ufacturing and consumer industries, the influx of overseas Chinese capital, the continued existence of traditional institutions, the emergence of class conflict, and the impact of social-welfare and labor organizations. By considering New York's Chinatown, we can gain insights into the nature of other Chinatowns as well.

THE OLD CHINATOWN GHETTOS

Chinese who emigrate have the tendency to congregate in their adopted country. They seem to stay together much more than other immigrant groups. There are Chinatowns in every major city in Southeast Asia, and there are Chinese communities on the continents of Australia, Europe, South and North America. In the United States, there are dozens of Chinatowns, but they did not develop when the first settlers came here during the last century. The initial formation of Chinatowns in the United States was not voluntary.

FIRST SETTLERS: THE "COOLIES"

The California gold rush during the late 1840s brought the first wave of Chinese. When the rich surface gold mines were exhausted, most white miners moved on to more productive sites. Only
large mining companies had the necessary capital to work underground, and to realize a fair return, they needed a reliable supply of cheap labor. "Coolies" ("bitter labor" in Chinese) from southern China were brought to America as contract labor. By 1851 there were 25,000 Chinese in California.

Once gold mining began to decline in the late 1850s, the demand for cheap labor shifted to railroad construction. The second wave of Chinese came to complete the most difficult section of the transcontinental railroad in the Rockies. They labored under harsh and dangerous conditions, which few whites were willing to endure. Moreover, until the railroads were completed, workers could not easily be supplied from the East. It was too costly to ship black laborers to the West, around Cape Horn. Also, the use of black labor was a sensitive issue due to the national debates on abolition preceding the Civil War.

The Chinese—coming from a weak, stagnant, and partially colonized Manchu empire—were substitutes for slave labor and were treated accordingly. California courts at the time considered the Chinese unassimilable aliens, without legal rights; they became the targets of racially motivated ordinances and unfair taxation.

Once the railroads were completed, Chinese were needed to develop other Western industries. They built levees and reclaimed marshlands for the delta farmlands of the Sacramento and San Joaquin river valleys, today considered among the most productive agricultural lands in the country; they were employed in salmon canneries on the Columbia River, in Puget Sound, and in Alaska; they worked in textile mills and in small-scale factories, rolling cigars, sewing garments, producing silk, and making gunpowder.1 By 1875, Chinese laborers in the West had increased to 105,000 and constituted almost one-quarter of all able-bodied male workers in the state of California.2

The Chinese at that point were becoming part of the American working class. This situation, however, changed when large numbers of white workers made their way westward on the newly completed transcontinental railroad. During the recession in the late 1870s, whites competed with Chinese for jobs. Employers hired Chinese at low wages, pitting them against white workers, and triggered a chain of reactions. The labor movement, then in its early stages of organization, considered the Chinese strikebreakers who cooperated with the monopoly capitalists. A group of skilled craft workers tried to use this anti-Chinese sentiment to gain political power. "Chinamen must go!" became their battle cry; racial demagoguery became the issue to rally white working people, many of whom were frustrated by unemployment. The Democratic Party, in the meantime, rebuilt itself in the West after the Civil War by shifting from its pro-slavery position to crude chauvinistic appeals. The period was marked by public hysteria over the specter of the "yellow peril." Finally, politicians from Western states, with the support of colleagues from the South, pushed the Chinese Exclusion Act through Congress in 1882. The Act barred all immigration of Chinese laborers. It was the first and, as it turned out, the only federal law ever to exclude a group of people by nationality.

The Chinese who were already in this country, including some 5,000 American-born Chinese, became the targets of abuse and mob violence. They were driven out of small towns and villages and sought refuge in larger cities. Thus, Chinatowns were formed in the 1880s—first in the major metropolitan areas on the West Coast and, later, in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Washington, and other cities.

The shift of Chinese into these urban ghettos was not voluntary. These were not like the immigrant ghettos of Italians, Jews, or Poles, which tended to disappear as each group integrated into American society. Rather, they were segregated areas where the Chinese were meant to stay. The segregation was maintained by the exclusion of
Chinese from the larger labor market. American capitalists had moved on to recruit cheap laborers from other Asian nations, such as Japan, Korea, and the Philippines.

The Chinatown ghettos differed from the European immigrant ghettos in one other important aspect: the near-total absence of families. When the first Chinese coolies came to America, few women accompanied their husbands. After the 1882 Exclusion Act, the courts considered women laborers and they were excluded as well. The courts also refused entry to wives of those already here. As a result, the Chinese male-to-female ratio was 27 to 1 in 1890. Because most states had miscegenation laws directed against the Chinese, the only way an immigrant could have a family was to go to China, marry, and return alone to the United States. Thus, Chinese males in this country, even those who were citizens, were likely to remain bachelors. Under such harsh conditions, some chose to go back to China to stay, and the number of Chinese declined to 89,863 by the turn of the century.

From 1900 to the 1940s, the Chinese population increased slightly, largely through illegal means. One common method of entry was the “slot system.” Under U.S. law, all persons born in this country are automatically citizens, as are the children of citizens even if they are born abroad. Few Chinese at the turn of the century were born here. However, the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 destroyed most immigration and birth records. Thus it became impossible to disprove a Chinese claim to citizenship; a Chinese man could return to China and claim to have fathered a son, who could also claim citizenship. The “slot system” soon evolved into a lucrative racket in which individuals paid fees to become “paper sons” of Chinese Americans.

Not surprisingly, the harsh conditions of their working life and the intensity of discrimination caused many Chinese to view their residence in America as temporary. They planned to stay only as long as it took to save enough to retire in China as a small landowner. Few realized their dreams, yet this “sojourner” attitude discouraged them from wanting to be part of American society. They remained, living and working in Chinatowns.

The Old Chinatown Ghettos

ORIGINS OF EARLY IMMIGRANTS

Before the 1950s, most Chinese in this country came from the southern coastal province of Kwangtung (in Wade-Giles spelling; Guangdong in the Pinyin system used in China today), particularly from four small counties along the western region of the Pearl River delta near the city of Canton (the name given by Europeans; Kuangchou, the Chinese name since A.D. 210; Guangzhou in Pinyin). Land in the region was poor, and the population dense. The people were of peasant origin with little education; they spoke similar dialects and their cultural and social backgrounds contrasted sharply with those of the small number of Chinese who came to America as students.

During the period of exclusion (between 1882 and 1943), American law did provide temporary entry for certain Chinese, including merchants, government representatives, and students. By far the largest group was students, who came to earn advanced degrees. However, they were here under very strict provisions. According to the Immigration Law of 1924, students had to have completed a bachelor’s degree in China and had to have their credentials accepted by an American institution of higher learning. They had to prove they were financially self-supporting and had sufficient funds to pay for their return to China within six months after graduation. They also had to have English-language skills. Not surprisingly, the majority were from wealthy and educated families. These well-to-do scholars and the Chinatown Chinese represented opposite poles of the class structure and had little to do with one another. Furthermore, most of the students were non-Cantonese-speaking. Even those who were Cantonese tended to be graduates of elite colleges located in commercial and cultural centers like Shanghai, Peking, Tientsin, Nanking—mostly cities north of the Yangtze River.

Very few students wanted to stay in the United States after graduation. For one thing, they faced an inhospitable racial environment; they could not get jobs, despite their graduate degrees. On the other hand, good positions awaited them in China. According to a study
by Y. C. Wang, based on Who's Who in China, by 1939 56.2 percent of the highest-ranking figures in the Chinese Nationalist government, academic institutions, and the military had received advanced education in the United States.5

In contrast to the students, the vast majority of the residents of old Chinatowns came from a homogeneous agrarian background. Their common rural origin had important implications. First, it enabled immigrants to form tightly knit communities capable of defending themselves against hostile external forces. Second, the formation of political and social institutions in Chinatown was based on the regional and agrarian traditions of Kwangtung. The result is an internal structure in Chinatown that is difficult to penetrate, even for Chinese of non-Cantonese origins. Once these institutions, with their distinctive regional traits, became consolidated, they were maintained even after the population of Chinatown became diversified. Therefore, in order to understand Chinese communities in this country, it is essential to appreciate the unique qualities of the Cantonese, the original Chinese immigrants of the last century.

The Unique Cantonese

To Chinese from other provinces, Cantonese are unique. They speak a dialect which is one of the most difficult for those in other areas to understand. Kwangtung Province was first incorporated into the Han cultural and political system in the seventh century A.D. during the T'ang dynasty.6 The original inhabitants were tribal aborigines of the Miao, Li, Yao, and Thai people. The city of Canton for centuries was considered by the Chinese to be a backwater; for a millennium it was the place of exile for officials who had lost imperial favor. Canton was isolated from the rest of China. Land travel to the area was obstructed by a ring of high mountains. A railroad connecting Canton and central China was not completed until 1936. Before then, the sea was the main link with the rest of the country.

As early as the seventh century Canton was an important international port for Arabic, Jewish, Singhalese, Indonesian, and Persian traders who came to buy Chinese slaves as well as silk, porcelain, and other goods. In the sixteenth century, European traders began to arrive. Later the Ch'ing government (1644–1911) restricted all foreign trade to the port of Canton, in order to keep foreigners as far as possible from Peking.

The Cantonese, therefore, experienced an early and extensive Western penetration. A systematic foreign trade developed. Chinese merchants, called cobong, monopolized the trade and made millions. The British and Americans shipped opium into China. This lucrative scheme eventually precipitated the Opium War (1839–42). The immediate cause was the confiscation of a shipment of British opium imported into Canton by Lin Tse-hsu, the Viceroy of Kwangtung and Kwangsi Provinces. The Chinese held their ground when the first battles were fought in Canton, but lost the war when British warships turned north to invade the city of Nanking. China's defeat in 1842 forced her acceptance of Western supremacy. China agreed to open five trading ports, Canton included, and to relinquish territories. Hong Kong, an island at the mouth of the Pearl River near the city of Canton, became a British colony.

Military defeat was followed by drastic economic decline. Famine and starvation led to a series of peasant uprisings in the south. Local warfare spread across the region. One group that suffered greatly during this period was the Hakka (the “guest people”), who had come to Kwangtung from the northern plains to escape economic hardship in the fourth century. They had settled in the poor, mountainous areas of the province. When they periodically tried to move to more fertile regions, they faced serious conflicts with the Punti (the “local people”).

The Hakka were the main organizers of the Taiping Rebellion (1848–65), which almost succeeded in overthrowing the Ch'ing Dynasty. At one time, the rebels occupied the southern half of the
country. The revolt began in Kwangtung, but fighting spread throughout China. In the meantime, warfare flared up again between the Hakka and Punti. For thirteen years (1854–67), while the Ch'ing government was busy dealing with the Taiping rebels, the two peoples waged a devastating struggle for control of the southwestern corner of the Pearl River delta. An estimated 500,000 people were killed. The Punti formed their own militias, built walled fortifications, and hired mercenaries. The people of both sides suffered grievously.

Thus, the Cantonese experienced civil wars, plundering by local bandits, and foreign invasions—all without the protection of the central government. They had to rely on their own resources to defend themselves and to survive. It was during these years that the Cantonese from the warring region migrated in large numbers to foreign lands. Many from Toishan, where the Punti-Hakka warfare was most intense, came to the United States.7 Previously, the Ch'ing Dynasty had prohibited its citizens from leaving the country, to prevent them from joining the forces still loyal to the previous Ming Dynasty which had bases on offshore islands. However, when the Opium War opened the gates of the empire, the government was too weak to control the exodus.

In the nineteenth century the Cantonese and the Fukiene (from the adjacent coastal province to the north) were practically the only groups that chose to emigrate. They were peasants who left China with the expectation of making enough money to help support their families. Once overseas, a few, especially those who went to South-east Asia, became prosperous merchants and small businessmen.

Cantonese are known as good businessmen—a reputation acquired from their commercial heritage. They are said to be worldly, shrewd, quick to learn, and willing to accept new ideas.8 However, shrewdness in business was not respected in traditional Chinese society. According to the Confucian social structure, merchants were in the lowest rank. Chinese from other provinces regard the Cantonese as too direct, at times hot-tempered, always ready to defend their own interests, and lacking in proper Chinese culture and civility.

The Cantonese in turn claim that their dialect, uncontaminated by foreign influences, is closest to archaic Chinese. (Many words used by the Cantonese no long appear in modern Chinese dictionaries.) They also maintain that family ties, the basis of Chinese culture, are stronger in Kwangtung than anywhere else.9

As for civility, the Cantonese think the northerners are stuffy and pretentious. My Cantonese waiter friends often complain about working with northerners, particularly from Peking or Shanghai, who feel compelled to explain that they are above restaurant work and that they are doing it only temporarily. The Cantonese call them ng soung: upright. The Cantonese are not ashamed of performing manual labor or engaging in trade. They are not as status-conscious as northerners and are willing to accept paths to upward mobility other than the traditional Confucian scholar one.

In any event, the Cantonese are unique and are treated by other Chinese as such. As a result, historically they have turned inward and relied on their most basic resources: their families, local clans, and village associations. People from Kwangtung have the strongest clan and lineage ties of all Chinese. They maintained them when they moved to urban centers in northern China, and also when they emigrated to foreign countries. Above all, the Cantonese tend to stick together. Thus, they are considered clannish. But this behavior has little to do with respect for tradition; it is a practical strategy for survival in a hostile environment.

The Cantonese in America could not count on help from their home government regarding their discriminatory treatment in the United States, because China as a nation was too weak throughout the late Ch'ing and the subsequent Warlord and Civil War periods from 1911 to 1949. The isolation of the early immigrants in America was complete; they were excluded by American society, persecuted by American authorities, ignored by the Chinese government, and seen as “marginal” people by their fellow Chinese. These were the perceptions of the early immigrants as they built the social and political institutions within their Chinatowns.
WORLD WAR II AND
THE CHINESE
COMMUNITIES

World War II brought changes in the status of the Chinese in the United States. When China became an ally of the U.S., there was a surge of respect from Americans for the long struggle of the Chinese people against Japanese aggression in Asia. This new attitude was reflected in 1943, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. After more than sixty years, Chinese were allowed to enter the United States, although under a yearly quota of a mere 105 persons. During the wartime labor shortage, the U.S. government prohibited racial discrimination in defense-related industries. Chinese worked in factories and gained experience in skilled trades; many kept these jobs after the war as discrimination in employment gradually lessened.

The government also promoted family unity by taking steps to change the law, so that Chinese with American citizenship could bring their wives to this country. Further, the War Brides Act allowed those in the Armed Forces to bring spouses into the United States. By 1947, approximately 9,000 women had come; 80 percent of all Chinese immigrants who entered between 1945 and 1947 were women. These measures eased the extremely imbalanced sex ratio in the Chinese community. By 1950 the ratio had improved to 1.89 males to 1 female. However, for those between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine the ratio was 3 to 1; and for those aged sixty-five and above, the ratio was 6 to 1.10

Those who were able to bring their families to America no longer considered themselves sojourners. They determined to settle down, raise children, and become part of American society. However, the most decisive change in American immigration law came in the 1960s.

THE IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1965

In 1965 a new immigration act ended the discriminatory national origins provision established in 1924. That provision had assigned to each country an annual quota based on the national origins of the population in 1890 (Chinese theoretically had a quota, but it was withheld until the repeal of the Exclusion Law in 1943). The provision had been enacted in 1924 in order to preserve the racial and ethnic character of the country. As a result, 94 percent of immigration quotas were assigned to the countries of Northern and Western Europe. The 1965 Act abolished that stipulation, substituting a flat quota of 20,000 immigrants for every country outside the Western Hemisphere, without regard to race and nationality.

The passage of the 1965 Immigration Act was the result of the changing race relations in America that began in the 1950s. The black struggle for equality heightened awareness of other "colored" minorities—Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and Asians. Beginning in the 1960s, government social-welfare programs began to list these minorities, along with the blacks, as "disadvantaged," deserving of assistance to correct discrimination.

At the very time that blacks were demanding civil rights, ethnic whites of Southern and Eastern European origin were fighting for their own rights in employment, housing, and other matters. One of their main concerns was the abolishment of the 1924 Immigration Act, which contained the national origins provision. Poles, Italians, Greeks, Jews, and others rallied around the new 1965 Immigration Act.

The ethnic whites did not take full advantage of the new law, because by the mid-1960s Europe's economy had generally improved and few felt the need to emigrate. The greatest beneficiaries were Asians and Latin Americans. But the spirit of equality reflected American attitudes toward colored immigrants, who had been systematically restricted from entering the country. The new immigration act represented a liberal and enlightened vision, and it was no accident
that it was passed in 1965, one year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Both were intended to make America a color-blind society.

The new law profoundly affected the composition and the size of Chinese communities. The Chinese population increased dramatically: from 236,084 in 1960 to 1,079,400 in 1985. Today, the Chinese are the largest Asian group in the United States.

According to the 1965 act, preference for admission emphasizes two principles: first, to unite the families of American citizens; second, to admit persons with professional skills needed in the U.S. economy. These categories foster two very different types of Chinese immigrants. Those who arrive with professional skills are better able to integrate into the American society and do not settle in Chinatowns. They are the Uptown Chinese.

While the 1965 Immigration Act favors professionals, 74 percent of the quota is actually reserved for the relatives of American citizens. Since most citizens of Chinese descent were traditionally of humble origin, mainly from the rural areas of southern China, their relatives are likely to have similar backgrounds. Immigrants in this category tend to settle in Chinatowns with their sponsoring relatives. They comprise the Downtown Chinese.

Despite the rising status of the Chinese in American society, large numbers of new immigrants have chosen to remain in Chinese communities. Chinatowns across the country have experienced rapid expansion. Old Chinatowns in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco are bursting at the seams. New communities are springing up everywhere.

The gravitation of new immigrants toward Chinese communities, despite the breakdown of racial barriers in the larger society, can still be attributed to their need for mutual support. Concentrated immigrant communities are not new in America; they provide a familiar environment for newcomers without jobs and English-language skills. But the basic assumption is that they provide only temporary quarters.

Most Americans who believe that today's Chinese immigrants should follow the path of the early European immigrants ignore the similarities of Chinatown to black and Latino ghettos. It is widely be-

The Old Chinatown Ghettos

lieved that immigrants should assimilate and make every effort to become "American." They should first learn the language, even if it means going to night school after a long day of work. They should appreciate hot dogs and understand baseball. Above all, they should avoid hanging around their countrymen too much. Ethnic ghettos may exist, but they should be a transitional stage, serving as a home for newcomers until they learn English and adjust to the American culture.

The argument seems logical, because immigrants customarily have found work outside their ethnic communities. In the long run, the location of the workplace determines where people live. Once better jobs are found, the newcomers move on and the ghettos slowly wither away. Most immigrants want to get out of their ghettos as soon as possible.

Most of today's Chinese immigrants not only live in their ethnic communities, they also work there, and maintain a high degree of isolation from the rest of American society. Some observers suggest that this reflects the Chinese desire to maintain their culture and tradition—an admirable trait to those lamenting the disappearance of ethnic diversity. Others consider the separation as un-American—a refusal to become part of this country.

In the past Chinese were, as we have seen, sojourners, for the most part unwilling to be a part of American society. But this is not the case with recent immigrants who arrive with permanent resident status. They are overwhelmingly young couples with children; they have no intention of returning to China; they want to stay here.

What is distinctive about America's Chinatown today—in contrast to the black, Latino, and even earlier European immigrant ghettos—is the dynamic growth of industries and commerce. Immigrants are attracted by jobs. Once they settle in these communities, the Chinatowns' economic and social system holds them in. Normally we think of an immigrant as an individual confronting the whole American society. His eventual assimilation is a foregone conclusion. However, the development of Chinatowns today is different.

New York's Chinatown is the largest Chinese community in the
ECONOMIC BOOM
IN NEW YORK'S
CHINATOWN

Before the mid-1960s, New York's Chinatown had a small, "pre-capitalistic," service-oriented economy. At its peak, the community encompassed only a six-block area, with a population never exceeding 15,000. Today its population has grown more than sevenfold, and is still increasing. According to a survey by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, New York is the first choice of Chinese immigrants. From 1965 to 1977, 22 percent of all Chinese, before their arrival in America, selected New York City as their destination.

The attractiveness of New York is understandable, since it is the largest metropolitan center in America. Immigrants come expecting a greater availability of jobs. Most of the Chinese immigrants, however, look for jobs almost exclusively in Chinatown. They have learned through the grapevine that it is easier to find jobs there than anywhere else. The 1980 U.S. Census seems to validate this claim. It showed that New York's Chinatown has an extremely low unemployment rate: 3.4 percent compared to the national average of 6.4 percent,