

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: CHINATOWN;
Latest Wave of Immigrants Is Splitting Chinatown

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Body

For more than 100 years, **Chinatown** has absorbed the different **waves** of Chinese **immigrants**, from the Taishanese earlier this century to the ethnic Chinese from Vietnam in the 1980's. But now, there are growing strains between the established Cantonese community and the **latest** group of **immigrants**, the Fujianese, who have poured in from mainland China in the last four years.

Many businessmen and longtime residents are expressing resentment of the new Fujianese, saying they are overwhelming **Chinatown**, causing an increase in crime and a major unemployment problem. Non-Fujianese workers complain that the sheer number of these **immigrants**, many of whom have been smuggled in, creates unfair competition by flooding the market and driving down wages. There is also concern over image.

"It's an embarrassment to us," said a Cantonese businessman, who insisted on anonymity. "When people come to **Chinatown** and see this mess, they think all Chinese are bad. Why should everyone take the blame for one group?"

But the Fujianese say the problems created by their arrival are being exaggerated, pointing out that earlier **waves** of **immigrants** faced the same predicament. They also say the established **immigrants** are overly concerned about their image being tarnished because of the publicity surrounding the grounding last year of the Golden Venture, a ship carrying 300 illegal Fujianese **immigrants**, and the prosecution of the Fuk Ching, a notorious Fujianese gang.

"Every **immigrant** group faces hardships when they first arrive, even the Pilgrims," said Steven Wong, a journalist of Fujianese descent. "Why make the Fujianese the scapegoat? These people are the backbone of the economy. That's why prices in **Chinatown** are so cheap. They have to work under harsh conditions because they don't speak English and the mainstream world would not give them jobs."

The tension stems partly from political divisions. The more established Cantonese **immigrants**, many of whom are loyal to the Taiwanese Government, are suspicious that the **immigrants** from Fujian, a province on the mainland, are sympathetic to the Communist Government.

Whatever the reason for the strain, people familiar with **Chinatown** say, it may be adding to the difficulties of assimilation. Because of their numbers, their inability to speak the Cantonese dialect and the illegal status that often makes employment difficult, many Fujianese have been left desperately poor and huddled in crowded apartments in

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the perimeter of **Chinatown**, between Eldridge and Jefferson Streets and as far north as Houston Street. The Fujianese claim that the Cantonese businessmen won't give them jobs, even as they use the existence of the illegal **immigrants** to drive down wages. Some have resorted to extortion and robberies.

The tension has kept the institutions of **Chinatown** -- the family, the village and business associations -- from reaching out beyond their own groups to help the new **immigrants**, something that would be unusual but would be especially helpful under current conditions. Adding to the problem is that the Fujianese **immigrants** are often too ashamed to seek help. Both groups say the American Government has been inconsistent, encouraging the Fujianese to come, through President Bush's 1990 Presidential order, then failing to provide any help.

Many Cantonese complain that established Fujianese, who began entering the country in small numbers in the 1960's, are not helping out their own. In interviews, three wealthy Fujianese said that the sheer number of **immigrants** made it impossible to make a difference. But one, a prominent Fujianese businessman, said people also feared that by helping the new **wave** they would antagonize their Cantonese business associates as well as Fujianese businessmen who have been harassed by some new **immigrants**.

"I want to show my support, but that would alienate my friends who have been harassed by them," he said. JANE H. LII

Graphic

Photo: **Immigrants** lining up outside an employment agency in **Chinatown**, where long-time residents say the newcomers are overwhelming the **neighborhood**. (Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times)

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