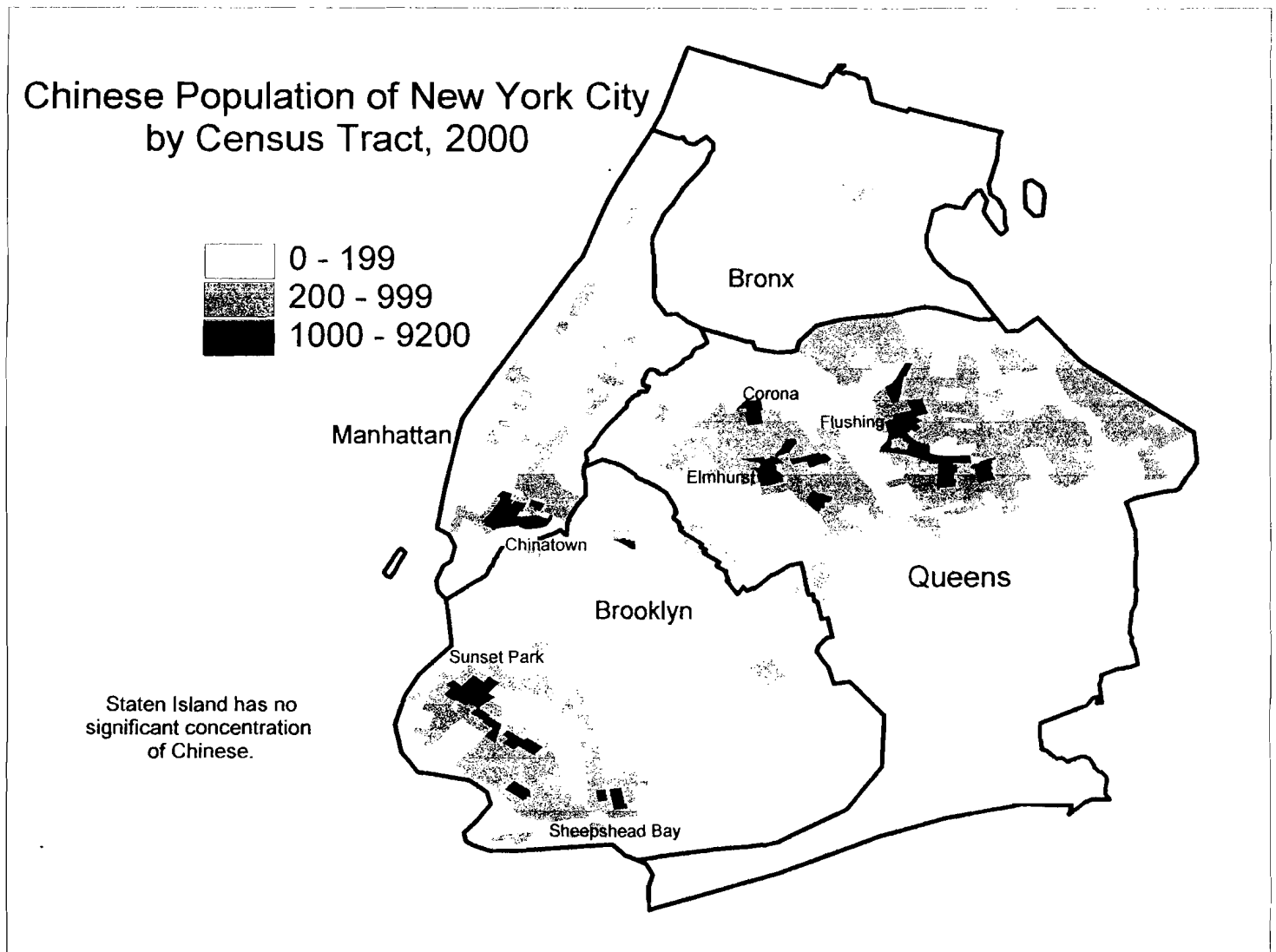


Figure 2. 2000 Chinese population of New York City.

has been a regional center, providing shops, social services, and restaurants for Chinese from throughout the Northeast. Now, Chinatown is still a regional center, and it still has many social services for poor and elderly Chinese, particularly the Chinese-American Planning Council, which serves over 5,000 Chinese every day (Zhou, 1998; 543).

Chinatown has also become a center for low-wage manufacturing, particularly the garment industry, most of which is based on Chinese capital. Compared with Los Angeles, where a greater proportion of affluent immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong has settled, New York is typically seen

as a destination for poor, less skilled workers (Zhou, 1998; 535). New York's Chinatown is the most popular US destination for illegal Chinese immigrants, those who have paid thousands of dollars to "snakeheads" for the chance at economic opportunities in the United States (Chin, 1999; 4). Most of the low-wage and illegal Chinese immigrants are from Fujian Province, a province with a history of immigration just across the Taiwan Strait from Taiwan. They have settled mostly to the east of the Bowery in former Italian and Jewish neighborhoods (Chin, 1999; 20, 111). So, there is now the long-established Cantonese district west of the Bowery,

and a new, predominantly Fujianese district to the east.

A comparison with past residential data shows the growth of Chinatown slowing during the past decade (Lin, 1998; 108). 2000 data show only a 10% rise in counted Chinese population in and around Chinatown since 1990. Data also show no spread of Chinese beyond the census tracts considered greater Chinatown in 1990. A combination of rent control, gentrification, and a booming economy has made affordable housing in areas immediately surrounding Chinatown difficult to find. This demand has spurred Chinese immigrants to look farther afield for affordable residential and industrial rents.

### **Brooklyn**

The M, D, N, and R trains run near Manhattan's Chinatown, over the East River into Brooklyn where new concentrations of Chinese immigrants have sprung up (Lin, 1998; 109). Although not contiguous with Chinatown, subway-accessible neighborhoods like Sunset Park are economically more logical destinations than areas just north of Chinatown where rents increase rapidly. Fifteen years ago, the Sunset Park/Borough Park area was simply a commuter zone for those working in Chinatown, but as it has grown, this part of Brooklyn has attracted a significant amount of commercial and industrial investment. In particular, the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue section of Sunset Park has become a center of Chinese retail and garment factory activity.

As more new immigrants with links to Chinatown arrived from Mainland China but were unable to find housing, they too took the subway out to Brooklyn. Thus, this residential concentration spread southeast from Sunset Park toward Bensonhurst, with more affluent newcomers settling even farther southeast in Sheepshead Bay. The 2000 Chinese population of Brooklyn tops 120,000, far surpassing the counted total of Manhattan, the borough from which this community originally grew. Now this less crowded, less expensive part of southwest Brooklyn has become an immigration destination in its own right.

### **Queens**

The Chinese population of Queens is the largest of the five boroughs, with 139,820 counted in the 2000 census. The bulk of this population is concentrated near Northern Boulevard or Queens Boulevard through Elmhurst, Corona, and especially Flushing. Unlike the Sunset Park neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Flushing is not an extension of Chinatown. It is a center for immigrants from Taiwan who are more affluent than immigrants from the Mainland who settle in Chinatown. Flushing is also not "Taiwantown," a segregated enclave of Chinese isolated from other ethnic groups. It is more like the "Ethnoburbs" found in the San Gabriel Valley east of Los Angeles where immigrants from China, Taiwan, Korea, India, The Philippines, Mexico, and the Caribbean all live and work in the same neighborhoods (Li, 1999; 480).

The Flushing area is particularly attractive to immigrants from Taiwan who may have the wealth to live in the suburbs but who want to retain closer ties to Chinese/Taiwanese culture. Obviously, business people whose livelihood depends on close US-Taiwan-China ties and on close ties to other business people would find Flushing an appropriate place to live. All of the necessary international business services are there, from banking to shipping. In another case, extended families with older members who do not speak English may be drawn to Flushing where a day's errands could be done completely in Chinese or Taiwanese. ESL classes are available here, as well.

The more affluent arm of this community stretches to the east beyond the border of Queens into Nassau County. Further growth is likely to be in this direction as housing in neighborhoods closer to Manhattan has a nearly 100% occupancy rate. An important factor in this continued growth is the political situation in Taiwan. Fear of a political breakdown there would spur a rush of capital into the Flushing/Nassau real estate market, generating further growth out onto Long Island.

### **Northern New Jersey**

The greatest relative growth of Chinese population in Metropolitan New York in the last two decades has been in the suburbs. Home to less than 6,000 Chinese in 1970, Northern New Jersey reached

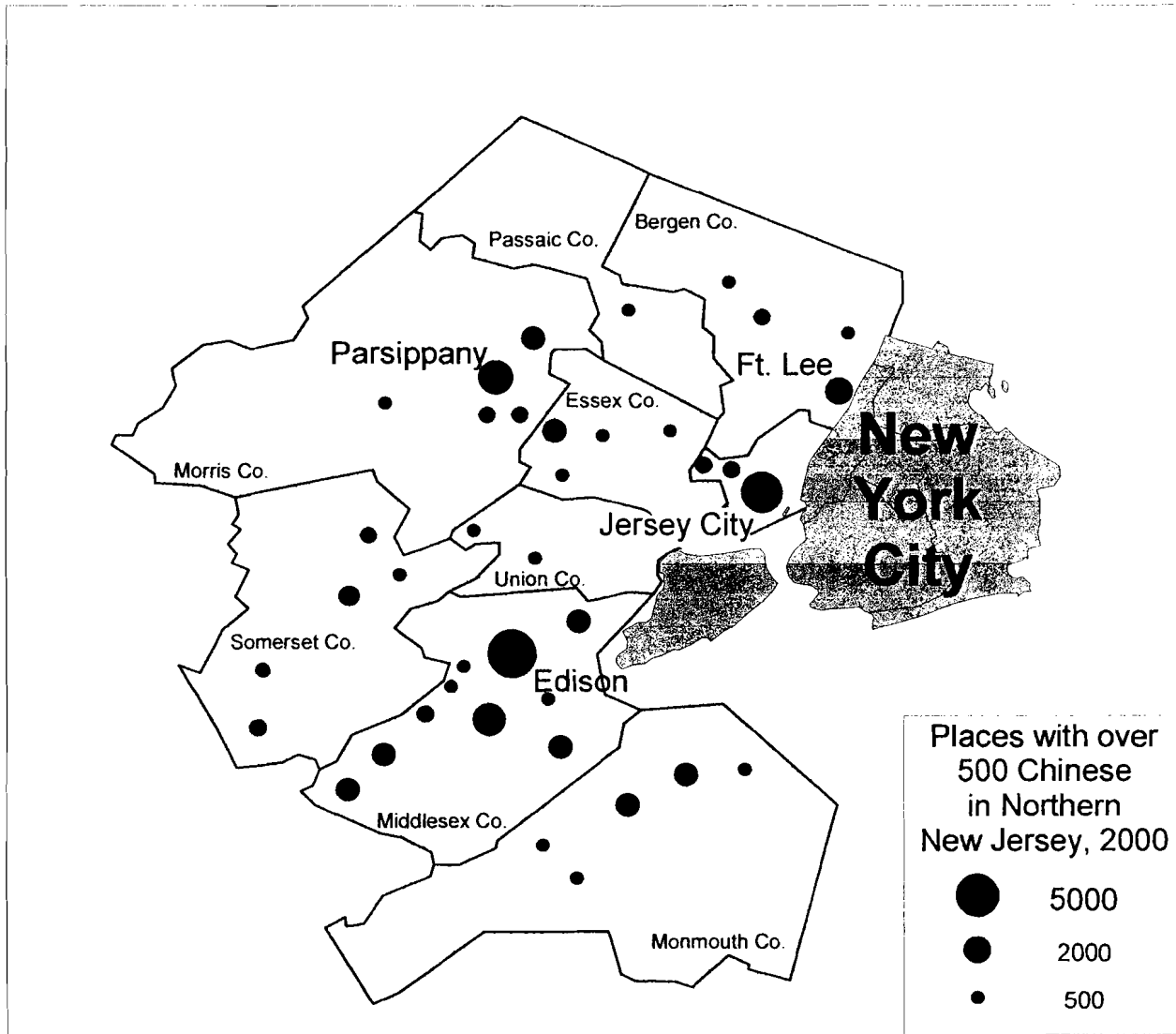


Figure 3. Chinese in Northern New Jersey.

over 83,000 in 2000. The homes of these people are thinly scattered throughout subdivisions over nine counties and almost 2,300 square miles (Figure 3). The map shows this population to be truly suburban; neither Newark nor Paterson have 500 Chinese, while many smaller townships have well over 500. The only city with a large Chinese population is Jersey City. Traditional assimilation theory would suggest this group to be largely second- or third-generation Chinese who have left the ethnic neighborhood behind as many Irish, Italians and Poles did generations before. However, this is not the case. Of 2,127 adults in my 1990 PUMS sample from

Northern New Jersey (Ruggles and Sobek, 1997), only 418 (20%) were born in the United States. 731 (34%) were born in China, and 645 (30%) were born in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Such data highlight the dual nature of Chinese immigration and the inadequacy of assimilation theory to explain its spatial distribution. The data indicate that a significant number of first-generation Chinese immigrants are living in American suburbs. These immigrants would be more acculturated to the United States than their counterparts in Flushing, more comfortable with English, perhaps having attended graduate school in the United States; over 1/3 of

adults in my 1990 sample had masters degrees, PhD, or professional degrees. After school, then they settled down to a life remarkably similar to what they would have seen in American movies when they were growing up. Their personal ties to Asia would usually remain strong, but they are more likely to be working for an American pharmaceutical company than in a restaurant or trading company.

Zelinsky and Lee (1998) suggest "heterolocalism" as a term to describe ethnic groups (first-generation immigrants in particular) who live in a dispersed residential pattern but who use automobiles, communications technology, and community centers to maintain their ethnic "glue." Wood (1997) documented a similar dispersed suburban pattern for Vietnamese in suburban Washington, DC. The key institutions in the Northern New Jersey Chinese community are grocery stores and authentic restaurants. Kaplan (1998: 494) noted that large supermarkets are typically the basis of an agglomeration economy for Chinese in suburbs. Kamlan, the largest Asian grocery store on the east coast, is located in Edison Township, the most obvious ethnoburb in northern New Jersey where over 28,000 Asians live, 6,000 of whom are Chinese. Kamlan is the centerpiece of a series of strip malls along US Routes 1 and 9 which feature Chinese, Korean and Indian restaurants and shops. Smaller nodes of Chinese business are scattered southeast of Edison in East Brunswick, and north and west of Edison in East Hanover and Parsippany. Fort Lee has the largest concentration of Asian retail business in Northern New Jersey, but the Chinese presence there is modest compared to the Korean and Japanese businesses. Chinese businesses in the more traditional neighborhoods of Chinatown and Flushing have responded quickly to the affluent suburban market by opening branches in Edison or surrounding towns. Chinese travel agents, florists, restaurants, and lawyers have discovered the suburbs as places to do business, not simply places to live.

## CONCLUSION

Chinese immigration to Metropolitan New York City has developed far beyond the isolated enclave of Chinatown. Immigrants from a wide

range of sources in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have settled in a wide range of destinations throughout the largest metropolitan area in the United States. The new neighborhoods into which Chinese immigrants and Chinese-Americans are moving are ethnically diverse but usually economically uniform. The Sunset Park/Borough Park community in Brooklyn is closely linked to Chinatown and began as a "spill over" from crowded, high-priced Manhattan. Flushing, Queens and the suburbs of northern New Jersey, however, are quite independent of Chinatown. They are part of the new face of Chinese communities in the United States, affluent and interspersed with populations of other Asians, immigrants from other parts of the world, and even Euro-Americans. In northern New Jersey, in particular, Chinese immigrants live in apartment complexes and subdivisions among predominantly White populations, sustaining their links to China, Hong Kong and China through visits to regional Chinese supermarkets and authentic restaurants serving primarily Asian clientele.

Looking ahead, immigration from China has remained strong, but the numbers of people immigrating from Taiwan and Hong Kong have fallen slightly over the past three years. This situation could change quickly, though, because many affluent Hong Kong and Taiwan Chinese have family links they can take advantage of in case of perceived threats from the Chinese government. Meanwhile, a large second generation of Chinese-Americans are becoming young adults, participating in American society with fewer ties to Asia than their parents, populating Metropolitan New York alongside affluent newcomers who continue to come to the United States.

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*Dual Immigration and the Chinese Population of Metropolitan New York City, 2000*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I consider Chinese to mean those who immigrated from China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, and anyone who classified themselves as "Chinese" or "Taiwanese" on the census. Virtually all speak and read Chinese and are of Chinese ancestry.