

Residential Patterns of Chinese and Korean Americans in Greater Los Angeles

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This article elaborates on why the residential patterns of Korean Americans and Chinese Americans vary. The affluent class of the Chinese Americans has developed a privileged version of an ethnic enclave within the San Gabriel Valley while the Korean Americans are dispersed within the Greater Los Angeles Area. The affluent Chinese have moved from the mainland to the San Gabriel Valley because of a high concentration of already present Chinese American inhabitants. On the other hand, Korean Americans have always been dispersed within the Greater Los Angeles area and therefore do not have a specified area that is highly concentrated. Historical sequences from these two ethnic groups also perpetuate these trends.

¹The greater Los Angeles area is home to two very large ethnic groups; Chinese Americans and Korean Americans. It has been observed that Korean-Americans are very widely dispersed throughout the greater Los Angeles area with many small areas of concentration (Li 2006:101), while Chinese-Americans have a clearly defined area of significantly high concentration in and around the San Gabriel Valley (Allen 1997:122). The purpose of this paper is

to determine why this residential pattern persists among Korean-Americans and Chinese Americans. It is the position of this paper that the Korean-American community is more dispersed because of the absence of a single heavily concentrated suburban area of institutional completeness that would be attractive to affluent Korean-Americans outside of traditional Koreatown, whereas the Chinese do have such an area outside of traditional Chinatown in the San Gabriel Valley.

In order to elaborate further, the historical sequence for these residential patterns must first be understood.

The traditional Chinatown of Los Angeles was well established to the north of downtown Los Angeles in the 1860s (Allen 1997:120). The Chinese

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residents of this area were, and still are “poorer, less educated, less acculturated, and more recently arrived than the Chinese who live elsewhere in Southern California” (Allen 1997:121).

As an alternative, the San Gabriel Valley has become the most popular destination for “immigrants who could afford better housing than Chinatown” (Allen 1997:122). In the 1970s, an effort was made to develop a suburban Chinese community in Monterey Park by advertising to the wealthy Chinese living in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Allen 1997:122). International events in the 1970s and 1980s caused many residents of Hong Kong and Taiwan to fear political uncertainty and come to the United States (Li 2006:82).

As a result, there was a significant influx of wealthy Chinese people migrating to Monterey Park, as well as into other areas within the San Gabriel Valley (Allen 1997:122). In addition to buying homes, many of these immigrants opened businesses “catering to the needs of the growing Chinese population” (Allen 1997:122). This phenomenon can be described as “rapid economic growth propelled by the influx of foreign capital and immigration” (Zhou 2005:280).

The ethnic Chinese banking sector played a significant and crucial role in this development. It “financed the transformation of the entire San Gabriel Valley into an [area] where the Chinese population and businesses are prominent” by tapping into “financial resources brought by the Chinese immigrants and possessed by ethnic Chinese across the Pacific Rim” (Li 2006:86-87). Many of the Chinese in the area soon became, or already were,

wealthier than the native whites and showed “little interest in acculturating to white America” (Allen 1997:122).

This was made further possible since the community had clearly developed into a region that corresponds with Raymond Breton’s description of “institutional completeness” (Li 2006: 100). A region is said to be institutionally complete when a significant proportion of the members of an ethnic group have most of their personal relationships within that group as a result of the abundance of ethnic institutions, or “formal collective organizations,” such as “social aid agencies, business groups and media, and public institutions like schools” (Bourgeois 2005:2).

According to one source, by 2000, 41.23 percent of Monterey Park’s residents were Chinese (Kwong 2005: 358). The same source stated that the Chinese population of nearby San Marino was 41 percent, Arcadia’s was 34 percent, and Rosemead’s was 29 percent. From all of this it is clear that the San Gabriel Valley is the largest center of affluent Chinese in Southern California as well as the area’s most “intensively Chinese settlement” (Allen 1997:122).

The development of the Korean community in the greater Los Angeles area had a much different start. Most Koreans who came to the United States were highly educated, often as professionals, but were unable to use such education effectively because of language and cultural barriers, discrimination, and “lack of transferability of work experience, education, and skills acquired in Korea” (Allen 1997:149; Song 2004:13-14). As a result, many

had to open their own small businesses in Koreatown (Allen 1997:149).

Koreans are well known for being very entrepreneurial in comparison to other groups (Waldinger 1996:329). However, unlike the Chinese in the San Gabriel Valley who had a strong ethnic banking sector as well as an intense “flow of transnational capital,” Koreans had to rely on rotating-credit associations and banks for financing (Kwong 2005:358; Allen 1997:149). Despite their difficulties, they were able to establish an area of “institutional completeness” in Koreatown (Li 2006:100).

Although it is the most important Korean enclave in the greater Los Angeles area, Koreans make up a very small proportion of the residents of Koreatown (Li 2006:103). Not to mention, in 1990, 56.6 percent of Korean households in Koreatown had an income below \$25,000 and they had a poverty rate of 25.3 percent (Li 2006:109). Koreatown is clearly not an area that is attractive to affluent Koreans.

Many Koreans were able to make significant economic success and move out of Koreatown and into the suburbs, while some were already wealthy enough to go to the suburbs directly from Korea (Li 2006:105-112). These settled into enclaves in places like the San Fernando Valley, San Gabriel Valley, Orange County and the South Bay (Li 2006:101; Allen 1997:150-151). These suburban enclaves developed their own Korean businesses and had sufficient Korean institutions to be considered institutionally complete (Allen 1997:150; Li 2006:105).

However, unlike Monterey Park and the San Gabriel Valley for the

Chinese, there was no one specific place or region that was heavily advertised for Koreans and to which an intense amount of transnational capital flowed. Therefore, there was no one suburb into which affluent Koreans concentrated and developed intensively. The Korean dispersion into the suburbs followed a pattern of “decentralized concentration” (Li 2006:103). In support of this notion, population data shows that Koreans do not make up more than 10 percent of the population of any one of 10 regions in Southern California (Li 2006:102).

It is the position of this paper that this trend is being perpetuated by the already established residential patterns of the two ethnic groups. Because Korean Americans outside of Koreatown have already been dispersed to the point of having no one major area of significant suburban clustering, new immigrants from Korea looking to move to the suburbs will continue to have several areas of institutional completeness to choose from and will not begin to intensively occupy any one region (Li 2006:116).

The Chinese, on the other hand, already have a significantly large area of concentration in the San Gabriel Valley that was well established by intense investment from overseas as well as local economic activity. Given this, new affluent immigrants from China will be more likely to choose the San Gabriel Valley area over another. It appears that this “cycle” will continue perpetually, and for this reason it can be said that the Korean American community’s lack of a single heavily concentrated suburban area of institutional completeness is the reason for its apparently greater dis-

persion than the Chinese American community.

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