

## Introduction

### *A Personal Reflection on the Study of Chinatown and Beyond*

This book draws on and develops my previously published work on the multifaceted Chinese America of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. My research on Chinese immigration and the Chinese American community began in the mid-1980s, when I was a graduate student at the University at Albany (formerly the State University of New York at Albany). Chinatown became my subject of study because of the circumstances of my own migration. I was intrigued by the Chinatown scene when I first arrived in New York City from China in the fall of 1984. Prior to that date I had never set foot in a foreign land. I knew nobody in the city except for a family friend who had immigrated just a year earlier and whose family put me up for a couple of days before I headed to Albany. My friend's family took me to *dim sum* in Chinatown the day after my arrival and showed me around Lower Manhattan. Juxtaposed against New York's magnificent skyline, the century-old ethnic colony immediately aroused my curiosity.

In my blurred childhood memory of the bedtime stories my grandmother told again and again, Chinatown was a faraway place—exotic, mysterious, and surreal. Until that day, they had been abstract tales of *gum san hak* (“guests of the Gold Mountain” in Cantonese). What shocked me outright was the seemingly irreconcilable paradox of Asian obsolete traditionalism and European avant-garde modernism: a movie set propped up against Lower Manhattan's skyscrapers. “How?” and “why?” I asked myself—questions that turned out to be relevant for sociological inquiry, much of it inspired by Herbert Gans's *Urban Villagers* and Gerald Suttle's *The Social Order of the Slum*.<sup>1</sup> When I considered a topic for my doctoral dissertation, Chinatown

was a natural choice, even though I knew very little about Chinese Americans' decades of legal exclusion, social marginalization, and political struggle, and even though no one in the Sociology Department was then working on Asian American or Chinese American issues.

I chose Chinatown as my subject of sociological inquiry for practical reasons as well. I had originally intended to return to China as soon as possible after completing my graduate studies in the United States, both because of financial constraints and because of the urgent need to reunite with my family back in China.<sup>2</sup> Studying Chinatown and its residents, I felt, could help develop the field of overseas Chinese studies, which was fairly dormant in the Chinese academy in the early 1980s. I was a self-supporting foreign student with little knowledge of or access to private or public funding sources, but my ample family and kin connections to New York's Chinatown would provide instrumental support. My fluency in Cantonese and in a number of dialects from migrant-sending villages was another unique resource that proved to be crucial for my fieldwork. For strategic reasons—to circumvent my financial constraints and attain my graduate career goal—I conducted my Chinatown research on two fronts: quantitative data analysis based on the U.S. decennial censuses and fieldwork in Chinatown. Both efforts, I believed, were suited to my own resources and ability.<sup>3</sup>

### Original Study: New York City's Chinatown

My initial study of New York City's Chinatown became the foundation for much of my research on contemporary Chinese America. It addressed a single research question: how has a longstanding ethnic community assisted immigrants in their struggle to make it in America without losing their sense of identity? But I cast my analytic net more broadly to include a historical overview of New York's Chinatown, which evolved from a male-dominant bachelor society to a full-fledged family community; an analysis of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Chinese immigrants, especially those who arrived after 1965; a detailed account of the enclave economy; a gendered analysis of the ethnic labor force, exploring the distinctive economic contributions of women and men; and an analysis of the gradual process of geographic decentralization that has become characteristic of the Chinese immigrant community since 1980.

My approach to Chinatown stood in contrast to the conventional view of immigrants as passive objects to be assimilated and of immigrant communities as isolated enclaves inhibiting assimilation. With a particular emphasis on the economic adjustment of post-1965 Chinese immigrants, I drew on, and empirically tested, the enclave economy theory—an emerging sociological theory developed by Alejandro Portes and his associates.<sup>4</sup> The gist of this theory asserts that ethnic enclaves can serve as mobility “platforms” or “engines” rather than “traps.” In its original conceptualization, the enclave economy has both structural and cultural components. As a distinct type of the ethnic economy, it consists of a wide range of diverse economic activities that exceed the limits of small-scale

trade and commerce and traditional mom-and-pop operations, and also contains ethnic institutions that mediate economic action. To some degree, the enclave economy resembles key characteristics of *both* the primary and the secondary labor markets of the mainstream economy.<sup>5</sup>

The enclave economy theory has an integral cultural component as well. From this perspective, economic activities are governed by bounded solidarity and enforceable trust—mechanisms of support and control necessary for economic life in the community and for reinforcement of norms and values and sanctioning of socially disapproved behavior.<sup>6</sup> Relationships between coethnic owners and workers, as well as customers, generally transcend a contractual monetary bond and are based on a commonly accepted norm of reciprocity.<sup>7</sup>

In reaffirming the ethnic community as a platform for social mobility rather than as a refuge for survival, I elaborated on a subject-centered ethnocultural approach to empirically test not only the economic dimension of the ethnic enclave, which was much studied and debated, but also the sociocultural dimension.<sup>8</sup> In my analysis, Chinatown is not an impoverished urban ghetto in the traditional sense of the word, despite the fact that its residents are predominantly poor, less skilled, and recent immigrants with little English-language proficiency. Instead, it possesses great potential, offering and generating tangible advantages and opportunities to immigrants that they would otherwise lack. In my view, ethnicity and ethnic attachments facilitate rather than impede social integration and mobility.

Three interrelated themes underlay my Chinatown study, which made a distinct contribution to the literature of the sociology of international migration. The first theme, drawn from the theoretical idea of the ethnic enclave, addressed a controversy over the character of ethnic labor markets. I conceptualized three ways to operationalize the enclave, using census data to measure the earnings returns on human capital in the enclave economy as opposed to the larger economy. I found that regardless of how the enclave was defined—by place of residence, place of work, or industrial concentration—male immigrant workers in New York's Chinatown were able to take advantage of human capital resources to increase their earnings.<sup>9</sup> However, similarly situated female immigrant workers, who made up almost half of the enclave labor force, were not able to reap similar advantages. This observation led to my second theme—gender and the ethnic enclave.<sup>10</sup>

Women had been absent or pushed to the sideline in the literature on the ethnic enclave. Bringing women to the center of my analysis, I took the position that immigrant women, despite many structural and cultural disadvantages, were agents of change capable of taking control over their destinies—not victims passively awaiting salvation. Using a subject-centered approach, I considered the labor force participation of immigrant women in Chinatown as an inseparable part of a family strategy for upward social mobility under extremely difficult circumstances. Employment in low-wage jobs was undesirable but generally accepted by these women as a means to raise their families out of poverty.<sup>11</sup>

For the third theme, residential resegregation, I questioned the best-developed model of residential mobility among immigrants, which predicted gradual and progressive assimilation. This theme was new in the ethnic enclave literature. I demonstrated that the formation of new middle-class ethnic enclaves and out-movement from Chinatown were not merely the result of increased economic status or interethnic contacts, as predicted by classical assimilation theories. Rather, residential mobility, and particularly the trend of resegregation, were jointly affected by the unique characteristics of contemporary Chinese immigration, the development of the enclave economy, the new immigrants' kinship ties to the ethnic community, and the ethnic segmentation of the housing market.<sup>12</sup>

I finished my doctoral dissertation in the spring of 1989, later publishing it as *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Temple University Press, 1992).<sup>13</sup> *Chinatown* stimulated heated debate on the role of the ethnic enclave and the nature of ethnicity.<sup>14</sup> In 1995 a Chinese translation of the book was published in China.<sup>15</sup> But I myself was left with more questions than answers upon the completion of my dissertation, partly because of my limited disciplinary training and partly because of my "sojourning" orientation as a foreign student. If my *Chinatown* research was an accidental choice, my continued study of contemporary Chinese America is rooted in a greater sense of purpose and commitment. I have established myself in the subfields of international migration, race/ethnicity, and community studies in sociology. Since the transformation of contemporary Chinese America is one of my key research interests, I have gained immense inspiration and theoretical insights from the successful activism of Asian American movements of the 1960s and beyond and the groundbreaking work of both pioneers and young scholars in the fields of Chinese American and Asian American histories, Chinese American and Asian American historiographies, and Chinese American and Asian American studies.<sup>16</sup> I have also benefited tremendously from both constructive and judgmental critiques of *Chinatown* in particular and the enclave economy theory in general. Informed by my conclusions about ethnicity and the ethnic community in *Chinatown* and by the abundance of multidisciplinary research on Asian America, my work on contemporary Chinese America has expanded beyond the theoretical constraints of the classical assimilation perspective. I have developed a community perspective that takes into account the interaction of individual characteristics, group-specific cultural values and practices, and structural factors in explaining intergroup variations in immigrant mobility outcomes.

### Segmented Assimilation as an Alternative Way of Seeing and Thinking

My original Chinatown study may be interpreted as a deliberate challenge to the conventional wisdom about assimilation that has dominated sociological thinking since the 1920s. Central to the classical assimilation perspective are three assumptions: (1) that there is a natural process by which diverse ethnic groups come to

share a common culture and gain equal access to the opportunity structure of the host society; (2) that this process entails the gradual abandonment of old-world cultural and behavioral patterns in favor of new ones; and (3) that this process, once set in motion, moves inevitably and irreversibly toward assimilation.

Classical assimilation scholars generally operate on the premise that the host society consists of a single mainstream dominated by a majority group (in the case of the United States, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or WASPs). Migration leads to the situation of the “marginal man”: a member of an ethnic minority group pulled in the direction of the host culture but drawn back by his or her culture of origin.<sup>17</sup> As time goes by, diverse ethnic groups from underprivileged backgrounds will go through this painful bipolar process through a natural race relations cycle of contact, competition, and accommodation, as group members abandon their old way of life to “melt” into the host society’s mainstream.<sup>18</sup> Classical assimilation scholars also acknowledge the potency of such institutional factors as family socioeconomic status (SES), phenotypical ranking, and racial/ethnic subsystems in determining the rate of assimilation. The assimilation of some ethnic minorities is especially problematic because their subordination is often based on ascribed characteristics such as skin color, language of origin, and religion. Readily identifiable minority groups, especially blacks, are likely to be confined within racial-caste boundaries, leading to intergroup differences in the pace of assimilation.<sup>19</sup>

From the classical perspective, distinctive ethnic traits such as old-world cultures, native languages, and ethnic enclaves, as well as ethnicity in the abstract, are disadvantages that hinder assimilation, but their negative effects diminish with each successive generation; native-born generations adopt English as their primary means of communication and become more and more similar to the mainstream American population in life skills, manner, and outlook. Although complete acculturation to the dominant American way of life may not ensure all ethnic groups’ full social participation in the host society, immigrants are expected first to free themselves from their old cultures in order to begin rising up from marginal positions. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, America seemed to have absorbed the great waves of immigrants who arrived, primarily, from Europe.<sup>20</sup> Even Chinese Americans, who had been objects of legal exclusion, found themselves making significant inroads into mainstream America, albeit with limited social acceptance.<sup>21</sup>

Since the 1970s, the non-European immigrant groups have not converged into the middle-class mainstream in the ways predicted by assimilation theories. The first anomaly concerns persistent ethnic differences in socioeconomic outcomes across generations.<sup>22</sup> Another anomaly is what Herbert Gans describes as the “second generation decline.”<sup>23</sup> Gans observed that immigrant children from less fortunate socioeconomic backgrounds struggled more than other middle-class children in school, and that a significant number of the children of poor, especially dark-skinned, immigrants risked being trapped in permanent poverty in an era of stagnant economic growth and too much of the kind of Americanization

that glorifies pleasure and consumerism.<sup>24</sup> Still another anomaly is peculiarly counterintuitive. In America's fastest-growing knowledge-intensive industries, foreign-born engineers and other highly skilled professionals disproportionately occupy key technical or even ownership positions and bypass the conventional enclave-to-suburbia route. In immigrant enclaves, ethnic economies develop on the strength of ethnic human capital and transnational monetary capital, opening up new avenues to upward social mobility without the painful and lengthy process of climbing from the enclave into the mainstream economy.<sup>25</sup> In urban public schools, neither valedictorians nor delinquents are atypical among immigrant children, regardless of the timing of their arrival and their racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. These anomalies indicate a significant gap between theory and reality.

My work is associated with the idea of "segmented assimilation," a term coined by Alejandro Portes and introduced as a middle-range theory in our co-authored article, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants among Post-1965 Immigrant Youth" (published in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* in 1993). The segmented assimilation theory responds to these anomalies, offering an alternative theoretical perspective on the process by which America's new second generation—the children of contemporary immigrants—are incorporated into the host society's system of stratification and the divergent outcomes of this process. Unlike classical assimilation theories, which posit an irreversible and unidirectional path leading *all* immigrants to their eventual incorporation into an undifferentiated, unified, and white middle-class mainstream, the segmented assimilation theory conceives of mainstream society as shaped by systems of class and racial stratification. The theory emphasizes the interaction between race and class and between ethnic communities and larger social structures that intentionally or unintentionally exclude nonwhites. It attempts to delineate the multiple patterns of adaptation that emerge among contemporary immigrants and their offspring, account for their different destinies of convergence (or divergence) in their new homeland, and address the ways in which particular contexts of exit and reception for national-origin groups affect outcomes.

Three main patterns are discernible. The first is the time-honored upward-mobility pattern: acculturation and economic integration into the normative structures of mainstream middle-class America. This is the old-fashioned pathway of severing ethnic ties, unlearning old-world values, norms, and behavioral patterns, and adapting to the WASP core culture associated with the middle class. The second is the downward-mobility pattern of acculturation and integration into the margins of American society. This is the pathway of adapting to native subcultures in direct opposition to the WASP core culture or creating hybrid oppositional subcultures associated with native racial minorities trapped on the bottom rungs of the host society's mobility ladder. The third pattern involves socioeconomic integration into mainstream America with lagged or selective

acculturation *and* deliberate preservation of the ethnic community's values and norms, social ties, and institutions. This is the pathway of deliberately reaffirming ethnicity and rebuilding ethnic networks and ethnic social structures for socioeconomic advancement into middle-class status.

According to the segmented assimilation theory, immigrant or ethnic groups assimilate into different segments of society, which are determined by group-specific contexts of exit and reception. The context of exit entails a number of factors, including pre-migration resources that immigrants bring with them (such as money, knowledge, and job skills), the social class status already attained by the immigrants in their homelands, motivations, and the means of migration. The context of reception includes the national-origin group's position in the system of racial stratification, government policies, labor market conditions, and public attitudes, as well as the strength and viability of the ethnic community in the host society. The segmented assimilation theory focuses on the interaction of these two sets of factors, predicting that particular contexts of exit and reception can create distinctive ethnocultural patterns and strategies of adaptation, social environments, and tangible resources for the group and give rise to opportunities or constraints for the individual, independent of individual socioeconomic and demographic characteristics.

Numerous qualitative and quantitative works have produced evidence supporting the prediction of segmented assimilation theory that members of the second generation are likely to assimilate upwardly, downwardly, or horizontally into an American society that is highly segmented by class and race—and to do so in different ways. This nuanced concept has attracted broad attention in the scholarly community since its inception. Some have joined forces to refine it and find innovative ways of measuring and operationalizing it for further empirical scrutiny and theoretical abstraction; others have raised critical issues and sought to stretch its intended meaning or develop alternative conceptions; still others have set up straw-man arguments against it, either out of confusion or because of a hidden ideological agenda. Despite the risks of being overused or misrepresented, segmented assimilation has become a powerful and increasingly influential theoretical perspective in the sociology of immigration and race/ethnicity and has been applied in the areas of education, psychology, criminology, and public health, as well as beyond the U.S. context.

It should be noted that downward assimilation is only *one* of several possible outcomes predicted by the segmented assimilation theory. Curiously, the theory is often misinterpreted as suggesting or predicting downward assimilation as the only outcome—and therefore criticized as overly pessimistic about the immigrant second generation. Nonetheless, to refute the segmented assimilation theory or to state that the second generation is doing just fine and is sooner or later moving into the mainstream middle class regardless of race/ethnicity or immigrant origin, one must demonstrate that *both* of the following cases are false: (1) that the proportions of those falling into the major indicators of downward



assimilation—dropping out of high school, teenage pregnancy, and arrests for breaking the law—are insignificant for each national-origin or ethnic group; and (2) that the differences in outcome are randomly distributed across national-origin or ethnic groups, regardless of each group's modes of incorporation.

Although the segmented assimilation theory is informed by past research on immigrant communities such as Chinatown, I have applied it to my current study of contemporary Chinese America in two notable ways. One is to heighten the effect of ethnicity by documenting the ways in which it is constantly interacting with (adapting to while also resisting) larger structural circumstances in the homeland and in the host society, as well as in the processes of migration and globalization. The other is to foreground the role of the ethnic community in affecting socioeconomic incorporation.<sup>26</sup>

### Unpacking Ethnicity from a Community Perspective

Past and recent studies have consistently found that ethnicity significantly affects varied outcomes of social mobility among different immigrant groups and that such divergent outcomes in turn lead to further changes in the character and salience of ethnicity. Much of the intellectual debate on ethnic differences is between the cultural perspective, which emphasizes the role of internal agency and the extent to which ethnic cultures fit the requirements of the mainstream society, and the structural perspective, which emphasizes the role of social structure and the extent to which ethnic groups are constrained by the broader stratification system and networks of social relations within it.

Social scientists from both perspectives have attempted to develop statistical models to quantitatively measure the effects of “culture” and “structure” for the upward social mobility of immigrant groups. Under ideal circumstances, these models would include indicators illuminating pre-migration situations. But because of data limitations, many social scientists typically attempt to control for “structure” by documenting specific contexts of exit, identifying aspects of post-migration social structures, and operationalizing those components for which they have data. This is not only conventional but also reasonable, since many post-migration SES differences among adult migrants are likely to either reflect or be carryovers from pre-migration differences. However, even the most sophisticated statistical model accounts for only some of the variance, leaving a large residual unexplained. More intractable are questions of how to conceptualize and measure ethnicity. Given the constraints of the data, many social scientists have tried valiantly to make progress on this front and have come up with measures that are ingenious, though not fully convincing. In the end, many have had to place much weight on the effect of the ethnic dummy, whose exact meaning or contents remain unknown. I argue that ethnicity cannot be simply viewed as either a structural or a cultural measure; rather, it encompasses values and behavioral patterns that are constantly interacting with both internal and external



structural exigencies. Unpacking ethnicity, however, requires the development of a community perspective, in which the concepts of ethnic enclaves, institutional completeness, ethnic capital, and multilevel social integration are helpful.

### *Immigrant Neighborhoods versus Ethnic Enclaves*

The idea that ethnic enclaves are significant contexts for immigrant adaptation stems from classical assimilation theories. However, the term “ethnic enclave” is often vaguely and loosely defined and used interchangeably with “immigrant neighborhood” to refer to a place where foreign-born and native-born racial/ethnic minorities predominate. As I have just discussed, the classical assimilation perspective suggests that ethnic enclaves are not permanent settlements but (at best) springboards assisting a gradual transition to the host society and (at worst) traps keeping immigrants apart from the mainstream middle class. In this view, ethnic enclaves and the institutions that emerge from them function in a non-linear fashion. They are beneficial only to the extent that they meet survival needs, reorganize migrants’ economic and social lives, and alleviate resettlement problems in the new land. Classical assimilation theories predict that ethnic enclaves will eventually decline and even disappear as coethnic members become socioeconomically and residentially assimilated, or as fewer coethnic members arrive to replenish and support ethnic institutions.

Classical assimilation theories have abstracted from the experience of the European immigrants who arrived in large numbers at the turn of the twentieth century during a time of rapid industrial growth. Old Jewish, Polish, Italian, and Irish enclaves in America’s major gateway cities have gradually been succeeded by African Americans and other native-born minorities or more recent immigrant groups. Some have experienced speedy declines into ghettos or “super-ghettos,” while others have remained vibrant and resilient. But classical assimilation theories fail to explain why such ethnic succession transpires, much less why patterns of neighborhood change differ by race/ethnicity or national origin. Recent research, such as the work of William Julius Wilson and Douglas Massey, generally cites economic restructuring and white flight as principal causes of inner-city ghettoization.<sup>27</sup>

However, today’s immigrant neighborhoods in urban America are quite different from past and present native-minority neighborhoods. Among the distinctive characteristics are a disproportionate share of noncitizen immigrants, both legal and illegal, and diversity in both national origins and social class backgrounds. A third factor is the significance of immigrant entrepreneurship, which transcends ethnic and national boundaries. Today’s immigrant neighborhoods encompass multiple ethnic communities and thus may not be easily dichotomized as either a springboard or a trap. Rather, they may contain a wider spectrum of both resources and constraints than in the past, and they may constitute varied social environments, which are largely defined by ethnicity. Variations in these ethnic social environments, in turn, lead to significant differences in the

socioeconomic outcomes of the first generation and the educational experiences of the second generation.

As the literature suggests, immigrant neighborhoods are constantly changing. Out-migration of upwardly mobile residents negatively affects social organization, social networking, and social life at the local level.<sup>28</sup> However, contemporary immigration and immigrant selectivity have shaped immigrant neighborhoods in diverse ways that both reinforce old constraints and create new opportunities. Thus, neighborhood and enclave may be viewed as two analytically distinct constructs. Such an analytic distinction is important in that local social structures—that is, all observable establishments including local businesses—tend to be ethnically bounded because of the cultural and language barriers that immigrants encounter.

### *Institutional Completeness*

In his study of immigrant adaptation in Canada in the early 1960s, Raymond Breton examined the conditions under which immigrants became interpersonally integrated into the host society.<sup>29</sup> Defining “institutional completeness” in terms of complex, neighborhood-based, *formal* institutions that satisfied members’ needs, Breton measured the social organization of an ethnic community on a continuum. At one extreme, the community consisted of an informal network of interpersonal relations, such as kinship, friendship, or companionship groups and cliques without formal organization. Toward the other extreme, the community consisted of both informal and formal organizations ranging from welfare and mutual aid societies to commercial, religious, educational, political, professional, and recreational organizations and ethnic media (radio or television stations, newspapers). The higher the organizational density within a given ethnic community, the more likely was the formation of ethnic social networks, and the higher the level of institutional completeness.

Breton found that the presence of a wide range of formal and informal institutions in an ethnic community (i.e., a high degree of institutional completeness) had a powerful effect on keeping group members’ social relations within ethnic boundaries and minimizing out-group contacts. The positive effect of institutional completeness on ethnic cohesiveness occurred *irrespective* of the group’s orientation toward mainstream culture or ethnic culture. Ethnic institutions affected social relations not only for those who participated in them, but also those who did not, and the ethnic community did not prevent its members from establishing out-group contacts.<sup>30</sup> Like classical assimilation theorists, Breton concluded that the ethnic community would fade progressively, given low levels of international migration, because even a high degree of institutional completeness would not block members’ eventual integration into the host society.

In the U.S. context, ethnic enclaves vary in the density and complexity of organizational structures, but few show full institutional completeness. In the current analysis, I propose a dual framework: at the institutional level (how insti-

tutions generate resources) and at the individual level (how patterned interpersonal relationships are structured by ethnic identity). I measure Breton's concept of "institutional completeness" in terms of the density and diversity of local institutions and add two additional dimensions.<sup>31</sup> The first is coethnicity—namely, the ethnic dominance of an institution's ownership, leadership, and/or membership—which I speculate strengthens within-group interpersonal interaction. The second dimension is the class composition of an institution's membership. Although the out-migration of middle-class coethnics from immigrant neighborhoods may exacerbate social isolation, their absence *as residents* in the inner city does not necessarily preclude their participation in local institutions in immigrant neighborhoods. In an ethnic enclave where there is a high degree of institutional completeness, those who have residentially out-migrated are likely to maintain communal ties through routine participation in its institutions, promoting interpersonal relationships across class lines. In my view, an ethnic enclave's institutional completeness, along with a significant presence of the coethnic middle class, positively influences immigrant adaptation through tangible resources provided by ethnic institutions and intangible resources, such as social capital, formed by institutional involvement.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Embeddedness of Social Capital*

Although the concept of "social capital" has come into wide use in recent years, there has been considerable debate over how to define and measure it and at what level of analysis to locate it. James Coleman defines social capital as consisting of closed systems of social networks inherent in the structure of relations between persons and among persons within a group—essentially a "dense set of associations" within a social group promoting cooperative behavior that is advantageous to group members.<sup>33</sup> Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner define it as "expectations for action within a collectivity that affect the economic goals and goal-seeking behavior of its members," even if these expectations are not oriented toward the economic sphere.<sup>34</sup> Rob Sampson describes it as having variable utility values, arguing that not all social networks are created equal and that many lie dormant, contributing little to effective social action, social support, or social control.<sup>35</sup> Robert Putnam treats civic organizations as the main source of social capital because these organizations provide a dense network of secondary associations, trust, and norms, thereby creating and sustaining "civicness," or a sense of civic community that facilitates the workings of the society as a whole.<sup>36</sup> Demographic characteristics, such as SES or race and ethnicity, can also be part of the social capital process. For example, family educational background, family occupational status, and income are usually considered forms of human or financial capital. However, family SES can also connect individuals to advantageous networks and is thus related to social capital.<sup>37</sup> As Glenn Loury suggests, social connections associated with different class status and different levels of human capital give rise to differential access to opportunities.<sup>38</sup>

Despite variations in definition, scholars seem to agree that social capital is lodged not in the individual but in the structure of social organizations, patterns of social relations, or processes of interaction between individuals and organizations. That is, social capital does not consist of resources that are held by individuals or groups but of processes of goal-directed social relations embedded in particular social structures. Thus, social capital inheres immediately in social relations among individuals that are often determined and constrained by ethnicity; it is also embedded in the formal organizations and institutions within a definable ethnic community that structure and guide these social relations. Because of the variability, contextuality, and conditionality of the process, social relations that produce desirable outcomes for one ethnic group or in one situation may not translate to another ethnic group or situation. Although it is understood as a dense set of social relations with associated norms and values, social capital is embedded in and arises from institutions in a particular community—in this case not just any type of community but one in which the organizational structure and member identification are based on a shared ancestry and cultural heritage: the ethnic community.

Analyzing the formation of social capital in institutional and ethnic contexts is important in two respects. First, former social relations in families, friendship or kinship groups, and other social networks are often disrupted through the migration process. Many newcomers today experience difficulty in connecting to the larger host society and institutions because of their lack of English-language proficiency and cultural familiarity. Among coethnics in their own ethnic community, however, even as total strangers, they can reconnect and rebuild networks through involvement in ethnic institutions because of their shared cultural and language skills. Second, ethnic institutions differ from panethnic, multiethnic, and mainstream institutions at the local level in that they operate under similar cultural parameters, such as values and norms, codes of conduct, and, mostly importantly, language. In theory, immigrants can participate in and benefit from any local institutions in their new homeland. But many are excluded from participation in mainstream institutions, such as local government and “old boy” networks or schools and parent-teacher associations, because of language and cultural barriers. Ethnic institutions, in contrast, are not only more accessible but also more sensitive than other local institutions to group-specific needs and particularistic ways of coping. Further, they are more effective in resolving cultural problems. Thus, ethnicity interacts with local institutions to affect the formation of social capital.

### *Conceptualizing Ethnic Capital*

The interplay of financial capital, human capital, and social capital within an identifiable ethnic community can be broadly conceptualized as “ethnic capital” to explain causes and consequences of community development and transformation.<sup>39</sup> Thus, ethnic capital involves interrelated and interactive processes of

financial, human, and social capital. Financial capital encompasses tangible economic resources, such as money and liquidatable assets. Human capital is generally measured by education, English-language proficiency, and job skills. Social capital, which I have discussed above, is more complex, entailing social relations, processes, and access to resources and opportunities.

How is ethnic capital related to community building? From the classical assimilation perspective, social capital in ethnic enclaves serves immigrants' survival needs well when they lack financial and human capital, but becomes "devalued" and eventually depleted as immigrants accumulate more and more financial and human capital. From a community perspective, in contrast, the interactive processes of financial, human, and social capital contribute to community development, which in turn perpetuates the accumulation of ethnic capital.

Old Chinatowns and new Chinese ethnoburbs are two ideal types illustrative of the dynamics of ethnic capital. Old Chinatowns had relatively weak human and financial capital but strong social capital. These communities had several distinctive features: (1) interpersonal relations were based primarily on blood, kin, and place of origin; (2) economic organizations were embedded in an interlocking ethnic social structure consisting of a range of ethnic organizations that guided and controlled interpersonal and interorganizational relations; and (3) the ethnic enclave as a whole operated on the basis of ethnic solidarity internally and interethnic exclusivity externally. Social capital, formed through a common origin, a common language, and a common fate, along with intimate face-to-face interaction and reciprocity within the enclave, provided the basis for economic and social organization, which in turn facilitated the accumulation of human capital in job training (and also, to a lesser extent, children's education) on the one hand, and the accumulation of financial capital through ethnic entrepreneurship and family savings on the other. The process of human and financial capital accumulation based on strong social capital resources in old Chinatowns heightened the significance of ethnic institutions, including ethnic business, which served as the basis for community development.

The processes of ethnic capital formation in new Chinese ethnoburbs are quite different. Compared with old Chinatowns, today's Chinese ethnoburb has several distinct features: (1) interpersonal relations are less likely to be based on strong ties defined by blood, kin, and place of origin, and more likely to be based on secondary, weak ties defined by common SES or other economic and professional characteristics; (2) economic organizations are less embedded in a locally based interlocking ethnic social structure and more diversified in type and more connected to the mainstream and global economies; and (3) the enclave economy as a whole operates on the basis of bounded solidarity and enforceable trust defined by a common ethnicity, but does not necessarily preclude interethnic cooperation and social integration. The interactive processes of ethnic capital in new Chinese ethnoburbs are not based on social capital because it is relatively weak. Instead, the community is built on strong financial and human capital. Social capital formation through ethnic interaction and organization comes *after*

the formation of ethnoburbs. In ethnoburbs, the development of ethnic institutions, including ethnic businesses, creates opportunities and multiple sites for interpersonal relations.

### *The Non-Economic Effects of Ethnic Entrepreneurship*

From the community perspective, we can begin to see the complexity of group processes as opposed to individual processes, and the interplay between cultural and structural factors determining immigrant adaptation. My original study of Chinatown focuses on the economic potential of an immigrant enclave, highlighting the significant role of ethnic entrepreneurship in community building.<sup>40</sup> Research shows that contemporary entrepreneurial activities among ethnic and immigrant groups in the United States have grown exponentially and produced desirable outcomes for group members. However, this body of research has been more concerned with the effects of entrepreneurship on economic integration among immigrant and ethnic minorities than with its influence on the social contexts mediating ethnic economic life. It has largely overlooked such non-economic effects as serving as an alternative means to social status recognition, nurturing entrepreneurial spirit, providing role models, and strengthening social networks locally and internationally. Some of these effects are merely noted in the literature without further investigation into the mechanisms and conditions that produce them—a substantial conceptual gap.

Through *Chinatown* and my continued research on the development of ethnic enclaves and ethnoburbs in the Chinese immigrant community and other Asian immigrant and refugee communities, I have systematically examined these non-economic effects. Since ethnic entrepreneurs often embed their economic decisions and actions in specific social structures, variations in ethnic social structures may be conceptualized as both causes and outcomes of entrepreneurship. I propose that it is the social embeddedness of ethnic economic activities, rather than the enclave economy per se, that fosters a unique social environment conducive to upward social mobility. This ethnic social environment should not be defined by the neighborhood's characteristics, nor by residents' SES, nor by institutions that are located there; rather, a complicated set of interwoven social relationships between various institutions and residents, bounded by ethnicity, significantly facilitates or constrains educational and economic advancement.

My research on the ethnic system of supplementary education in the Los Angeles Chinese immigrant community provides a prime example.<sup>41</sup> It addresses how ethnic entrepreneurship shapes an ethnic environment conducive to education—an environment that benefits Chinese immigrant children to the exclusion of non-Chinese children sharing the same neighborhood. As part of the larger development of the Chinese enclave economy, a whole range of private afterschools have emerged in recent years, along with the growth of Chinese-language schools.<sup>42</sup> Like other ethnic businesses, private educational institutions and tutoring services are concentrated in Chinatown and Chinese ethnoburbs in

Los Angeles. They vary in scale, specialty, quality, and formality; some are transnational enterprises with headquarters or branches in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, offering highly specialized curricula and formal structures; some are informal and relatively unstructured one-person or mom-and-pop operations. Some feature comprehensive academic programs; others tend to be highly specialized, with academic (as opposed to strictly linguistic) objectives. The latter may offer English, math, chemistry, or physics tutoring and intensive drilling solely to help children perform better in their regular K–12 schools, even if some of the instruction or tutoring is bilingual. Thus, these private institutions supplement, rather than compete with, public schools. Some of these for-profit services and programs are also embedded in nonprofit Chinese-language schools and other nonprofit ethnic organizations serving immigrants, such as family, kin, and district associations and churches.

This ethnic system of supplemental education not only generates tangible educational resources but also reinforces the overriding value placed on education by Chinese immigrants, and their extremely high educational expectations. Through participating in private afterschools, Chinese immigrant parents and children develop a more sophisticated understanding of the educational system and are better informed about college options than their peers of other national origins. They know which middle school is a feeder to a better high school, which high school offers adequate Advanced Placement (AP) classes and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) preparation, how to prepare for standardized tests, and when to take them. The diversification of ethnic economic activities in the ethnic community also broadens the basis for social interaction between residents of Chinatown or the Chinese ethnoburbs and their geographically dispersed coethnics. Such relationships, though secondary and instrumental rather than primary and intimate, create channels for information exchange and thus ease the negative consequences of social isolation and ethnic segregation.

My analysis of the ethnic system of supplementary education contributes to the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship by shifting the focus from ultimate mobility outcomes (such as earnings or employment opportunities) to intermediate social processes: creating an ethnic social environment that mitigates immigrants' cultural and economic disadvantages. Social organization in immigrant neighborhoods varies by ethnicity, and the presence of an enclave economy, not just the concentration of a variety of local ethnic businesses, influences not only the economic life but also the social environment of coethnic group members.

Varied levels of enclave economic development among different immigrant groups affect community building, which in turn creates differences in the availability of and access to neighborhood-based resources, especially those pertaining to the socioeconomic integration of adult immigrants and the education of immigrant children. Social capital formed in different ethnic social environments appears to have different values, and what appears to be social capital for one ethnic group may not equally benefit another sharing the same neighborhood. In this respect, the enclave economy concept is superior for investigating



specific ethnic social environments and processes of group mobility. It allows for a more focused and detailed examination of varied social contexts and their effects on mobility outcomes, thus unpacking the black box of ethnicity. A fuller account of the variations in ethnic social environments, in turn, can offer a better explanation of why ethnicity affects outcomes positively for some groups but negatively for others. It also allows for the development of an understanding of precisely how social resources are produced and reproduced in the ethnic community.

## Organization

My research on contemporary Chinese America follows the community perspective sketched above. The chapters that I have selected for this volume aim to shed light on the processes of community transformation in contemporary Chinese America from a sociological angle. Taken together, these chapters begin to unveil a reality. The resulting picture is imperfect and subject to diverse forms of interpretation and social construction, but, I hope, also informative and intellectually stimulating. As a sociologist by training and an Asian Americanist by acculturation, I have benefited from interdisciplinary scholarship in American studies, ethnic studies, and global studies. I am committed, in turn, to contributing to the subfields of international migration, race/ethnicity, and community studies. In conducting research, however, I cannot cover every angle and every subject under the sun. Thus, my research focuses on a limited range of topics, and my ethnographic research sites are primarily in Los Angeles and New York—two prominent immigrant gateway metropolises. And to state one modest goal simply: in the face of continual assertions that contemporary immigrants take jobs away from natives and “eat” social welfare, my work shows that they not only contribute tremendously to our economy (as immigrants have done historically), but are capable of creating new opportunities for themselves while making themselves new Americans.

I have organized this book on contemporary Chinese America into five parts. Part I consists of a single chapter that provides a historical overview of Chinese emigration and the formation of the Chinese Diaspora, of which Chinese America is a part.

Part II comprises three chapters documenting the patterns of contemporary Chinese immigration and demographic transformations. Chapter 2 offers a descriptive overview of the development of the ethnic Chinese community after World War II and the lifting of legal barriers to Chinese immigration. I provide a demographic profile of Chinese Americans, highlight significant trends and issues, and discuss the implications of drastic social change for identity formation and community development.

Chapter 3 examines the residential patterns of Chinese immigrants in New York City, historically a central gateway metropolis. I question whether the classic

model of residential mobility adequately accounts for the differences in personal characteristics of the Chinese who live in different parts of the metropolis and for the segregation of the Chinese from other racial and ethnic groups. Factors such as SES, marriage, and fertility operate among the Chinese (as they do for other groups) to promote residential location outside the ethnic enclave. But I show that specifically ethnic factors, such as the enclave economy, immigrants' kinship ties, and the ethnic housing market, jointly structure residential patterns.

Chapter 4 (co-authored with Yan-Fen Tseng and Rebecca Kim) takes a close look at an emerging phenomenon: the Chinese ethnoburb. In the past three decades, the classical enclave-to-suburbia mobility model has been challenged. Urban neighborhoods that whites once dominated have evolved into either resegregated enclaves dominated by a single racial minority group or "global" neighborhoods where diverse native-born groups live side by side with new immigrants of different national origins. Some of the resegregated neighborhoods experience decline, a phenomenon that has been studied in great detail. Others, however, are thriving and growing, becoming home to immigrants possessing higher-than-average education and incomes who are capable of creating their own ethnic economies. The chapter focuses on the latter situation, illustrated by Chinese ethnoburbs in California's San Gabriel Valley.

Part III includes three chapters that reveal the organizational structure of the ethnic enclave. Chapter 5 examines Chinatown's enclave economy. I draw on the enclave economy theory—one of the most often cited yet most hotly debated theories in the field of international immigration—to empirically test whether there are significant earnings returns on human capital to immigrant entrepreneurs and workers participating in the ethnic enclave, based on the case of New York City's Chinatown. I offer three distinct operational definitions of the enclave as a place of residence, a place of work, and an industrial sector. Regardless of the definition employed, there is considerable evidence of positive returns for the earnings of male enclave workers from education, labor market experience, and English-language ability. By contrast, none of these human capital variables is positively related to income for female enclave workers. I use qualitative data to supplement and further explain these empirical findings.

Chapter 6 zooms in on a central ethnic institution. Chinese-language media have been on the American scene since the first Chinatown, but only recently have they achieved the status of an influential ethnic institution serving both social and economic functions. I show that since the late 1970s, Chinese-language media have taken on a dual role as both an ethnic social institution and an economic enterprise facilitating immigrant adaptation.

Chapter 7 unpacks ethnicity through a close examination of Chinese-language schools and the ethnic system of supplementary education in the immigrant Chinese community. I illustrate the specific ways in which ethnicity functions to create social capital and an environment conducive to immigrant children's educational achievement.

Part IV includes three chapters on the Chinese immigrant family. Chapter 8 deals with work and its place in the lives of Chinese immigrant women in the ethnic enclave. Working wives and mothers are traditionally considered secondary wage earners, and employment is not automatically accompanied by occupational attainment for individual workers. For immigrant women, the double burden of household work plus paid labor is compounded by their own lack of English-language proficiency, transferable education and job skills, and knowledge of the larger labor market—and, for many, by their husbands' labor market disadvantages, which make the women's labor force participation imperative for the family. This chapter illustrates the special meanings of immigrant women's work in the context of ethnic enclave employment and family responsibility.

Chapter 9 examines intergenerational relations in the Chinese immigrant family. Many Chinese parents have clearly articulated expectations that their children will attain the highest levels of educational and occupational achievement, help raise the family to middle-class status, and, most importantly, take care of parents when they are old and frail. However, the children often regard their immigrant parents as *lao-wan-gu* (meaning “old stick in the mud”), with feudal, outdated, and old-fashioned habits. Their rebellion against tradition is constant, inevitable, and intrinsic to their experience of growing up. This chapter explores the paradoxical family process through which parents and children cope with intricate relationships and negotiate priorities that benefit both individual family members and the family as a whole.

Although the bulk of Chapter 9 focuses on conflict, coping, and conciliation when parents and children live together, Chapter 10 considers intergenerational relations in the context of an altogether new type of living arrangement that has arisen in the Chinese immigrant community. “Parachute kids” come to the United States on their own, usually in their early teens, for a better education. Separated from their parents in those key years and in search of self-identities, the parachute kids and similarly situated immigrant children are subject to demands and pressures from their families, their American peers, and the host society. I discuss these young people as a social group and provide an analysis of the risks inherent in transnational families.

Part V addresses the future through a chapter on the issue of race and ethnicity in contemporary Chinese America. Chapter 11 argues that although Chinese Americans as a group have attained career and financial success equal to those of whites, and although many live near or have even married whites, they remain culturally distinct and suspect in a white society. Within America's racial hierarchy, Chinese Americans and their Asian American peers have occupied an in-between position. They have been labeled a “model minority” or considered “honorary whites” because of their socioeconomic attainments. At the same time, they continue to be stereotyped as the “perpetual foreigner.” Today, globalization and U.S.-China relations, combined with persistently high rates of immigration and returned migration, continue to affect how Chinese Americans are perceived and positioned in American society.

## Future Work

Chinese America continues to intrigue me. Upon completion of each research project, I am exposed to new questions, interesting ideas, and exciting possibilities. Among the many unanswered questions on my Chinese American research agenda, several stand out. First, I would like to continue my work in ethnic enclaves. My research on economic adaptation speaks to the question of how visibly identifiable, low-skilled, and often stigmatized immigrants nonetheless make modest progress as they enter American society. My answer is that immigrants get ahead because they are able to take advantage of the resources generated through the ethnic community itself; the community provides a set of mechanisms that help newcomers get jobs, learn skills, and generate human, financial, and social capital. Thus, the enclave is not just a site for survival, but also a base for mobility. However, external circumstances, such as the power of local social organization or culture/acculturation, do not simply dictate socioeconomic outcomes. Many factors interact at different levels. How to build empirically testable models and how to abstract empirical findings into theory remain challenging tasks for future research.

Second, I would like to dispel the “model minority” myth by examining in greater depth two interrelated issues: Chinese American educational hyper-attainment and the racialized glass ceiling in the workplace. Little empirical research has been done on the national level to get the facts straight. Hyper-attainment among Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans has now become so obvious in official statistics and in the public eye that the United States (and not just California) must address it in the next decade. Why do children of Chinese immigrants, including those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, outperform native-born Americans in the educational arena? Conventional theories of social stratification are no longer sufficient; alternative theories must be developed to integrate theories of international migration, segmented assimilation, and the enclave economy. As for the glass ceiling, Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans have made tremendous inroads into mainstream America, but they have done so largely by educational hyper-attainment and excessive effort. Many hit a glass ceiling at some point in their careers and become stuck before the age factor chips in to negatively affect their career advancement. The conventional explanation is that they experience racial discrimination or that they voluntarily withdraw from the struggle to advance because they are content with their mediocre positions. To counter the model minority stereotype, we must not only show that it harms Asian Americans by holding them up as “the other,” but also develop more sophisticated models to identify key determinants of immigrant and ethnic success and explain how they affect outcomes. In so doing, however, we must expand our data collection beyond ethnographic field sites and regional boundaries.<sup>43</sup>

Third, I would like to explore in greater depth global linkages between Chinese America, China, and the greater Chinese Diaspora. The rising economic power of

China and the Chinese diasporic communities around the world have facilitated the movements of people of Chinese ancestry across borders in unprecedented ways. Research has begun to address this trilateral relationship. Studies on transnationalism strongly suggest the emergence of alternative forms of economic incorporation into receiving societies that are quite different from what immigrants experienced in the past. However, the emerging literature on transnationalism falls short in explaining the phenomenon of return migration among highly skilled and productive immigrants. While small in scale, the sum total of all these return movements and the subsequent contributions of immigrants to families and communities left behind acquire “structural” importance for both sending and receiving countries. They affect both the pace and the forms of immigrants’ incorporation into the host country and the prospects for economic development of those whom they have left behind.

Another gap in the literature involves immigrant adaptation. Little is known about whether highly assimilated Asian immigrants are satisfied with their current status and achievement in American society. The general assumption is that they are. But empirical evidence has increasingly found that successful economic incorporation into American society does not guarantee societal acceptance. The following questions are of particular interest to me. What prompts some highly skilled immigrants who are established in American society to return to China? Do such transnational movements imply permanent resettlement? How does the presence of Chinese transnationals affect local community developments in China and the United States? And how does the transnational flow of capital and labor shape economic and social developments at the local level—in *qiaoxiang* (migrant-sending communities) in China and ethnic enclaves in the United States?

Continuing to blend quantitative and qualitative methodologies, I intend to focus on these and other issues of a comparative nature—from a range of intra- and interethnic trajectories and a range of social contexts. The field of Chinese American studies involves many prospects and possibilities, and it is not up to a few individuals or a few disciplines to define its research directions and agenda. I am simply one among many social scientists who are passionate about research and determined to make a meaningful contribution.