

Asian Communities in the United States: A Class Analysis

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO SKETCH OUT AN ANALYSIS OF CLASS FORMATION IN the new Asian communities. The article is organized into two parts. The first section is a description of selected Asian communities (in California) based upon visual impressions of buildings, the use of urban space, and the activities of people, supplemented by census data and other sources of information. The purpose here is to examine the import of what Hopkins and Wallerstein (1977) identify as *the third fundamental aspect to the modern world system, the formation or disintegration of "cultural" communities*. In a brief paragraph, Hopkins and Wallerstein suggest that in addition to the international division of labor and the formation of interrelated states in the modern world system, it contains a multiplicity of interrelated (and often, overlapping) cultural communities. By cultural communities, they mean language communities, ethnic communities, religious communities, races, status groups, class communities, scientific communities, and so on. In their words, "some preexistent communities were incorporated and reconstituted, others destroyed; entirely new communities were formed, including 'whole peoples.'"

In this article, I am not concerned with an analysis of the movement of industry, the changes in employment demands, and the impact of shifts in industrial investment on society; rather, the intent is to describe what appear to be different patterns of class formation in racial communities.

The second part of the article is an analysis and discussion of the petty bourgeoisie in the formation of racial communities. The new immigrants from the Far East are a highly educated group. Kim (1978), in a survey of Asians in Chicago, reports that 54.4% of Koreans were college graduates before coming to the United States; 68.3% of them worked as professionals, managers, or proprietors, and an additional 26.4% were in skilled or white-collar occupations in Korea. The occupational and educational backgrounds of the Filipinos are equally impressive: 78% were college graduates before entering the United States; 62.5% were employed as professionals or managers in the Philippines, and an additional 23% were in skilled or white-collar work. The exception appears to be the Chinese, where a majority

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reported a working-class background, although some 46% reported professional, technical, or managerial backgrounds at the time of immigration. Kim's findings on the new Asian immigrants are supported by other studies. Thus, the highest level of generality that can be applied to the new arrivals from Asia is the immigration of the petty bourgeoisie.

A Description of Selected Asian Communities in California

Before describing the communities, some terms need to be clarified. The term Asian (or Asian American) as used here includes people from Guam, Hawaii, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Samoa, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and groups with a longer history in the United States: the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. The term community as used here is the same as the everyday usage of the term by people to refer to areas in the city as being of this or that ethnic community. A community is typically a geographically bounded area identifiable by the predominance of a given ethnic group, either a residential community or, more typically, an area characterized by the distribution of services and products by ethnics and the conversion of foodstuff into uniquely ethnic commodities.

1. *The Korean Community.* Walking west on Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles from Vermont to Crenshaw, a 20-block strip, one discovers lined on both sides of the street gaudy signs advertising eating and drinking places, retail stores, and services of one kind or another, all in Korean. This is an amazing development that has occurred in less than 10 years. While immigrants in the past have established neighborhoods in blighted areas of the city or claimed areas when urban space was relatively open, the Koreans in the 1970s have managed to obtain geographically bounded housing and places of business in an already developed urban space.

The 1970 U.S. Census reported 70,000 Koreans in the United States. Today, the number is estimated to be around 260,000, with about 100,000 in Los Angeles, concentrated along the 20-block strip on Olympic Boulevard. The Koreans are a young population: 41.5% are below age 25, and 87.3% are below age 45. An estimated 5,000 Korean youngsters are enrolled in the public schools.

The Koreans' median education level of 14.5 years makes them one of the highest-educated groups in the United States. In Los Angeles, they appear to be engaged in petty entrepreneurship. There are 4,500 small businesses operated by Koreans, some 1,200 of which are liquor stores and restaurants. An unspecified number operate grocery stores, automobile shops, or are self-employed as maintenance gardeners and janitors. The women are reported to be employed in the garment industry at piecework rates.¹

The entrepreneurship of the Koreans has drawn the attention of sociologists, primarily Edna Bonacich and her colleagues at UCLA. They view self-employment among Asian immigrant groups as a phenomenon of a middleman minority (Bonacich, 1973; Kitano, 1974; Bonacich et al., 1977). The theory says that under certain conditions, the nature of the community organization combines

with host hostility toward the ethnic to produce a minority group that occupies a higher niche in society. Although the middleman minority possesses revenues and resources out of proportion to its numbers, it has relatively low status with respect to political power and social privileges. I will examine the Korean community in greater depth later on in this article.

2. *The Japanese Community.* Moving across town to the corner of East 1st and San Pedro, there are in a 10-block-square area shiny new buildings overlooked by the 448-unit New Otani Hotel, with rates that are comparable to the most expensive hotels in Beverly Hills. The new buildings have no gaudy signs, but etched on the plate-glass windows are the names of companies whose products have become common household names—Sony, Nikon, Hitachi, Seiko, Mikimoto pearls, and so on—and walking into an eating or drinking place, one notices that the patrons are mostly men dressed in dark suits and ties talking in Japanese. The waitresses and bartenders speak in Japanese and one gets the impression that the establishment is owned by a company based in Japan.

The historically oriented researcher would know that the 10-block-square area used to be *nihonmachi* (Japantown), where people lived or came to do their grocery shopping, attend church services, receive dental and medical care, and celebrate holidays and festivals as a community. In San Francisco, as in Los Angeles, transnational capital with the cooperation of the local urban renewal office constructed “Little Tokyos” for the Japanese national, typically single male adults, sent to the United States for short-term assignments by the parent corporations. In San Francisco, the transformation of *nihonmachi* began in the late 1960s with a report issued by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency (SFRA). The report noted that the area is predominantly residential, with a few small businesses. The buildings were judged to be unfit and unsafe for occupancy, overcrowded with inadequate ventilation, light, sanitation, and open space. The report concluded that these conditions depress property values and contribute to high expenditures for the preservation of public health and safety, such as crime and delinquency, and pose other problems of fire and accident prevention.²

Nihonmachi was the site of a variety of home designs from the late 19th century—Victorian, mid-Victorian, Mansardi, and Queen Anne—no different from contiguous neighborhoods, which later received low-interest loans for restoring these old buildings to preserve the San Francisco of bygone days. The SFRA, with assistance from the District Attorney’s office, which backed up the policy of nonnegotiable evictions and the right of eminent domain, purchased the property and then sold it to international capital. They constructed a complex of buildings, housing the Japanese consulate, the Bank of Tokyo, the convention-type Miyako Hotel, and a two-block mall displaying the latest industrial products from Japan. It was initially called the Japanese Cultural Center, but was changed to the Japan Trade Center when the remaining residents of the area, supported by student

groups, pointed out the hypocrisy and carried out a seven-year struggle against the encroachment of international capital.

The reconstitution of Japantown is almost complete. The area has been redesigned to attract tourists and to service the single, male employees of Japanese monopoly capital. It includes a bowling alley, a favorite leisure activity of Japanese nationals; a movie house with the latest films from Japan; a bookstore with magazines from Japan, as well as books with academic and popular titles; a TV station showing regularly scheduled programs in Japanese; and several dozen eating and drinking places, some that are frequented by well-dressed prostitutes giving smiles of invitation to the men dressed in dark suits and ties.

The life of the Japanese national is oriented around his loyalty to international capital. He does not contribute to the quality of life in the larger Asian American population. He is unfriendly, socially distant, and his presence in increasing numbers in the United States is evidence that it is not limited to semi-peripheral and peripheral areas.

An aspect of international capital that requires further analysis is the investment in real estate given the strength of monetary value in one core state with respect to another. In addition to the half-dozen high-rise buildings in downtown Los Angeles already in the hands of Japanese investors, some recent acquisitions include the purchase of the Crocker Bank headquarters building in downtown Los Angeles, the four-star-rated 1,500-unit Bonaventure Hotel, the Sheraton Hotel in Santa Monica, and several shopping centers and industrial parks in and around the Los Angeles area (*Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1979). The presence of the Japanese national has become a permanent "fixture" on the American scene.

3. *The Chinese Community.* The much older and larger Chinatown is the product of 100 years of discriminatory legislation and extra-legal repression of the Chinese in California. To understand the increase of the Chinese population in the United States from 237,000 to over 806,027 in 1980 requires a historical analysis of the political economy of California and the role of Chinese labor. Setting aside the historical development of San Francisco's Chinatown, in 1965, just before the influx in immigration, there were 42,600 Chinese in San Francisco, with an estimated 30,000 concentrated in the 42-square-block Chinatown-North Beach area. The center of Chinatown is one of the poorest sections of San Francisco. Examining family income data by census tracts, the median income in the core Chinatown area ranged from \$4,300 to \$4,800 (S.F. Report, 1969). By comparing Chinatown with the Mission District, mostly Hispanics, and with Hunters Point, mostly blacks, across indicators of quality of life, Chinatown is the poorest area in San Francisco. For example, of the percentage of families with income under \$4,000, Chinatown has 40.7%; the Mission District, 31.4%; Hunters Point, 37.2%; and the city as a whole, 21.1%. Male unemployment figures reveal Chinatown and Hunters Point to have the highest unemployment in the city at 11.6%; the Mission District, 10.2%; and the city rate at 6.7%. Looking at persons age 25 and over with seven years of

education or less, Chinatown has 63.8%; the Mission District, 29.4%; and Hunters Point, 30.8%. And the substandard housing rate is highest in Chinatown with 27.3%; the Mission District, 17.6%; and Hunters Point, 9.3%.

The new immigrants since 1965 have doubled the Chinese population in San Francisco to 82,480. They have settled mostly in Chinatown, exacerbating the preexisting conditions of unemployment, sub-employment, housing shortage, and accompanying health and welfare problems. Lan (1971) and Light and Wong (1975) report that Chinatown now has a density of 885 people per acre, 10 times the city's average. The Chinese in San Francisco have a suicide rate three times higher than the nation's average, and an infant mortality rate two times higher than the rest of the city. These statistics reveal the grim social conditions behind the facade of an "exotic and mysterious" Chinatown and the bitter irony is captured by a community worker who observed: "This is the only ghetto in the United States with a Grey Line bus tour."

Chinatown is not a racial community in the traditional sense. It exists because of its importance to the tourist industry, with linkages to the nearby chain hotels, airlines, and the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce. The retail stores and restaurants in Chinatown, which are noted for their reasonable prices, are highly dependent upon a cheap labor force. Census data support this analysis as 21.4% of the Chinese are employed by eating and drinking places, which is 10 times higher than the percentage for Japanese (Light and Wong, 1975). In New York's Chinatown, 53% of the adult men and 36% of all working residents are employed in restaurants. Over 34% of the Chinese in the United States are employed in retail trades as compared to 15% for the Japanese and 14% among whites (Light and Wong, 1975).

San Francisco ranked second, behind Chicago, in hosting conventions. Thus the infrastructure of Chinatown is as important to the city's economy as the natural deepwater ports in Oakland and San Francisco are to the world system of capitalism. The difference, however, is that Chinatown requires replenishment of fresh labor power. In a study of the occupational pursuits of the new immigrants, Kwang (1976) reports that almost 70% were in service/domestic work, irrespective of their prior occupational backgrounds. In comparing median family incomes of those who immigrated before 1925 and those who arrived after 1965, he found they were earning the same amount, that is, \$7,426 and \$7,372 respectively. Kwang's findings indicate that there exists a labor force that earns the same wage regardless of the year of immigration. What this means is that the new immigrants are engaged in the same line of work as those who arrived before 1925, which suggests that the "liberalization" of the immigration laws in 1965 essentially admitted fresh labor to replace the worn-out labor power admitted before 1925.

4. *The Filipino Community.* There is much less information on the new arrivals from the Philippines, who have increased their population in the United States more than tenfold, to over 774,640 in 1980. Their pattern of settlement has been

quite different from the other Asian groups, tending to locate wherever cheap housing can be obtained close to downtown. There are, however, pockets of Filipino concentration: 2nd and Temple in Los Angeles, one of several Mexicano *barrios* in the city, or 7th and Howard in San Francisco, a skid row area. These pockets appear to be reception areas before people move on to more permanent residences, such as Daly City in the San Francisco Bay Area, which has come to be known as a Filipino community. Unlike the other Asian communities, the Filipino community is not characterized by entrepreneurship. Instead, the men are employed in the service sector in low-skilled, low-paying jobs, and the women, with a high rate of labor force participation, are employed in clerical work and sales. Filipinas (women) employed as professionals work as nurses (Kim, 1978). The proportion of Filipinas with a college education (27%) is the highest for any population group, male or female, which explains their high labor force participation and their hopes of developing professional careers.

A recent development is the large number of Korean and Filipino workers in the electronics industry (Santa Clara County), the very industry that has relocated to cheap labor havens in the Far East. The availability of Asian labor has apparently revitalized the industry. Pay starts at \$3.80 per hour for assemblers and \$5.50 an hour for skilled technicians. Workers receive bonuses of fifty to one hundred dollars for referring persons who get hired (*San Francisco Chronicle*, August 18, 1979).

There are other developing racial communities on the West Coast—Vietnamese, Samoan, Laotian, and Cambodian. Social service agencies are conducting surveys and studies, and we should learn more about these groups as time goes on. But clearly, from the sketches of the Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean communities, there are different patterns of development depending upon the country and class origin and their economic role in the core state.

The Immigration of the Petty Bourgeoisie

The term “petty bourgeoisie” includes those professionals and managers who “head” the capitalist labor process, the middle-level managers of international capital, as in the case of the Japanese national, as well as the stratum of professional and technical workers, which has apparently become superfluous or threatened by proletarianization in semi-peripheral and peripheral areas. We distinguish the former as the new petty bourgeoisie from the latter as the old petty bourgeoisie.

The internationalization of capital has apparently altered the traditional class structure in semi-peripheral and peripheral areas, not only by the proletarianization and impoverishment of ever-growing numbers of people, but by affecting the livelihood of the independent proprietor and professional. The rationalization of production process has been accompanied by the establishment of supermarkets, company health care services, and convenience stores of one kind or another, to organize the workers’ lives to maximize their productive capacity. Such an arrangement would especially affect certain segments of the old petty bourgeoisie—ac-

countants, bookkeepers, small proprietors, health professionals, craftsmen, and so on. These occupations qualify for immigration into the United States under two preferences: the professional, scientist, or artist priority, or to fill labor shortages in the United States.

While the new immigrants from Asia, because of their petty bourgeois background, may be distinguished from the undocumented workers from Mexico or the guest workers in Europe, the forces that lead to their migration are the same: the establishment of a world market-oriented manufacturing industry, the highly rationalized and automatized production process that transfers control over the labor process to a stratum of technocrats and managers (Dixon and Jonas, 1979), and shifts in the infrastructure that declass segments of the old petty bourgeoisie. What is different about the immigration from Asia is the intellectual class that accompanies the new immigrants, which I will discuss in a moment.

The U.S. laws on board certification, citizenship requirements for civil service employment, and the requirement of fluency in English for many jobs, combined with the fiscal crisis, have effectively channeled the new workers into superexploited sectors of the job market—the garment industry, the eating and drinking places, hospitals, service stations, clerical and sales work, and so on. Underemployment has not, however, altered their petty bourgeois orientation, despite the “anti-Marcos” and (formerly) “anti-Park” movements within these communities. Where anti-imperialist activities have emerged, the KCIA (Korean CIA) and agents of Marcos silenced criticisms by employing strong-arm methods (*San Francisco Chronicle*, August 9, 1979). The class outlook of the new immigrants makes them ideal workers in industries that have long resisted unionization of workers, and their long period of socialization in bourgeois education makes potential alliances with the American working class highly problematic. To understand this, we turn to a discussion of the intellectual class in the Korean and Filipino communities.

The influence of the intellectual class plays an important role in the formation of a racial community. The internationalization of capital has apparently threatened the intellectual class as well, which might be related to society’s need to reproduce the new petty bourgeoisie, profoundly altering the traditional institutions (colleges and universities) to meet the needs of commerce and technology. The significance of this social dislocation lies in the number of doctorates (in Philosophy or Divinity) who have emigrated from Korea. There are more doctorates in the Korean population in the United States than in the other Asian groups combined, large enough that they have formed a national organization called the North American Association of *Christian Scholars* (emphasis added).³

The intellectual class wields an enormous amount of influence that stems from the prestige and privileges traditionally accorded to the literati class, learned in calligraphy, poetry, and art. The intellectuals produce a large number of publications—books, pamphlets, newsletters, journals, and newspapers, which are widely consumed given the high literacy rate among the new immigrants. The

publications focus upon issues in Korea with the “unification of Korea” as a major theme or “human rights and democratic elections” in the Philippines. The writings emphasize nationalism and Christianity, revealing the intellectual’s hope of some day returning to the mother country to regain the privileges he once enjoyed.

In the Korean community, the preacher is the one person who comes closest to approximating the standards of the literati class. There are officially 100 Korean Protestant churches in the city of Los Angeles alone, and about three times that number if we include congregations headed by lay ministers. The ministers are mostly Presbyterians and, to a lesser extent, Methodists. The lay preachers are graduates of Korean colleges, having obtained what would be equivalent to a bachelor’s degree in theology, while the ministers of churches have had three years of additional work in a theological seminary in the United States.

The key to understanding the social and economic organization of the Korean community is the lay preacher. He is the modern-day comprador, serving as the unofficial immigration officer, the welfare agent, the employment counselor, the family adviser, and investment counselor. Each lay preacher has a congregation of 10 to 50 families. Prayer meetings are held daily early in the morning, and the successful preacher recognizes the importance of audience participation, with rousing songs that generate enthusiasm and zeal to express devotion.

The prayer meetings are held in the apartment building owned by the lay preacher, purchased by offerings that come to 10 to 15% of the annual income of each family. The large offerings are a demonstration of one’s devotion, given to support the intellectual activity of the preacher that may take the form of writing books and articles, or collecting ceramics and art works, as well as to pursue the economic interests of the group.

Each congregation is an economic group as well. The preacher organizes the pooling of resources to float substantial loans to purchase small businesses and income property for the group. In this way, many of the storefronts along Olympic Boulevard, and the apartment buildings behind them, came to be acquired by Koreans. The larger congregations represent in some instances the merger of smaller groups. Whether the mergers are based on economic or spiritual grounds is not clear. Thus, concealed from view, behind the day-to-day proletarian work, is a version of communal Christian capitalism, which raises serious questions about the theory of a middleman minority, as well as about the potential for a working-class movement in the Korean community.

The influence of the intellectual/preacher in the Korean community is substantial, but the intellectual’s influence in the Filipino community is not so readily apparent. The production of intellectual work is equally voluminous, but it does not focus upon a Filipino American social reality. For example, there are two “left” positions: the “anti-martial law” movement, with strands of anti-imperialist and pro-socialist propaganda, and the Movement for a Free Philippines, an anti-Marcos and pro-American organization, as evidenced in the writings of the San Francisco-based,

widely read *Philippine News*. Both focus on the social and political conditions in the Philippines. What we do not see is an analysis of the mass daily life of the new immigrants. Life in America and what they left behind are viewed as two separate worlds, rather than parts of a global phenomenon. As a result, there is an emphasis upon nationalism, resembling the writings of the voluntary exile who seeks a haven to pen criticisms of the regime in power while waiting for conditions to change to eventually return to his country. It romanticizes the return of the exile, promoting a sojourner mentality, contributing to false consciousness on a short- and long-term basis. It implicitly accepts super-exploitative work as only temporary, until one can return to a better way of life, and for others, it contributes to the view that proletarian work is a necessary step, while learning English, for their eventual social mobility.

The current intellectual production is in sharp contrast to the writings of a Filipino immigrant who came to the United States at the age of 17 in the first cohort of Filipino laborers in the 1920s. Carlos Bulosan had little formal schooling, but he is considered to be the major chronicler of what it meant to be a Filipino worker in the United States. While working in the fields as a migrant laborer, he read and wrote about his search for the heart of America. He found it in 1938. In a passage from an essay written by Bulosan entitled "My Education," he had this to say about his discovery and commitment as an intellectual:

We were now moving toward the end of another decade. Writing was not sufficient. Labor demanded the active collaboration of writers. In the course of eight years I had relived the whole course of American history. I drew inspiration from my active participation in the workers' movement. *The most decisive move that the writer could make was to take his stand with the workers* (Bulosan, 1979: 117).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has shown that class formations vary from one Asian community to another. It is only in Chinatown that immigration has an almost totally proletarian character, a tendency that is accelerated by the structure of Chinatown. Chinatown exemplifies in all its forms what Harry Braverman has called the "universal market" (1974). Japanese immigration is very much shaped by transnational capital and by the unity of U.S. and Japanese monopoly capital on a world scale. Contemporary Japantowns are very much shaped by the needs of the new petty bourgeoisie. In the Korean and Filipino communities, petty bourgeois domination results not only from the centrality of a highly educated and professional stratum within the immigrant population, but also from the entrepreneurial and religious mentality that accompanies petty capitalism.

The politics of "anti-imperialism," expressed by the leadership in the Korean and Filipino communities, is at root a form of nationalism that deflects criticisms of conditions in the United States. It encourages utopian visions of a return to pre-

imperialist stability. The focus on Marcos, for example, as an individual despot obscures his dependency on, and relationship with, monopoly capitalism as a world system that exploits not only workers “over there,” but also within the core countries.

NOTES

1. The data on Koreans in Los Angeles were obtained from Dr. Samuel Rhee of the Los Angeles Mayor’s Office for Youth Development. I also interviewed members of the Los Angeles Police Department, county officials, and workers in community organizations.
2. For a historical analysis of the redevelopment of San Francisco’s *nihonmachi*, see Tatsuno (1971). For a similar analysis of the redevelopment of *nihonmachi* in Los Angeles, see Gee (1976).
3. I am indebted to Professor Roy Sano of the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, for information on politics and religion in Asian American communities.

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