

Obtained spatial dispersion, yet reinforced ethnic boundary
A study of contemporary Chinese immigrant in suburban towns in New England

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INTRODUCTION

The paper is a revised section of an ongoing dissertation project that examines demographics, residential patterns, and the formation and development of ethnic communities of contemporary Chinese immigrant in New England metropolitan area. In this particular chapter, two theoretical models for understanding the trajectory of immigrant assimilation are first discussed. Neither of them, however, fits into the situation experienced by recent Chinese immigrants, especially those who entered the country after year 2000 and now reside in New England suburban towns. In addition to analyzing the newly released 1% Public Use Micro data of the 2008 American Community Survey (2008 ACS 1 year estimate PUMs), this study relies on extensive observations in several selected suburban towns in New England, and interviews with the key informants and residents inside the communities. Overall, it is found that Chinese immigrants living in suburban towns in New England have developed a new type of ethnic community that is different from the old enclaves, such as Chinatown in most immigration gate cities. It neither replicates the form of ethnoburbs that are mostly observed in suburban areas in NY and LA. The formation and development of such an ethnic community cannot be better understood separately from the unique demographic feature of Chinese immigrants in New England area. Exogenous conditions include the development and availability of convenient transportation tools, the fast exchange of information through the internet, and various cultural events organized by Chinese language schools that are rapidly growing in past ten years. Therefore, the boundaries of Chinese communities seem to be reinforced and extended beyond the actual residential neighborhoods and sometimes cross towns and counties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The classic theoretical model used to link the spatial dispersion into suburban white middle-class neighborhoods and the level of immigrant assimilation basically predicts that residential assimilation will eventually lead to cultural assimilation. Spatial dispersion (i.e., achieved residential mobility out of the urban ethnic enclave) is an important manifestation of economic, cultural, and social assimilation. Related arguments also include that immigrants initially settled in a segregated urban ethnic enclave with cheap but poor housing conditions, and chose to move out of the enclave and into a whiter neighborhood in suburbs once they had accumulated enough household income. When such a spatial dispersion takes place, contacts with mainstream natives (i.e., the majority white residents in the neighborhood) will eventually help immigrants achieve the final stage of assimilation. At the same time, immigrants lose distinctive ethnic traits and ethnic ties become fewer. This model has been extensively applied and examined in empirical studies on various migrant groups. The theoretical arguments were generally supported by findings showing that immigrants in suburbs were statistically doing better in terms of English proficiency and income of all kinds, and they usually reported longer duration of residence in the United States compared to the immigrants residing in the inner city enclaves.

This view has been challenged by recent researches on suburban Chinese communities, for instance, Queens in NY and Monterey Park in LA. The growth of suburban immigrant communities over the last couple of decades in NY and LA have shown strong evidence that suburban residency is no longer the final stage of assimilation. For many new immigrants,

suburbia has become the first stop rather than the last destination through family or social networks built even before they arrive in the United States. These new immigrants, usually poor in English, can easily find jobs and share housing in existing ethnic communities in suburbs upon arrival. Based on the studies of Chinese immigrants in Queens, NY and Monterey Park, LA, some researchers have proposed “ethnoburb” as a new type of ethnic communities emerging in suburbs. The distinctive features of an ethnoburb include several aspects. First, unlike the historical Chinese immigrants who were normally single males, the contemporary immigrant groups from China (including the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other areas) consist families (couples and sometimes with children). Second, the sending areas have been shifted weights. Rather than poor illegal people from Guangdong or Fujian Provinces, immigrant flows from various regions including mainland, HK, and Taiwan are more and more observed. The prevalence of Mandarin in suburban Chinese communities, even in the old enclaves, is a clear indication. Third, immigrants come from various social and economic backgrounds as well. In some suburban Chinese communities, there is a mixture of rich, middle-class, and poor Chinese immigrants. Another important characteristic is that in an ethnoburb, a single immigrant group may not be the dominant group (over 50% of the total neighborhood population). But distinctive cultural features and consumptions, social institutions, and economies are clearly in the form of existence in ethnoburbs. Therefore, the classic spatial assimilation model does not apply in the case of emerging ethnoburbs in NY and LA suburbs.

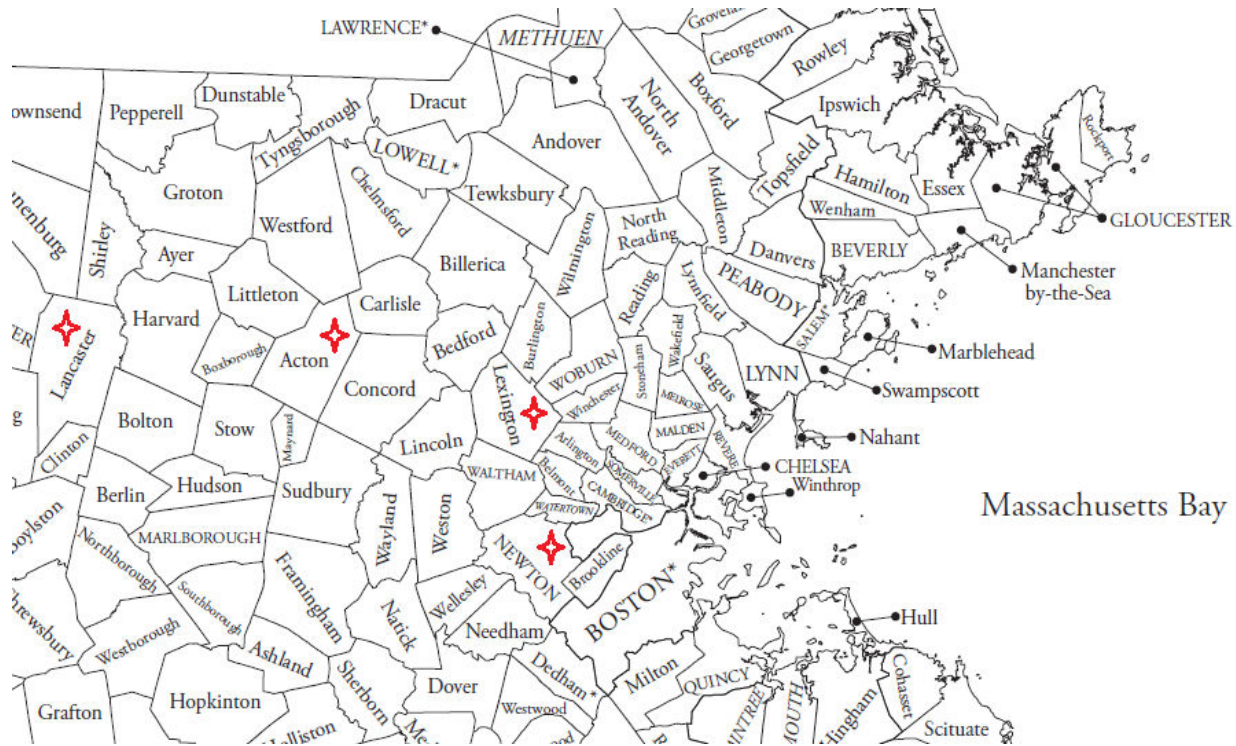
New England has not been one of the traditional destinations chosen by Chinese immigrants. In the past ten years, however, there is a growing Chinese immigrant population in this area. Take Quincy city in the state of Massachusetts as the example. The three year estimate (2006-2008) from the American Community Survey shows that the Chinese population in Quincy city has more than doubled compared to the 1990 Census report. Comparing the data from the 2000 Census and the 2008 American Community Survey, we also find that the increase in foreign-born Chinese population in the state of Massachusetts (53,874 vs 64,038) mainly is from the mainland China (38,682 vs 50,006) while there is a decrease in the Chinese immigrant population from Taiwan (7,159 vs 5,489). I am thus interested in studying the suburbanization of contemporary Chinese immigrant in this area and find that due to their own unique demographic features and the availability exogenous conditions, this group of Chinese immigrants is moving forward along a somewhat different trajectory of assimilation regarding their way of handling ethnic communities in suburbs that clearly demonstrates the spatial dispersion, yet accompanied by reinforced ethnic boundaries.

SELECTED FINDINGS

MA Chinese as Reported in ACS

I first analyze data from the 2008 American Community Survey (2008 ACS 1 year estimate PUMs, mainly understanding the demographic characteristics of the foreign-born Chinese in Massachusetts. I compare their average level of education, income, and duration of residence in the United States to the general population and other immigrant groups. The foreign-born Chinese in the state of Massachusetts on average travels longer time to work compared to the general population. There are more female in the group as well a substantially

higher proportion of being married. Compared to the universe population in MA, Chinese immigrants have on average significantly higher level of education. Almost half the immigrant Chinese have the educational attainment equal and beyond the bachelor's degree. Average personal wage of foreign-born Chinese is not, however, significantly higher than the general population. Another feature of immigrant Chinese in MA is that almost one third of them report year of entry later than year 2000. About 68% entered the United States after year 1990.



I then chose Lancaster, Acton, Lexington, and Newton as study sites shown as red stars in the map above. Here I report part of the findings from the observations in Acton and interviews with residents from there. Regardless the inconvenient schedule of the MBTA commuter rail (the train travels once from Acton to the South Station, Boston in an hour), most residents chose Acton because of the cheap housing price in the past 10 years and relatively good educational system in the town. Some of them consider driving to Boston for the work quite as a routine for them now. However, the housing price in Acton has been increasing gradually and some of the new residents in suburbs chose to purchase their houses in nearby towns, like Boxborough and Maynard. Some of the residents do not work in Boston either. In stead, they found employment just in nearby towns. A few IT companies have set up the branches in small suburban towns due to the cheap land. The development of business offices, industrial parks, and shopping malls in suburban areas has provided potentials for suburban residents' employment. This changing nature of suburban areas has increased residential and business opportunities for immigrants including well-educated professionals.

During the investigation of Acton, I also attended the first Chinese cultural day organized by the Acton Chinese Language School in June 2010. Various cultural activities, including traditional dancing and singing performances, dragon show, Chinese painting and calligraphy, Chinese gardening art and so on were brought together in Nara Park. In addition, several Chinese restaurants from local Acton and other towns set up their own food vendors serving authentic Chinese food as well as some Americanized cuisines. According to one of the organizer, this event turned out to be a great success with more than 3,000 people attended and more were blocked outside by the police due to the over-crowdedness in the park. The Acton Chinese Language School was founded in 2003 by a few parents who decided to set up their own Chinese language school in a suburb and help their children to heritage the great Chinese language and culture. Gradually, the school attracts parents and children from other towns and even other counties who would not mind traveling to Acton to take classes in weekends. Later on, parents from different towns set up online clubs at Yahoo and other websites to share information in education and then extended to housing, traveling, and other aspects of life.

While Observing and interviewing Chinese residents in these suburban towns or cities, I have constantly come across organized events, such as barbecue, soccer, Ping-Pong, Basketball, and etc. Most of the time, people invited to the event are not from the neighborhood within walking distance, some from other towns and cities. The events are mainly organized by posting messages or invitations in online communities of various interested. There are also exchange of information about where to buy the best Chinese vegetables and which Chinese restaurant serves best dumpling. There are also exchange of social support and physical help within the capacity. Such communities seem to have the least geographic boundaries, yet strongly bounded by ethnic and cultural borders. Unlike ethnic enclaves that have clear geographic limits overlaid with the presence of ethnic concentration, suburban ethnic communities in New England clearly cannot be wrapped within a traditional neighborhood, a census tract, or even a town.

Given the development of intra- and inter-state highways and affordability of automobiles to most families, immigrants who may not able to find a sizable group of people of their own ethnicity can extend their neighborhood to include coethnics from places further away. The communications between ethnic members are effective through the internet and the ethnic culture can gain more adherents by sending the second generation to ethnic language schools. Through these methods, ethnic boundaries are reinforced while further spatial dispersion may be observed. New England's case thus provides empirical data urging us to rethink the relationship between spatial dispersion and immigrant assimilation. The classic spatial assimilation model has been rejected and the ethnoburb type of ethnic communities is not the general type that can be applied to New England. Further studies will need to address a new theoretic framework for this phenomenon after combining theories from ethnic studies and neighborhood research.