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**THE "ISOLATION" OF NEW YORK CITY CHINATOWN:
A GEO-HISTORICAL APPROACH TO A CHINESE COMMUNITY IN THE U.S.**

by

PEI-YAO CHEN

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

2003

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Abstract

The “Isolation” of New York City Chinatown: A Geo-historical Approach to a Chinese community in the U.S.

By

Pei-Yao Chen

Adviser: Professor Colette Daiute

This dissertation studies the “isolation” of New York City Chinatown, examining how it was produced, maintained, and transformed from the late nineteenth century to the present. It rejects the common conception that associates “isolation” with individual psychology and culture because such focus tends to shift our attention away from inequalities of race and class, which remain the organizing principle in American society. To move away from an individualist approach and a simple cultural determinism, this study calls attention to and starts with the socio-political and economic dimensions of “isolation.” “Isolation” is conceptualized as a socially and historically produced process through which different spatial domains of Chinatown (including material spatial practices, the representations of Chinatown, and the lived experiences of the residents) were organized by various powerful groups in such a way as to protect and promote their interests. In particular, the “isolation” of Chinatown was, in great part, created and maintained through the specific political, economic and/or ideological functions it performed in and for American society. It is through this process that subjectivities and identities of the dominated groups were shaped, reshaped, and transformed. Using archival study and participatory research in a workers’ center in Chinatown, this dissertation identifies four forms of “isolation,” each spanning over a particular historical

period. My analysis shows that each form of “isolation” was constituted differently through a variety of forces, including the U.S. government, the Chinese nationalist government and the elite class in Chinatown, to benefit them economically and politically. In addition, each form of “isolation” was associated with the construction of a specific version of “Chineseness,” which played an important part in supporting the “isolation” to sustain. The analysis reveals that, over the course of time, “Chineseness” has transformed from a racial/biological category to a cultural/ethnic category. Finally, this study demonstrates that in different historical periods the working class people in Chinatown actively engaged in collective struggles to challenge “isolation.” Through their activism, they challenged the dominant conceptions of the Chinese and created new (Chinese) identities.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Historicizing “isolation”

“I met many prisoners of Chinatown like Bi Liu’s father—isolated, upset about the community, but resigned to making a buck and to always being strangers in America. Over and over, I heard how frightening Chinatown was, how bad crime was. But residents feel trapped. They don’t know enough English to deal with the police, they are too frightened to try to fight crime alone, and they are too suspicious of American authorities to help them improve Chinatown.”

Gwen Kinkead, *Chinatown: A Portrait of a Closed Society*, 1992

When journalist Gwen Kinkead wrote about New York City’s Chinatown, she was puzzled by how this booming business community at the center of New York’s metropolis still remained isolated from its neighbors in the late twentieth century. Arguing that racism resulted, in part, from cross-cultural misunderstanding, Kinkead was devoted to improving mutual understanding by demystifying the Chinese community to the American public. However, Kinkead experienced great difficulties in conducting her research in and about Chinatown as an “outsider” to the community. She described her frustration as “opening up an oyster without a knife.” While she acknowledged that racial discrimination had, in part, forced the Chinese to live in their own world, and expressed sympathy towards those who were “trapped” in Chinatown, she did not hesitate to blame Chinese immigrants for their self-imposed isolation and unwillingness to integrate into American society.

Kinkead was not alone in seeing New York City Chinatown as an isolated community. In this dissertation, I will argue that “isolation” is a crucial concept in reference to Chinese communities in the discourse of U.S. racial politics. Over the last one hundred and fifty years, since the Chinese first came onto American shores,

politicians, journalists, social scientists and many others, from different perspectives and interests, have paid great attention to the variants of “isolation” they observed in Chinese communities. Traditional accounts tell us that immigrant workers who do not speak English and lack skills and education are destined to be trapped in Chinatown. Some even prescribe “isolation” as an inevitable, but temporary, stage from which immigrants will eventually emerge and assimilate into American society. A more positive evaluation of “isolation” also exists. It argues that “isolation” represents a form of resistance, in which Chinese immigrants stick together to defend themselves and to preserve their culture in a hostile environment. Instead of joining the debate about whether “isolation” is good or bad, a more critical way to consider this issue is to place the concepts of “isolation” in a historical perspective.

Using Sucheng Chan’s Asian American historiography as a guideline, my historical review of the concept of “isolation” reveals that the concept underwent some major transformations over the course of time¹ which highlight the ways in which the Chinese were positioned in American race relations and how these positions have changed. My analysis also borrows Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon’s analytical tool of “register of meaning”² to capture how the concept of “isolation” has evolved and to locate it at the levels of individual, community, race and culture. I will demonstrate that

¹ Sucheng Chan’s Asian American historiography provides a helpful guideline. See Chan, 1996.

² In their article, *A Genealogy of Dependency*, Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994) trace dependency as a keyword of the U.S. welfare state. According to them, a crucial element of politics is the struggle to define and interpret social reality. Particular words and expressions, which function like keywords, become the battleground where meanings of social experience is negotiated and contested. Dependency has become a keyword of U.S. politics which carries unspoken assumptions of connotations that have powerful influence over the meaning of social life it describes but is exempt from critical examinations because of the taken-for-granted commonsense it constitutes. To dispel the taken-for-granted beliefs surrounding dependency, Fraser and Gordon trace the shift of the dependency according to four registers of meanings – social, economic, psychological, and political – in which the meanings of dependency reverberate.

the concept of “isolation” has shifted from a biological register associated with the Chinese race, to a more psychologically and culturally-oriented register expressed at the individual level.

This “isolation” was associated with racial inferiority during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries when issues of Chinese immigration were at the center of national political debates (Barth 1964; Lee, 1965; Miller 1969). Regardless of their positions on Chinese immigration, both anti- and pro-Chinese groups considered “isolation” an expression of the inferior quality of the Chinese race and culture. While the anti-Chinese groups accused the Chinese of being unassimilable and threatening American Anglo-Saxon purity, pro-Chinese groups, represented in part by missionaries, sought to advance the Chinese and improve the race by acculturating them to American civilization and converting them to Christianity (Carlson & Colburn 1972; Woo 1991). Here, the biological register dominated the meanings of “isolation,” which was framed as a biologically-determined trait of the Chinese race.

This same problematic perspective was carried into the mid-twentieth century when the psychological aspect of “isolation” was “discovered” by social scientists during the 1920s, as they came to study different groups of immigrants and immigrant communities (Chan, 1996). They tried to develop models of how immigrants assimilate into the host society, a function of a larger cultural anxiety around the influx of non-Anglo immigrants in general. The most influential view of assimilation derived from the human ecology school of urban sociology at the University of Chicago. Robert E. Park (1926), for instance, theorized that immigrants pass through a “race relation cycle” consisting of four stage of interaction with the host society: contact, competition,

accommodation, and assimilation.³ Within the assimilation framework, “isolation” of the Chinese community was either a temporary stage of adaptation, or, from a more negative perspective, a psychological problem for individuals who deviated from the “normal” path of assimilation. This marked the emergence of the psychological register of the “isolation,” which ascribed a negative personality to the Chinese race in this country as a whole.

Ironically, the so-called inferior traits of the Chinese race took on the opposite meaning during the 1960s (Chan, 1996). Although remaining within an assimilation framework, some scholars, instead of seeing “isolation” as a social problem, began to focus on contributions made by the Chinese to American society (e.g. Sung 1967; Hsu 1971). “Isolation” was now regarded as a cultural asset, a means for praising Chinese immigrants for sticking together, working hard and moving ahead on their own. The Chinese became a “model minority.” The negative biological register was now replaced by a positive cultural register.

A different concept of “isolation” also emerged during the same period. The civil rights movement created opportunities for Asian activists and scholars on college campuses to challenge dominant conceptions. They reframed “isolation” as a form of structural oppression resulting from racism, capitalism, and Western imperialism, and conceptualized the Chinatown ghetto as an internal colony (Chen & Bonacich 1984; Wei 1993). Striving for a self definition, activists and scholars rejected the racial categories

³ For instance, Paul Siu (1953) used this model to study the Chinese community in Chicago and described the lives of Chinese laundrymen as “self-imposed isolation.” See John Tchen (1987), *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation*. For reviews on assimilation models in reference to Chinese communities, see Timothy Fong (1994), *The First Suburban Chinatown: the Remaking of Monterey Park, California* and Jan Lin (1998), *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*.

imposed by the dominant society (either inferior race or model minority). Claiming to be part of an “Asian America,” they sought to recover the violent racial history which was silenced by Euro-centric cultural discourses in an attempt to build a political movement based on shared oppressions and struggles. The Asian American movement gave rise to the structure register of “isolation,” reframing Chinese “isolation” as one form of the structural oppression against Asians.

Finally, a new concept of “isolation” emerged in the early 1980s when individual agency became a central idea in the new social history (Chan, 1996). The new concept rejected the notion that the Chinese were simply victims of structural oppression. While recognizing structural limitations, it perceived Chinese immigrants as people capable of weighing alternatives, making decisions and asserting control over the world in which they live.⁴ “Isolation” was regarded as a strategy for immigrant workers who lacked a formal education and faced language barriers and discrimination. For them, Chinatown provided opportunities. For instance, the ethnic enclave thesis described Chinatown as an ethnic enclave, which provided economic opportunities and a protective buffer zone for Chinese immigrants to survive in American society (Zhou, 1992). A positive psychological register now claimed a large proportion of the concept of “isolation,” with a strong emphasis on individual psychology, motivation and coping.

Contemporary conceptions of “isolation” remain within this last framework.

Although still excluded from political and economic opportunities, Chinese immigrants

⁴ See Sucheng Chan (1986) on Chinese laborers adapting their skills to work in California’s agriculture industry during the late 19th century; Renqiu Yu (1992) on the struggles undertaken by Chinese laundrymen between the 1930s and 1950s.

are no longer depicted as victims forced into isolation. Rather, they are agents of change, skillfully using various resources – from individual, family, community, and culture - to improve their own conditions. I do not disagree with this thesis. However, I think it is too simplistic and somewhat misleading. It treats “isolation” as a result of a set of political-economic, cultural and psychological determinants. “Isolation” of Chinatown becomes a Chinese “thing,” a particular coping mechanism for Chinese individuals, family and community living in the United States. There is no doubt that Chinese immigrants, through their culture, develop particular ways to cope with hostile environments. However, the focus on individual coping and active participation in Chinatown community development shifts our attention away from inequalities of race and class which remain the organizing principle in American society. I will further argue that the relations between racism and “isolation” are much more complicated than a simple causal relation (i.e. racism caused “isolation”). This study will show that it was the material conditions of “isolation” that facilitated the development of particular racial ideology, which, in turn, helped maintain “isolation.”

Furthermore, the tendency to individualize and culturalize “isolation,” that is, to associate “isolation” with individual psychology and culture, presumes and presents a static and ahistorical notion of Chinese people, Chinese community, and Chinese culture. In this view, “Chineseness” is reduced to a set of values or framework of social relations which reproduces itself as these values are internalized by individuals. Such a reductionist view, I argue, confines our understanding to a focus on what is “inside” a person, as if the geographical boundaries and social relations of “isolation” can be absorbed into his or her personality or cultural identities.

This dissertation is to de-individualize and de-culturize “isolation” and seeks to provide a critical perspective, one that challenges simple determinism and rejects culture as given, to understand Chinese communities in this country. To do that, I will situate seemingly individual experience in a broader social-political and economic framework and map out “isolation” historically and geographically. This means to call attention to and to start with the socio-political and economic dimensions of “isolation.” I will begin by asking, how did Chinatown become isolated in the first place? How was “isolation” constituted? How did “isolation” change over time? What and whose interests were involved? What political, economic and/or ideological functions did it serve? One of my propositions, which is one main theme explored throughout this project, is that “isolation” is organized by various powerful groups in such a way as to ensure their own survival and interests. I will argue that “isolation” is not limited to politics within Chinatown. Rather, its very creation is, in great part, facilitated and maintained through the specific functions it performs in and for American society. In summary, this study conceptualizes “isolation” of Chinatown as a mechanism of American domination, which serves to maintain and advance U.S. capitalism and is one of the foundations upon which white, middle-class hegemony rests. Since the political and economic interests of American capitalist system change overtime, we can expect that “isolation” of Chinatown is constituted differently and performs different functions to American society in different historical periods.

The task to politicize “isolation” also requires one to challenge some often taken-for-granted assumptions about Chinatown, including Chinese people, Chinese culture, and the Chinese community. What “Chineseness” means changes across time and space;

people in different positions also construct the term differently. Yet this project is not simply another anti-essentialist project that argues everything is socially constructed and rejects the view that social forms can be determining. I agree with Kenan Malik in his critique of anti-essentialism. He points out that the notion of indeterminacy, one main principle of anti-essentialism, is an ahistoric explanation because its opposition to any certainty denies us the ability to understand social phenomenon in their specificity (Malik, 1996). To be historically and socially specific, Malik argues, “one must understand the determinations of any social fact and its relationship with the totality in which it appears” (p248). If one takes seriously the idea that the meaning of “Chinese” changes historically, she/he must understand the specificity of the socio-political and economic conditions which lend “Chineseness” its specific meanings.

In what follows, I will sketch out a historical study of “isolation” of Chinatown. I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive history of Chinatown, but to provide a particular political perspective that calls attention to the intersections of race and class which remain one of the organizing principles of U.S. domestic and foreign policies. It also suggests that an adequate political response to “isolation” would have to question its political and strategic dimensions in a broader political and economic context. While well meaning, social scientific and other accounts fail to understand that “isolation” is an Anglo-American construction rather than a “problem” or “cultural characteristic” of the Chinese. Similar arguments have been made about other kinds of “ghettoization” as well (see Gregory, 2000; Venkatesh, 2000). The point is that without understanding how Chinese “isolation” actively benefits U.S. economic and political interests, we are left

with a politics aimed at “fixing” the Chinese (or fetishizing them) rather than a critical politics seeking to understand the dynamics of race/class in the U.S.

1.2 Re-conceptualizing “isolation”: theoretical foundations and methodology

A critical understanding of “isolation” of Chinatown requires a theoretical re-conceptualization of “isolation.” Henri Lefebvre’s work on social space is important here because it allows me to reframe the study of “isolation” from a study of people to a study of place. This, I argue, is the first step to move away from a individualist approach and simple cultural determinism to study “isolation,” because it provides an opportunity to free ourselves from the presumed a priori of “Chinese,” “Chinese community,” and “Chinese culture,” and to examine them critically. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre conceives social space as a historical process and makes an analytical distinction between three different yet interconnected dimensions of social space. First, *material spatial practices*, which refer to the flows and interactions of things, money, and people in and across space in such a way that ensures production and social reproduction. Relations of production and reproduction are regulated by the social orders imposed by dominant groups to serve their interests. Second, *representations of space*, which are the conceptualized spaces of the experts or producers of the space, encompassing the signs, knowledge, and codes that allow the space to be talked about and understood. Representations of space are closely connected to order and power. Through means of construction (i.e. buildings, palace, monuments), they intervene in and modify spatial arrangement, which in turn guarantee that they endure. Finally, *representational space*, which is the space of the users or inhabitants, directly lived through associated images

and symbols. In this domain, certain psychological processes (i.e. emotions, desires, beliefs, subjectivities) are produced in order for the dominant spatial arrangement to sustain. Although representational spaces are passive experiences and limited to the imagination, which barely achieves any symbolic force, they are the only means through which the users can seek to change and appropriate the dominant system's imperious architectures and its deployment of signs (Lefebvre, 1974).

Lefebvre regards the three spatial dimensions as a triad, perceived (spatial practices), conceived (representations of space) and lived experience (representational space) and rejects any attempt to reduce social space to any single element (for instance, social constructionists would focus only on the symbolic representations of the space). Employing Lefebvre's analytical framework here, I conceptualize "isolation" of Chinatown as a historical process, a particular spatial-temporal configuration constituted in and by the three dimensions. More concretely, the study will examine "isolation" as a process and result of social conflicts, negotiations, and struggles, expressed through the three spatial domains, between those who have the power to command and produce space and those who do not. My intention is to explore the ways in which "isolation" is organized by various powerful groups to ensure and advance their interests. But also, I want to look at how the disempowered groups engage in collective struggles to change the conditions that control them.

This translates to a research design that examines "isolation" in the following ways. Firstly, I identify different forms of "isolation" in different historical periods. Secondly, I explore how each form of "isolation" was constructed through the three spatial domains. In the sphere of *material spatial practices*, I will explore the ways in

which social relations and practices in Chinatown were organized by dominant groups in such a way as to promote their interests. I ask, how was “isolation” produced? Whose interests were involved? What were the socio-political, economic and/or ideological functions it performed? How were the relations of production and reproduction arranged? What were the forces behind the perpetuation or change of such arrangement? In the sphere of the *representation of space*, I ask, how was Chinatown conceptualized by the dominant groups? By what ideologies were they informed? How was their conception realized in practice? Thirdly, I examine the *representational space*, the space of the dominated groups. I ask, who were “isolated”? What psychological processes were produced in order for “isolation” to sustain? What were some of the social-psychological and political consequences in the Chinatown community? Finally, I will explore how the dominated groups engage in collective activism to resist, challenge and/or transform the particular set of spatial arrangements imposed by the dominant groups.

To approach these questions, this study focuses on “isolation” of New York City’s Chinatown and examines its historical transformation from the nineteenth century to the present. I call this approach a historical study, in which “isolation” is the unit of analysis. “Isolation” is conceptualized as a dynamic mechanism, a historical process, configured spatially and floating across time. Conceptualized in this way, “isolation” serves as a vehicle to study social relations of domination that change historically, how these relations shaped and re-shaped the development of Chinatown, and the psychological processes that were produced through these processes. “Isolation” thus provides a useful tool to understand the development of the Chinatown community as a historical process through which the socio-political and psychological domains are

mutually constituted. To make my method clear, a historical study of “isolation” is not to document the historical events in Chinatown or to use history as a background. Rather, it uses historical materials, including the past and the present, to construct a theoretical framework to understand “isolation.” This kind of historical analysis regards the present as part of the history and argues that in order to fully understand present reality, a theoretical comprehension based on a study of the past and the present is required. In this study, historical materials are obtained from two types of sources: archival and empirical study. For the earlier periods, I rely on archival data including studies, reports, policies related to Chinatowns, Chinese immigration to the U.S. and overseas Chinese in general. For the contemporary period, my analysis is based on the combination of archival data and my participation in Chinese Staff & Workers’ Association (CSWA), a workers’ center in Chinatown.

An important aspect of this approach is that theorizing is not separate from the analysis of empirical data. Analyses are made in terms of theoretical propositions. These propositions are not to be verified. Rather, they serve to articulate a particular political perspective. From my perspective, this study seeks two goals. One is to use historical materials to construct a theoretical framework to understand the present reality, that is, the political and economic inequalities that continued facing Chinese immigrant workers in this country. The other goal is to use this understanding to inform and engage in the struggles for social change at the present. I consider this study as a political project in which my politics and research cannot be separated. My political understanding and motivation behind the study are part of the historical explanation because they actively shape the research methods, directions, and the information selected and reviewed.

Therefore, the historical analysis I provide here is grounded in my perspectives at present and its merits are determined by how well it achieves the goals I have mentioned. In the following, I will discuss the different theoretical frameworks that provide the grounding concepts and tools to this study.

Situating “isolation” in a historical and global context

Lefebvre’s spatial concepts provide a useful interpretive framework to understand how “isolation” is constructed at a local level. To situate “isolation” historically and globally, I turn to three theoretical frameworks developed from the tradition of historical materialism. They are David Harvey’s historical-geographical materialism, Immanuel Wallerstein’s modern world system, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s concept of Empire. Not every theory is used equally to perform every interpretive task. Rather, each of them provides a particular interpretive framework to situate “isolation” of Chinatown in a historical and global context.

Historical materialist analysis seeks to unveil the fetishism of commodities in the market place in order to understand conditions of social domination and to build a general theory of the way material life is reproduced under capitalism. It seeks to explicate the historical conditions that shape and are shaped by human activities and to predict the necessary conditions for revolution to occur. Harvey builds on this framework, and points out the lack of concern for geography in this purely temporal and diachronic account of capitalist development and class struggle (Harvey, 2000). He argues that spatiality plays an important role in capitalist accumulation because capitalism “produces a geographical landscape appropriate to its own dynamics of accumulation at a particular moment of

history, only to have to destroy and rebuild that geographical landscape to accommodate accumulation at a later date” (p59). Incorporating geographical dimensions in a historical materialist analysis, Harvey sees urbanization both as an expression and strategy of capitalist accumulation. In particular, his account on postmodern urbanization, the changes in urban forms associated with the shift from industrial to post-industrial economy, deepens my understanding of how the development of Chinatown since the 1970s played out in New York City’s political economy in the global capitalist system (see more detail in chapter 6).

Wallerstein’s analysis on the modern world system, namely the capitalist world economy, seeks to theorize the historical process through which the capitalist countries in Western Europe rose to world supremacy, from the agricultural capitalism between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries to the industrial capitalism during the eighteenth century and beyond (Wallerstein, 1974). His analysis of the world capitalist system is relevant to this study in two ways. First, his use of world-system, rather than tribes, communities or nation-states, as the unit of analysis, helps me understand Chinese immigration to the U.S. and the formation of Chinatown since the mid-nineteenth century as part of the developmental process of the capitalist world economy. Within the framework of world system analyses, the constitution of the workforces from different racial and ethnic groups and the political and economic development in areas outside of Europe and the U.S. are not anomalies to be explained away but are key elements in the formation of the modern world system.

This points to the second relevancy. The world system framework helps me understand the development of the Chinese community as shaped by the unequal

relations between China and the U.S. since the mid nineteenth century. According to Wallerstein, the capitalist world economy was based on an international division of labor, which allowed some groups within the system to exploit the labor of others in order to maximize their profit. The division of labor was determined by each country's relative position within the world system at a given time. Depending on their relative strength, countries can be placed into four categories: core-states, periphery, semi-periphery, and external. It follows that the core-states, which tends to have strong state-machineries, enforced unequal exchange on peripheral areas, the weak states, in order to facilitate their own growth and maintain their strength. It was in the historical context of the nineteenth century that China and other parts of Asia became absorbed into the peripheral zone of the world system, subjected to the exploitation by the core states. The inclusion of these regions increased the available surplus and allowed the core states, such as Britain and the U.S., to enhance their core status.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) also concerns the development of the modern world system. Written during the last decade of the twentieth century, their work particularly focuses on the new political order of globalization and traces its historical transformation, from the imperialism of European dominance to the new power that governs the world, which they call Empire. Their historiography of Empire helps me understand the historical transformation in forms of American domination of the Chinese from "colonial isolation" to "disciplinary isolation" (the two forms of "isolation" will be discussed in detail in 1.3). In contrast to colonialism which relies on the expansion of the territorial boundaries of the European nations, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries of nation-states. Empire "progressively

incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontier” (xii). Extending Michel Foucault’s notion of discipline power, Hardt and Negri argue that the regulatory mechanism of Empire relies on a disciplinary society, in which power is not an external force that dictates our practices, but becomes an inner drive, indistinguishable from individual’s desires and will. Discipline power is more effective and permeates through every aspects of social life because it produces subjects who discipline themselves.

Hardt and Negri’s concepts of colonial and disciplinary domination provide a useful framework to theorize the historical transformation of “isolation.” However, it does not mean I totally agree with their concept of Empire. Their conceptualization of Empire creates disturbing political implications. Although they recognize that the U.S. has a privileged position at the center of Empire, their claim that Empire has no centralized power discounts the enormous authority of the U.S. in contemporary global affair. In addition, the notion of Empire and its omnipresent global power could easily fall into the “globalization thesis” that has become a powerful ideological tool to beat upon local resistances (i.e. workers, trade unions and socialists). For instance, the globalization thesis is being used by businesses as a formidable propaganda (i.e. the threat of plant relocation) to persuade workers to comply with capital and to give up their fights.

Studying local struggles

Struggles against “isolation” are not simply defensive reactions confined within Chinatown. They are the sites where the broader historical struggles against systematic oppressions were realized and where the historically produced identities were negotiated

and re-defined. My study of the struggles in Chinatown joins a growing body of work that is grounded in a social practice theory (see Holland & Lave, 2001). A social practice theory focuses on local practice as a process of social formation and cultural production through which individual subjectivities and socio-cultural forms were dialectically constituted. An important aspect of this approach is that instead of starting with the assumption of an already formed person or an already formed social structure, it begins with local struggles as the starting point of inquiry. By examining local practices, it provides a different approach to understand the dialectical relations between history and person – history is realized in and by individuals and individuals are historically produced. My study of the struggles in Chinatown will provide some further expansion of this approach. By studying local struggles across time, this study shows that Chinese identities are not only grounded in a particular space and time, but also change historically.

While my research in the Chinese Staff & Workers' Association (CSWA) is only a small portion of this study (CSWA is discussed as an example of contemporary struggles against "isolation" in chapter 6), I feel it is important to discuss my participation in this organization here because it has great influence on my conceptualization of Chinatown. More importantly, my participation in CSWA has helped me see that change is possible and enabled me to envision what a critical response to "isolation" should be.

When I started this project, I had limited contact and understanding about the Chinatown community. I started with some basic assumptions about Chinatown. I assumed "isolation" as a race issue and defined Chinatown as a unified entity in racial

terms. Although I was aware of some of the internal conflicts (political and class conflicts) within the community, “race” was my primary interest and main interpretive framework. This began to change as I became involved in CSWA. I came to know this organization when I saw their picket line in front of the New Silver Palace Restaurant during my initial exploratory process in Chinatown. The workers’ action and courage was inspiring (they had been picketing against management’s exploitative and illegal labor practices every week for four years as of 2001), and I decided to get involved in their activities. Participating in CSWA’s activities and spending time with the workers helped me see the intersection of race and class in the construction of “isolation.” While “isolation” is a form of American racial domination, it has brought about different impacts on different classes in the Chinatown community. As this study unfolds, it will show that, over the course of time, “isolation” relied on and facilitated a polarized development in the community, intensifying the elite control of the community. The result was, the more oppressive American domination was, the more powerful the Chinese elite class became, and the more vulnerable and isolated the working class people became.

I describe my research method as committed research, a term first developed by Orlando Fals Borda and further elaborated by Alain Touraine (Touraine, 1981). According to Touraine, in committed research, researchers not only participate in an organized movement, but also identify with its objectives. Researchers’ solidarity with the collective actions is essential for them to grasp the object of their research. In that sense, a researcher is at the same time a participant in the organization. Yet committed research is different from participatory observation; it is more than collecting information

in a particular setting. It is a more useful way to understand collective actions and organized struggles because, as in my study, it concerns not only the observable behaviors of the workers or their perspectives on something, but also the collective counter-offensive actions of the workers who have defined specific objectives and goals and have taken actions according to them. The underlying assumption is that, as Touraine explains, “knowledge of society is possible only in as much as popular movements shatter the categories of order and thus cause both the social relations and the mechanisms of domination to emerge” (Touraine, 1981, p199). For me, my participation in CSWA in the struggles to challenge the established order and power structure of Chinatown and beyond has helped me unmask the social relations and mechanisms of domination behind “isolation.”

Regarding the role of researchers, Touraine suggests two functions they can play. The researcher can take up the role of an ‘agitator’ actively assisting (sometimes in the form of confrontation) the group to strengthen its capacity and group identity, to engage group members in self-analysis, to help them deconstruct their ideologies and transform them into actions. She or he can also take on the role of ‘secretary,’ documenting the group’s process and providing the information the group needs (Touraine, 1981). The active roles sketched out by Touraine are not applicable in my situation because I did not have any knowledge or experience in community-based organizing. I came to the organization to learn rather than to give any expert advice which I do not have.

I began to learn about this organization by participating in meetings, picketing, hanging out in the office and talking to people. Initially, I perceived my participation as a way to collect information. However, gradually, as I became more involved, my

participation took on a different meaning; I came to identify with the philosophy and goals of this organization, and considered myself as being part of the workers' struggle. I began to take on a more active role, working closely with two cases involving restaurant workers (assisting in the legal proceedings of their cases and in organizing support for their struggles), assisting in organizing job actions and demonstrations, attending conferences with workers, helping prepare workers' public speeches (in press conferences, public hearings), acting as an interpreter in meetings and public events, and editing the organization's Chinese newspaper. Yet, throughout the process my work at the organization remained volunteer in nature. This created some level of independence and distance that allowed me to place this experience in a broader perspective.

My understanding of the organization comes from various sources. I think of them as different levels of meaning construction. For analytical purposes, they can be distinguished in four levels. (a) Personal stories. Most of the workers came to the organization to seek help and support against the exploitative practices of the employers or landlords. They used personal stories to talk about their struggles and to relate to each other. CSWA creates a space for them to share their experiences, not just to speak about the pain and suffering, but also to frame them in terms of injustice and exploitation. From open discussions in meetings to personal conversations, I have learned from many workers about their lives, personal history, and daily struggles, including issues related to work, family and health, and how they became involved in the organization. (b) CSWA culture. As a new member in the organization, I was introduced to and constantly presented with a picture of what CSWA was about by staff organizers, board members, and long-term members who were committed to the organization. In formal settings (such

as volunteer orientation meetings, and training sessions), daily conversations, and various activities, I learned about the organization's history, organizational structures, philosophies, strategies, as well as its challenges and achievements. (c) Official representation. This was when I became part of the collaborative meaning construction to present CSWA to the outside world. Examples for this included editing the organization's newspaper, helping workers prepare public speeches to speak for the organization, planning for demonstrations, reaching out to people in the community and to other organizations. (d) Self-analysis. During the course of my participation, I kept a personal journal to document my reflections, which allowed me to examine my own views, assumptions, and feelings, and their changes over time.

Having laid out the key theoretical frameworks and methodologies, in the following sections, I will summarize the key propositions I plan to advance throughout this dissertation, which will help inform the reader of the framework and direction of this study. They are organized by three themes. The first theme discusses the historical transformation of "isolation" (1.3). This dissertation identifies four forms of "isolation" and distinguishes them in two historical periods, "colonial isolation" and "disciplinary isolation." In each form of "isolation," I examine the historical conditions in which "isolation" was produced, the political, economic and/or ideological functions it performed, and its socio-psychological consequences in the Chinatown community. The second theme examines the construction of a specific version of "Chineseness" and how it played out in supporting "isolation" to sustain (1.4). This study will demonstrate that "Chineseness" has transformed from a racial/biological category to a cultural/ethnic category and will trace the historical conditions associated with the changes. Finally, the

third theme explores the development of collective struggles in Chinatown and how Chinese immigrant workers challenged the dominant conceptions of the Chinese and created new (Chinese) identities through this process (1.5).

1.3 Historical transformation of “isolation”

This dissertation identifies four forms of “isolation” in different historical periods. Each of them is conceived as a mechanism of American domination, through which the Chinese community is organized in such a way as to benefit American capitalist society. While such domination exercises a top-down control, its operation involves various groups at different levels, including the U.S. federal and local governments, the Chinese nationalist government (the KMT), and the Chinese elite in the community. However, “isolation” must not be reified. There was no central agency which acted in terms of a long-term objective. Rather, decisions were made by groups of people in terms of their immediate interests. In the case of Chinatown, “isolation” seemed to be advantageous for many groups, both politically and economically. It is in this conjunction of interests among various groups that made Chinese “isolation” possible and unique.

The four forms of “isolation” I have identified can be distinguished in two historical periods. Table 1-1 provides an overview of the two historical periods, with their corresponding forms of political culture, means of control, the production of subjectivities, the construction of Chinatown’s borders and their examples. Since this section is to provide an overview, historical details will be discussed in the later chapters.

Table 1-1 Historical development of “isolation” of Chinatown

Mechanism of domination	Colonial Isolation (Late 19 th century to early 1970s)	Disciplinary Isolation (Late 1940s to present)
Forms of political culture	Imperialism/ Racism	Transnational capitalism/ Neo-racism
Means of control	Conquest/Alienation/ Exclusion	Inclusion/ Differentiation through cultural reproduction
Subjectivity	Oriental other	Model minority
“Chineseness”	Racial/biological category: Inferior race	Ethnic/cultural category: Model minority
Construction of Chinatown's borders	Rigid borders defined in racial terms	Old boundaries were reconstituted in cultural terms and created different sets of opening
Types of “isolation”	Fraternal Welfarism Chinatown as a Chinese territory	Model minority Chinatown as a commodity

“Colonial isolation”

The first historical period of “isolation” is characterized by a colonial mode of domination, which spanned from the late nineteenth century to the early 1970s. In “colonial isolation,” the form of political culture was imperialism, which was historically rooted in America’s imperialist ventures in China during the late nineteenth century. As Michael Hardt and Antonia Negri demonstrate, the root of American imperialist practices can be traced back to the very origins of this country, to black slavery and the genocides of the Native Americans (Hardt & Negri, 2000). During the late nineteenth century, U.S. began to importing Chinese labor and forcing China to open up her market as a means to facilitate U.S. capitalist development. Imperialism cannot be separated from racism. The

idea that Chinese was racially inferior justified the exploitation and discrimination against the Chinese. This kind of racial theories were powerful and popular, in great part, because they were backed by scientific discoveries.

During this period, domination was realized through conquest, alienation and exclusion. American imperialist practice in China was contradictory. On one hand, it created economic benefits (i.e. the importation of Chinese cheap labor and U.S. economic privilege in China), but, on the other hand, it brought home various problems, including the large number of Chinese laborers in the U.S. during the late nineteenth century and the threat of communist infiltration during the Cold War. These generated social anxiety because they were regarded as a threat to Anglo-Saxon middle class security and privilege. Therefore, constant alienation and exclusion were needed to keep out these undesirable elements. Chapters 2 and 3 examine two examples of “colonial isolation”: “fraternal welfarism” and “Chinatown as a Chinese territory.” “Colonial isolation” was exercised in the form of indirect control, using local Chinese authorities to control the community. “Fraternal welfarism” relied on a tight social hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations and “Chinatown as a Chinese territory” depended on the dominance of the KMT to control the Chinatown community. I will demonstrate that both forms served dual functions: helping to advance American interests in China while containing the negative impact of the Chinese race on American society.

In “colonial isolation,” subjectivity was constructed along the dichotomy of colonizer and colonized. The Chinese were regarded as the Oriental other, whose presence in the U.S. was considered “out of place” and undesirable. Alienation referred not only to the ways in which the Chinese were politically excluded, geographically

segregated, but also psychologically estranged from American society. I argue that the negative construction of the Chinese as the Other was necessary to sustain a positive American identity. In chapters 2 and 3, I will examine the construction of two specific versions of “Chineseness” associated with “colonial isolation” and how they functioned to construct a positive American identity.

“Colonial isolation” imposed rigid borders that isolated Chinatown from the rest of the society. Chinatown’s borders were not simply defined in geographical terms, but were defined by social relations and practices that excluded the Chinese from participating in the political economy and the public life of American society. My analysis will show that while Chinatown’s borders were defined in racial terms, the domination of the fraternal organizations and that of the KMT in Chinatown played an important role in reinforcing the racially defined boundaries. Using various strategies, the fraternal organizations and the KMT ensured that Chinese workers remained in their “place”: geographically confined within Chinatown, and remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Chinatown’s borders were also constructed at a psychological level. The construction of the subjectivity of Chinese as the Oriental Other involved the processes of inclusion and exclusion, identification and othering. This kind of borders created a clear distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders.” Yet, as I will demonstrate, what was considered “inside” or “outside” had different meanings for different groups of people.

These rigid racial borders were by no means impervious. Business transactions, human needs, desires and struggles created possibilities for border crossing at different levels. Bearing that in mind, I will specifically focus on the kind of border crossing that involved collective actions and grass-root organizing. I will discuss them in 1.5.

“Disciplinary isolation”

The post WWII period witnessed the decline of colonialism and scientific racial theories as both were seriously challenged by the independence struggles in the third world countries as well as the civil rights movements in the U.S. These changes helped facilitated the transition from “colonial isolation” to “disciplinary isolation.” In this process, the Chinese and the Chinatown community were reformulated and repositioned in such a way as to benefit a new set of political and economic interests in and for American society. Discipline is used in a Foucaultian sense. For Foucault, the power of discipline is located not in some central source, but in the capillary formations at its point of exercise where subjectivities are produced by taking up disciplines and enacting its practices. Contrary to the sovereign power, such as feudal regime, which excludes, represses, censors, abstracts, masks and conceals, disciplinary power, as Foucault argues, is productive, “it produces, it produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977, p194). Although Foucault identifies disciplinary power as an Enlightenment project, which emerged during the 18th century in Western societies, I think the use of “discipline” to conceptualize a particular historical development of “isolation” is appropriate here because the development of Chinatown underwent a different path.

My use of “discipline” is also informed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s conceptualization of Empire. While Foucault focuses on the deployment of discipline through institutional architectures, Hardt and Negri theorize how the practices and relationships of disciplinarity that originated from the factory production became a regime of social production, investing the entire social terrain as a mechanism of both

production and government.⁵ For them discipline does not simply refer to the juridical and political forms, rather it permeates throughout the entire social plane, with its productive and reproductive relations subsumed under the command of capital and the state. In fact, “a *disciplinary society is thus a factory-society*” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p243).

The historical conditions associated with the shift from “colonial isolation” to “disciplinary isolation” will be discussed in chapter 4 Interlude. Here I should point out three important aspects of this transformation. First, the transition was more a concession to the reality than a deliberate strategy thought out by the ruling elite in the U.S. Faced with increasing insurgencies of people of color in the Third World countries and in the U.S., U.S. capitalist development could no longer rely on the colonial mode of domination. Disciplinary domination was the new strategy. Secondly, there was no defining moment in the transition from “colonial isolation” to “disciplinary isolation.” The change was a gradual process, which spanned from the end of WWII to the Cold War. Thirdly, while disciplinary power and its associated global order were powerful and omnipresent, it does not mean that it is impossible to resist or challenge this form of domination. The level of control and degree of penetration required in order for the system to be sustained also revealed its weakness.

As table 1-1 shows, in “disciplinary isolation,” the political culture was transnational capitalism. Although biological accounts of racial hierarchy were

⁵ Hardt and Negri further point out the current social form as the highest stage of disciplinary control, which they call the society of control. The society of control is characterized by an intensification and generalization of the disciplinary apparatuses and by the permeation of the control to every sphere of the social life, no longer bounded by the walls of social institutions (P22-23). In the case of Chinatown, I use “disciplinary domination” to refer to both terms.

renounced, the idea of hierarchy remained and was only reconstituted. In the new kind of racism, race was replaced by culture which became the main principle in explaining human differences. Etienne Balibar calls it neo-racism, or more precisely “racism without races.” Balibar argues that, in neo-racism, culture functions like nature and “it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin” (Balibar, p22).

Ideologically, there was no insoluble biological heredity, but only insurmountable cultural differences, and incompatible life styles and traditions. The behavior or trait of individuals can no longer be explained by their blood or genes, but are the result of belonging to different cultures. A good culture is one that promotes individual achievement, work ethics and family values, qualities essential to the development of capitalism. In that sense, Chinese is regarded as a good culture and the Chinese became model minorities because they possess a good cultural heritage.

During the period of “disciplinary isolation,” explicit exclusion and discrimination against the Chinese were eliminated. With the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Reform Act of 1965, the Chinese were no longer undesirable aliens, but were included as an ethnic minority who were granted legal rights and citizenship

similar to the ones White European immigrants have enjoyed.⁶ Subjectivity was no longer constructed along the colonial racial binary. Instead, the Chinese were regarded as a model minority and “Chineseness” became associated with an ethnic/cultural category. “Disciplinary isolation” did not depend on explicit repression. Rather it relied on cultural reproduction as its mechanism of control. By promoting cultural differences in the name of cultural preservation, discipline power ensured that old racial hierarchies and inequalities continued. This kind of control was harder to detect, yet more effective and permeable, because it compelled the subjects to conform to the norms, enact the practices and discipline themselves. Discipline power is not an external force that dictates our practices, but it became an inner drive indistinguishable from our desires and will. Chapters 5 and 6 examine two examples of “disciplinary isolation”: “model minority” and “Chinatown as a commodity.” Each of them produced certain kinds of Chinese subjects that benefited political and economic interests in and for American society.

⁶ A critical examination of the nature of the 1965 reform revealed that it was not as liberalized as many have assumed. The huge inflow of Chinese and Asian immigrants was not the intention of the reform; rather it was more of an accident as a result of negotiation, compromise, and partly, policy mistakes. Reforming the existing racist immigrant system has been sought by the federal government since the Truman administration as a way to improve its global image and its relations with Third World countries. Federal government’s agenda resonated with business’s demand for both high skilled professionals and unskilled labor. However, the attempt to relax immigration restrictions against Asians met with strong oppositions from nativists and labor unions. The former argued that more Asians would destroy the nation; the latter argued that foreign labor would undermine the power of U.S. labor. The 1965 Reform was a result of compromises among these diverse interests. Discriminatory exclusions against Asians were abolished; a nonimmigrant policy was established, involving programs that permit foreign workers to be temporarily employed within the United States and its territories. The opponents of the Reform did not lose their battle. As Vernon Briggs pointed out, “family-unification” provision of the 1965 Act, which was commonly regarded as a sign of liberalization, was actually designed to maintain the status quo, by maintaining the existing racial composition of the population in the U.S. Since at the time Asian population in the U.S. was small due to decades of immigration exclusions, the new Act which allowed immigration through family relations (i.e. spouses, parents, children) would only bring in a small number of Asian immigrants and continued the predominance of immigrants from western hemisphere over those from eastern hemisphere (Briggs, 1984). The Reform was never intended to dramatically increase Asian population in this country.

The emergence of “disciplinary isolation” was associated with the transformation of Chinatown’s borders. The racially defined boundaries were reconstituted in cultural terms. The enforcement of the new borders were not written in the laws, nor relied on local authorities (i.e. fraternal organizations or the KMT). Rather, Chinatown’s borders were now enforced and maintained under the guise of cultural preservation. The new borders also created a set of openings. First was the emergence of the middle class Chinese who lived in the suburbs and entered professional fields (Chapter 5). Secondly, as Chinatown became commodified and Chinatown was transformed into a commercial district for the rich (Chapter 6), Chinatown’s borders became more open in order to facilitate cultural consumption (for American consumers), business activities and capital investments. Psychologically, with the emergence of hyphenated ethnic categories (i.e. Chinese-American), the boundaries between Chinese and American, between “insider” and “outsider” became less clear and more flexible. However, these openings were limited to a small number of Chinese (middle class and the elite). The majority of the residents and workers in Chinatown remained excluded from the political economy and the public life of American society. Nevertheless the new conditions created new possibilities for different kinds of liberation struggle to develop. I will discuss the Asian American movements (Chapter 5) and Chinese Staff & Workers’ Association (Chapter 6) as two examples that sought to challenge and move beyond Chinatown’s boundaries.

1.4 “Isolation” and the construction of “Chineseness”

The second theme of this dissertation examines the construction of specific versions of “Chinese” that were associated with the different forms of “isolation” I have

identified. Such “Chineseness” was an important element that helped “isolation” to be sustained. I do not suggest tracing the real essence of the term “Chinese,” because there is no such thing. Rather, I attempt to show that the term “Chinese” is not a coherent or stable category and its meanings change historically. As I have briefly mentioned in table 1-1, Chineseness was associated with a racial/biological category during the period of “colonial isolation” and was transformed to an ethnic/cultural category during the period of “disciplinary isolation.”

The construction of “Chineseness” was deeply embedded in American concepts of race. Therefore, in order to fully understand how “Chineseness” was constructed, how it transformed from a racial to a cultural category, and its relationship to “isolation,” we need to understand the development of the idea of race in Western thought. I will begin by asking, how did “race” become the dominant discourse about human differences and how it has changed? This will help illuminate how racial categories function in the political economy of American society and, further, how specific version of “Chineseness” was created to support “isolation” of Chinatown.

The idea of race in Western thought: how it became the dominant discourse about human differences

The concept of race is an historical product. Yet, as Ivan Hannaford points out, there is a common uncritical acceptance of the concept of race as a “given” among contemporary social scientists and historians. He argues that the lack of understanding of the historical origins of race concept poses an obstacle to real racial emancipation (Hannaford, 1996). As I will demonstrate in this section, the origin of the race concept

and its development are intimately tied to the European agenda (especially the ruling class) in maintaining and legitimating their political and economic domination since the seventeenth century. In other words, the concept of race, since its inception, implies and imposes European domination, and is integral to the development of the Western capitalist system. I will argue that as long as race is used as an organizing idea to understand and explain the world, we are unlikely to escape the implications of domination imposed by this concept.

However, this does not suggest that racism can be eradicated simply by getting rid of the language of race. We have already learnt such a lesson from the failure of the liberals' attempt during the postwar period which sought to depoliticize race by replacing racial categories with cultural ones. The point is, racism was a product and a crucial element in the modern capitalist system. Thus conceptual change alone would not eliminate racism. Conceptual change must be accompanied with the reformation of the system in order to create necessary conditions for real change to occur. This conclusion is critical to the study of "isolation" of Chinatown. It questions any politics that aims at achieving racial equality without challenging the concepts of "Chinese" and "Chinatown." But, then, how do we address the issues of racial oppression and exploitation in Chinatown without invoking the domination imposed by the racial categories? In other words, is it necessary to assert a racial identity (i.e. Chinese American) in order to achieve racial equality? What are the alternatives of political liberation, one that does not assert racial categories? These are important issues this dissertation seeks to address.

Several scholars have pointed out that the concept of race is a modern invention.⁷

Among them, Ivan Hannaford provides a comprehensive study that traces how the idea of race became so dominant in the contemporary understanding and explanation of the world. Here I will briefly review some of the important developments that have shaped the idea of race as we understand it today. In *Race: The history of an idea in the west*, Hannaford demonstrates that the idea of race did not begin to take its familiar modern form in western societies until the early years of the 17th century. Before that, the classification of groups of people was more of a political and religious matter. People belong to a certain group because of their citizenship (political affiliation or religious belief) rather than biological factors. Although the Greeks distinguished between themselves and “barbarians”, the division was based on polity rather than race, and the category was also more resilient – a barbarian can become civilized. In Greece and later in Rome, “polity” was both a structural arrangement and a philosophical way of looking at the world, in which people were differentiated not in terms of where they came from or what they looked like, but in terms of their membership in a political arena.

During the Middle Ages, Western Europe was dominated by Augustinian Christianity in its Catholic form. Politically divisive categories were replaced by religious ones, defined by the willing participation in the Sacrament. Regardless, in both political and religious arena, a people was bound together through law and through faith, rather

⁷ In addition to the work of Ian Hannaford (1996), Kenan Malik (1996) Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), which I discuss in greater detail here, also see Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: the history of an idea in America* (1963). Nicolas Hudson, *From “Nation” to “Race”: the origin of racial classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (1996). Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: origin and evolution of a worldview* (1993).

than through an autonomous moral order independent of political and religious reality (Hannaford, 1996).

After the Reformation, the renewal of Christian faith in Europe brought with it reformulation of political order. According to Hannaford, this change laid the ground for the early formation of the modern idea of race. In Northern Europe, the breakdown of the transcendent ideological and political power of the Roman Catholic Church allowed religious and political power to be concentrated in one secular ruler. Since Protestants no longer had a recognizable and legitimate symbol to guide them, they began to search for other accounts of existence, that is, “ancient nobility”-a race, to legitimate the authority to rule. Yet, the notion of race was exclusively reserved for the kings and bishops, who justified their authority and privilege as deriving from a noble descent. During the same period, the attempt to search for a natural origin was also fueled by European discoveries of exotic peoples in other parts of the world that has begun in the fourteenth century, which opened the door to search for hidden causes of difference in humankind. The result was the spreading popularity of polygenetic theories of the origin of mankind, based upon witchcraft, sorcery, astrology, and natural infection of the human blood as well as a wide variety of natural explanations in climate, language, and geography (Hannaford, 1996).

It was not until the 18th century that the modern idea of race was fully developed and was given primary importance in European thought. The change was fostered by several important and related developments. First was the new methodology in natural history. As Hannaford points out, the metaphysical and theological scheme of things – the bible and ancient authorities – were superseded by a more logical description and classification in which humankind was ordered in terms of physiological and mental

criteria based on observable facts and testable evidence. During this time, intensive efforts were made to diminish the influence of written biblical and classical political authorities. Intellectuals began to search for justifications in terms of evidence derived from the histories of other natural peoples (Volker). With the rise of science, the race idea began to be elaborated in philology, comparative anatomy, and anthropology. The new criteria of natural history also became the basis for inquiry into legitimate government. Each nation was believed to have a hidden but noble natural past that could be legitimized by the new scientific and historical processes (Hananford, 1996).

Before Darwin's evolution theory, two important writers in the beginning of the nineteenth century were responsible for the place that race has had in Western political and historical thinking, creating an independent judgment of human histories that were no longer tied to histories of State and Church. They are Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776-1831) in Germany, and Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882) in France. Niebuhr reexamined the past in light of the temper and character of the races and stressed the importance of philology in understanding the past. In *Histories of Rome*, Niebuhr reinterpreted the histories of Greco-Roman political life, transforming the concept of Rome from a set of political ideas and practices to "a natural collection of close affections, common names, and kindred blood and color" (Hannaford, p238). Niebuhr's new approach to historical interpretation set the stage for the discovery of the true origins of the ordinary people through philological and scientific inquiries.

After Niebuhr's reinterpretation of human history in racial terms, Gobineau further advanced race to a more prominent place in western world. In *History of the idea of progress*, Robert Nisbet (1980) notes that Gobineau was the key figure in uniting the

concepts of race and human progress and contributed to the ideas of racial ranking that spread throughout Western civilization. Gobineau was obsessed with both the triumphs and failure in the history of mankind's efforts to build civilization. He saw the true cause of the life and death of a people as a shift in the share of blood and argued that history should be seen as conflict between races. Gobineau was primarily responsible for the insidious conception of the Aryan race. For him, it was the *Aryan race*, the parent stock of all the more recent races – Greeks, Romans, Germanic, and others – which was alone responsible for all the major advances in civilization. He also ranked the races of the world: at the bottom are the Negroes; next come the Chinese and related Asians; whites rank highest not only in mental capacity but also physical beauty. Among the white races, Gobineau paid the most ardent appreciation and hope to the German race, to whom, as he argued, western civilization owes everything for its cultural advancement (Nisbet, p288-290). In *The Inequalities of the Human Races*, he wrote:

“that everything great, noble and fruitful in the works of man on this earth, in science, art, and civilization, derives from a single starting point, is the development of a single germ and the result of a single thought; it belongs to one family alone, the different branches of which have reigned in all the civilized countries of the universe” (cited in Hannaford, p265).

In his interpretation of slavery, Gobineau argued that the institutional arrangements of government and politics in states were generally useless in bringing civilization to uncivilized peoples, and the Negro in particular in the United States and elsewhere was racially fixed in his slavery. He regarded the Negroes and Cherokees in North America at the lower strata of society and saw their enslavement exemplify his principle of natural inequality (Hannaford, 1996).

It is important to note that ideas of race did not exist in a social and economic vacuum. Their development was inseparable from capitalist development and colonialism. As Immanuel Wallerstein argues, modern racism is crucial in maintaining capitalism as a system (Wallerstein, 1991). Xenophobia, disdain and fear of the other, has been in existence in all historical systems, yet its primary consequence tends to be the ejection or elimination of the “barbarian.” As the capitalist system entered an expansive stage, it needed all the labor-power it can find, thus instead of ejection, converting these barbarians into workforce would be more profitable. Modern racism helped create a large cheap labor force, and, at the same time, it provided justification for the exploitation.

Ironically, one of the most important developments that fostered racial concept was the triumph of bourgeois liberalism. Although the egalitarian and libertarian ideas of the Enlightenment spread by the American and French Revolutions seemed to conflict with racial thoughts, racism was not just a transitional stage in which liberalism has not been fully implemented. Rather, racism lay at the center of the liberal logic, which in turn contributed to its development. In Kenan Malik’s word, “the concept of race emerged as a means of reconciling the conflict between the ideology of equality and the reality of the persistence of inequality” (Malik, 1996, p6). The contradiction between the treatment of slaves and colonial peoples and the official rhetoric of freedom and equality was contained by the dichotomized humanity between men and non-human or subhuman. The dichotomy served to preserve both the profitable forms of discrimination and exploitation and the democratic ideology.

Wallerstein further clarified the important role of the idea of race in the modern world system. In his analysis of bourgeois liberalism, Wallerstein argues that racism was

necessary to the successful implementation of liberal ideologies of the nineteenth century in the advanced capitalist countries (Wallersteing, 1997). As he points out, liberals were reformers rather than radicals, seeking to perfect the system rather than transforming it. Liberals believed that political change was inevitable, but a good society (good to the liberals) could only be achieved through rational planning and implementation of by those who had the capacity to do so. Here lies a crucial aspect of the political project of the nineteenth century liberalism in the core capitalist countries, which was to tame the “dangerous classes.” To prevent social revolutions, liberals offered them a triple program of rational reform: suffrage, the welfare state, and national identity. This program aimed at pacifying the dangerous classes, rather than providing genuine equality and liberation. For this program to succeed, racial thoughts and racist practices were crucial. First of all, the overall standard of living of the core capitalist countries benefited from the effective transformation of surplus from the colonies. In addition, collective nationalism could be built upon the notion of “civilized” nations vis-à-vis “barbarians”. Discrimination and exploitation of other races was a necessary condition to achieve equality of liberal ideology at home (Wallerstein, 1997).

Since the development of the concept of race was an important element of the modern world system, it is not a surprise that the idea was further developed during the period of rapid capitalist expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century. The desire to rationalize exploitation of non-European peoples fostered the elaboration of a complex ideology of racial differences and hierarchy. Such rationalization was realized through the work of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin and their social evolutionist followers (they were not the first or only evolutionary theorists, but their work definitely

had the most impact). Following their work, political activity was seen as subject to the same rules of evolution that applied to the natural biological world. Notions of states of evolution, survival of the fittest, and heredity determinism were eagerly applied to homo sapiens. The survival of the fittest could also be indicated and ensured by the conquest of inferior races and people or war against rival states. In addition, social evolutionism joined together with economic liberalism, cautioning against the interference of politics and the state in matters considered to be natural and rational. Laissez-faire was reinterpreted as a mandate not to interfere with any form of human inequality and suffering. The poor were poor because they were biologically inferior. Negroes were slaves as a result of natural selection which had found the best place for them (Van Den Berghe, 1967).

From the mid-nineteenth century onward, racial concept and racism, fueled by social-Darwinism, came to permeate all social institutions and public discourse profoundly. Theories of evolution and natural selection were applied and further elaborated as the British searched for a scientific racial account to explain and justify the advance of Anglo-Saxon civilization in all corners of the world. English scientists and historians created a powerful volk idea of “Saxondom,” which forged an inheritance by race with those who had gone from the homeland to settle the economically promising lands of America, Canada, Australasia, and South Africa. The Franco-Prussian War in 1871 was another turning point for the development of race thinking, as people searched for explanations for French defeat and German victory (Hannaford, 1996). By the end of the nineteenth century it was accepted that a man lived in a racial world and may be recognized for what he is from his material appearance, from eyes and skin to

intelligence. Race as an organizing idea claimed precedence over all previous formulations of social relations and structures.

Racial thinking in America

Having traced the development of the modern concept of race in Western thought, I will now examine how this concept developed in the United States. As I will demonstrate, the particular history of the U.S. gave rise to a special formation of race idea, which provided the foundation for a racialized account of “Chineseness.”

American concept of race was greatly influenced by European racial ideologies developed from the eighteenth century onward, especially those of Reformation Christianity, bourgeois liberalism and natural rights histories (Hannaford, 1996). Yet, the United States also had a history that gave a particularly fervent and unique quality to the idea of race and highlighted the rate at which a racial explanation of the world was accepted. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe that American society did not develop within the heavy shackles of feudalism and aristocracy but started off from a separate and very different foundation. In contrast to modern European sovereignty, which consigned political power to a transcendent realm, God or the monarchy, the U.S. notion of sovereignty poses an idea of immanence of power grounded entirely within society – power is not something that God gives us but something that we make. In the absence of feudal hierarchy and a centralized government typical to Europe, the American terrain was marked by the open space of the frontier, which provided both conceptual and material foundations that supported republican democracy and liberty, and allowed capitalist expansion to move forward without major obstacles (Hardt &

Negri, 2000). With respect to the idea of race, American particular experience also resulted in greater tension, thus required greater effort to reconcile American idealism of equality and liberty and the brutal domination of colored people.

This particular American experience gave rise to a special brand of racial ideology: the notion of manifest destiny, the idea that America was racially superior and was chosen to carry out God's mission (Stephanson, 1995). At the heart of manifest destiny was the superiority of Anglo-Saxon people and the superiority of American political system, one that was not polluted by feudal hierarchy and centralized government typical to Europe. I argue that Manifest destiny is an important concept to understand the specific constructions of "Chineseness" in the U.S. As I will show in chapters 2 and 3, manifest destiny was part of the dialectical construction of colonialism, creating the dichotomy between inferior Chinese and superior American. Based on Stephanson's analysis, I will further argue that, with regard to "isolation" of Chinatown, manifest destiny could be expressed in two tones. By tones, I refer to two modes of thought that seemed oppositional, but a close look reveals that they were speaking about the same thing. Chapter 2 examines the defensive tone of manifest destiny in which the Chinese was regarded as a threat to American society. Chapter 3 examines the paternalistic tone of manifest destiny in which the Chinese was regarded as people who need American salvation. I will show that although the two tones seemed contradictory, they were actually not far apart. Both shared the same ideological foundation: the superiority of American and the inferiority of the Chinese.

The idea of race that had become the dominant thought in Western world was seriously challenged after WWII (Chapter 4). What emerged was a new racial discourse

that uses culture as the explanatory factor for human differences. In this new concept, Chinese was no longer inferior, but superior because of its cultural heritage. I will show that the shift from racial discourse to cultural discourse was far from a radical break from the colonial racial hierarchy (Chapter 5). Rather the discourse of culture articulates a kind of conservatism which helped preserve racial differences and inequality only under a different guise.

1.5 Struggles against “isolation” and the construction of “Chineseness”

The third theme of the dissertation examines the struggles against “isolation” in Chinatown in different historical periods. Struggles against “isolation” are not only groups of actors with specific grievances within Chinatowns; they are marked by the degree to which they challenge the existing social relations, power structure, and “cultural model” (Touraine, 1988). They challenge them by proposing alternatives against hegemonic norms and values and creating new identities. In this study, I begin with five key questions: (1) How was “isolation” conceptualized? Or what did they see as the causes of “isolation”? (2) What was the foundation upon which the struggle was built? i.e. nation, family, ethnicity, or locality. (3) What were their actual practices? (4) What alternatives did they seek to provide? And finally (5) what was the new identity they sought to create? The selection of groups to be reviewed is based on the following criteria: (a) the group challenged racial oppression as one main cause to “isolation” (b) it sought to involve the mass, whether through services or collective actions (c) it provided an alternative and (d) research material is available.

Table 1-2 is an overview of the struggles I plan to examine in this study. These groups only serve as examples, and are far from a complete list of activist movements in the Chinese communities in the U.S. The analysis of the first three struggles is based on secondary sources; the discussion on CSWA is based on my participation in the organization. For analytical purposes, I find it helpful to use the three categories developed by Manuel Castells, who adapted Alain Touraine's typology of social movements. These categories are: *societal goal*, which refers to the vision and the kind of social order the group wishes to attain; *adversary*, which refers to the principle enemy identified by the group; and *identity*, which refers to the self-definition of the group on what it is and what it wants to become. I also added *strategy* as another category, which refers to the methods employed by the groups to achieve their societal goals. Since the work of each group was a response to particular historical issues and only has meaning in its own historical contexts, the table does not intend to compare them in terms of who is "better" or "more progressive." Rather this table provides a useful tool to trace the historical transformation of the construction of "Chineseness," because each group, in different ways, challenged the dominant conceptions of the Chinese and re-defined "Chineseness."

Table 1-2 *Struggles against "isolation"*

Historical periods	Struggles against "isolation"	Adversary	Societal goals	Strategies	Identity
"Colonial isolation" (Late 19 th century – early 1970s)	Chinese Revolutionary movement (the end of 19 th century - 1911)	Foreigners (including the Westerners and the Manchu emperor)	Equality for the Chinese	To build a strong modern China	Chinese as a race and nation
	Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (1930s-1940s)	Western imperialism and Chinese traditional structure	Equality for the Chinese	To build a strong China, to practice democracy	Chinese as a race and nation
"Disciplinary isolation" (Late 1940s – present)	Asian American movement (late 1960s-1980s)	Racism, capitalism, imperialism	Equality for the Chinese	Claiming Asian America as a new political power	Asian American ethnic identity
	Chinese Staff & Workers' Association (since 1979)	Systemic exploitation of Chinese workers	Emancipation for working people	To fight with workers for the control over time and lives	Working class identity based in Chinatown

In their (re)construction of Chinese as an identity, three concepts were associated with the term "Chinese": Chinese as a race (a biological category), a nation (a sociopolitical category), and ethnicity (a cultural category). The three terms were used inconsistently, which revealed the instability and ambiguity of the term "Chinese". My purpose is not to search for clear definitions for these terms, but to explore their historical development, which will inform us about the construction of Chineseness through activist movements in the Chinatown community.

As I suggested in the previous section, the concept of race, nation, and ethnicity were integral to the development of the capitalist world system. Wallerstein has pointed

out that each of these concepts, which he calls “peoplehood,” rests on one of the basic structural features of the capitalist world-economy (Wallerstein, 1991, p71-85). However, for the Chinese, who were the subordinated group forced to enter the peripheral zone of the capitalist world-economy during the mid-nineteenth century, these concepts underwent a very different path of development and were used differently. Focusing on the concept of nation, Hardt and Negri note, “whereas the concept of nation promotes stasis and restoration in the hands of the dominant, it is a weapon for change and revolution in the hands of the subordinated” (p106). Indeed, nationalism appeared to be a powerful weapon of defense for the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. In the formal colonies, the concept of nation was a necessary vehicle to mobilize support from within and to demand freedom from foreign domination and self-determination for the people. Hardt and Negri’s statement about nation can also be applied to the concepts of race and ethnicity. In this study, I will take their argument to consider the development of race, nation and ethnicity from the perspectives of the Chinese. While my main concern is the development and usage of these concepts in Chinatown, it is important to locate these ideas in broader historical contexts in order to understand fully their functions and impacts.

During the period of “colonial isolation”, struggles against “isolation” associated “Chineseness” with racial and national terms. Conceptualizing the racial oppression they encountered in the U.S. as equivalent to foreign imperialist aggressions against China, the Chinese used the concept of nation and race as a weapon of defense against foreign enemies: the claim to nationhood affirmed the dignity of the people and legitimated the demand for equality; the claim to Chinese racial superiority served to ward off the

dominant discourse that labeled Chinese as inferior. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of “culture” to replace “race” as the primary explanatory factor for group differences. The claim to an Asian American, an ethnic identity, was an effort to denounce the racial basis of Chineseness and to reclaim the legitimacy as an ethnic minority in the United States. In a sense, “Asian American” also utilizes a nationalist vision. Seeking to build a new political power among groups with diverse cultural backgrounds and histories, it created a nation, an *imagined community* (Benedict Anderson’s famous term) called Asian America.

“Race”, “nation” and “ethnicity” are inseparable from “class.” However, “class” (so is “gender”) has been repressed or de-prioritized by the first four types of struggles, in great part, for the purpose of promoting the unifying notion of “nation,” “race” and “ethnicity”. In this study, I will demonstrate that the notion of “nation,” “race,” and “ethnicity” provided the Chinese a language and tool to form a unifying force of resistance. However, at the same time, these terms were easily used by elite groups to exploit and suppress lower classes in the community. For instance, the elite class often invoked a sense of cultural affiliation or ethnic solidarity (i.e. we are all Chinese) to justify their exploitation of the workers and prevent them from speaking out about unfair treatments or organizing. The KMT also justified their authoritarian control in the community in the name of national unity. In this respect, CSWA is unique because it emphasized on class exploitations as the foundation for all other forms of oppression and questions the repressive aspects of the unifying concepts of Chinese as race, a nation and an ethnic minority.

Throughout this dissertation, I will examine the emergence of Chinese racial nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century, and the concept of “Asian American” during the 1960s. I will explore how these concepts were developed and used as weapons of defense in the struggles against “isolation” in Chinatown. In addition, I will discuss their impacts as well as limitations with reference to “isolation” of Chinatown. My analysis suggests that while the concepts of peoplehood, Chinese as a race, as a nation and an ethnic minority, provided a powerful weapon of defense for the dominated groups, they simultaneously imposed another form of control in the Chinatown community.

Chapter 2

Fraternal Welfarism

It was not until the early 1870s Chinatown became a vocabulary word in New York City's geography. Before that the Chinese presence was not significant: sixty-four Chinese men were recorded to be the residents in the Fourth and Sixth Wards (Downtown Manhattan) in 1865, most of them cigar makers and sailors (Tchen, 1999). Beginning in 1870, large numbers of Chinese laborers began to move eastward and took residence in New York City. The eastward migration of the Chinese took place after the completion of the transcontinental railroads as tens of thousands of Chinese railroad laborers suddenly became unemployed. Unwelcome in the first place, the Chinese found themselves facing insurmountable anti-Chinese hostility and violence, which was further intensified as the economic recession deepened and the Chinese, a foreign labor force, became a convenient scapegoat for the crisis. They began resettling in large cities, where, as they reasoned, population was more diverse, differences were more accepted and law enforcement would be more effective.

In 1873, Mr. Wo Kee opened his retail store on 34 Mott Street and it soon became the hub of the Chinese settlement that was rapidly growing. The growth of the Chinese settlement was captured by Louis J. Beck's 1898 book *New York's Chinatown*, in which he wrote:

The lower end of Mott Street very quickly filled with Chinese, its former white tenants giving way to the new comers. Gradually the colony increased and spread into Doyers Street, until now the entire triangular space bounded by Mott, Pell and Doyers Streets and Chatham Square is given to the exclusive occupancy of these Orientals, and they are fast acquiring possession of Bayard Street. This territory furnishes within its orders shelter for 4,000 yellow-skinned traders, artisans, gamblers, amusement caterers and prostitution, who minister to the wants and

entertainment of the 13,000 of their more industrious countrymen who are scattered throughout the metropolitan area (p11-12).

By 1900, New York City's Chinese population rose to over 10,000. Most of them clustered in the four block area bounded by Mott, Bayard, Pell and Doyer Streets.¹ The area we call Chinatown today was associated with social degradation and moral decay in the public's memory. One block to its left was the infamous Mulberry Bend and the adjacent Five Points, the most notorious of New York's slums housing the Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. The horrific conditions of the tenements were brought to the public through Jacob Riis's famous expose, *How the other half lives* (1890), a vivid photographic and narrative description of the "shadow" of New York plagued by contagious diseases, degraded morality, sweatshops, and crime (Page, 1999). The area was finally demolished due to the efforts of housing reformers who saw the tenements as a sign and origin of social degradation and feared that the ill-housed immigrant masses would bring social unrest to their civilized society.

One block to the right was the Jewish settlement. Southern Italians arrived in the 1870s, concentrating in the neighborhood north of Canal Street, the area that was later labeled Little Italy. Crowded tenement buildings with below-standard conditions marked the lives of these immigrant communities. The settlements of Eastern and Southern European immigrants grew in response to the development of New York's garment industry. Because of its labor-intensive nature, garment factories have always followed and were followed by the settlement of immigrant workers. By the turn of the twentieth

¹ The Hunter College Neighborhood Planning Workshop, Chinatown: land use and planning study, 1992.

century, garment factories and immigrant communities were concentrated in the area below Fourteenth Street.

Despite their geographical proximity, the development of the Chinese settlement did not share any similarity with its neighbors. Family settlement was rare. As most Chinese women and children were barred from immigration, the majority of the Chinese were males at laboring age (in 1890 the Chinese male-to-female ratio was 27 to 1)². Only the elite and merchant class who were exempt from the Chinese Exclusion had the luxury of having family lives. Unlike their Eastern and Southern European neighbors who were integrated into the sweatshops and factories during the period of industrialization of New York City, the Chinese were excluded from joining the industrial labor force and from political opportunities (i.e. citizenship) that were crucial to become part of American society. Faced with racial discrimination and violence, the Chinese were forced to rely on each other for survival. The Chinese settlement in the four block area grew to become a self-sufficient community with its own political, economic and social systems. This marked the beginning of Chinese “isolation” in New York City.

The first period of “isolation” was characterized by a tight social hierarchy, which I call fraternal welfarism. Table 2-1 shows the roadmap that will guide my inquiry. I will discuss how fraternal welfarism was constructed and situate its formation in the context of global restructuring during the second half of the nineteenth century. The tight social hierarchy of fraternal welfarism imposed rigid borders that isolated Chinatown residents from the rest of American society. While Chinatown’s borders were defined in racial

² Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown*. 1996, p14.

terms, as we will see, they were maintained, in great part, through the dominance of fraternal organizations which imposed social orders to control this community.

The second section of this chapter explores a specific notion of Chineseness associated with fraternal welfarism, in which the Chinese were regarded as a threat to American society. I will demonstrate that such idea was part of the dialectical construction of “inferior Chinese” and “superior American” within the framework of manifest destiny, a framework that guided and justified American domination of the Chinese. The third section will focus on the Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown and explores how it used the newly emerged Chinese racial nationalism as a weapon of defense to challenge the racially defined boundaries.

Table 2-1 *Roadmap 1: Fraternal Welfarism*

Form of "isolation"	Fraternal Welfarism	Chinatown as a Chinese Territory	Model Minority	Chinatown as a Commodity
Historical periods	Late 19 th century to early 20 th century			
Construction of "isolation"	Tight social hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations			
Historical conditions	America's economic expansion during the global restructuring of the 2 nd half of the 19 th century			
Political, economic and/or ideological functions	To advance U.S. economic development To control Chinese laborers;			
Socio- psychological consequences in Chinatown	Sojourner mentality Reinforced the patriarchal hierarchy			
Construction of Chinatown's borders	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and the dominance of fraternal organizations in Chinatown			
"Chineseness"	Demonized "Chineseness": Chinese were a threat to American society			
Local struggles	The Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown			

2.1 The construction of Fraternal Welfarism

The three spatial elements of Fraternal Welfarism

Fraternal welfarism was characterized by a tight social hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations in the Chinatown community. This “isolation” was constructed through three spatial elements. In the sphere of *material spatial practices*, the tight social hierarchy was organized by different types of fraternal organizations to protect and promote the interests of the elite. Through mutual assistance and competition, these organizations imposed social orders in the Chinatown community and helped maintain its self-sufficiency. In the *representations of space*, these fraternal organizations perceived Chinatown in terms of territories and adopted various strategies to maintain and expand their sphere of influence. Strategies included implementing strict regulations toward members, strengthening the organization’s power through mergers and new alliances, and obtaining Chinese government’s recognition to legitimize its authority in Chinatown.

In *representational space*, which is the space for the dominated group (Chinese laborers), fraternal welfarism helped create a sojourner mentality. Since Chinese laborers were denied of citizenship, deprived of the rights to have families and finally barred from entering this country, they had to rely on fraternal welfare structure for survival and were more likely to be attached to their home country than to identify with the U.S. This kind of mentality also helped “isolation” to be sustained. However, fraternal welfarism was not simply a local Chinese affair. The tight social hierarchy was a product of and played an important part in the development of U.S. capitalist system during the second half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, fraternal welfarism served double functions: its tight social structure was beneficial to U.S. economic development by providing a means to control Chinese laborers and, at the same time, helped contain the cultural anxiety over race in American society.

The tight social hierarchy of fraternal welfarism was a social welfare system.

Claiming a sense of brotherhood³, defined by kinship (close or extended), shared dialect, or home village, various organizations were formed to look after the welfare of their members.⁴ For instance, there were village associations whose membership depended

³These organizations were fraternal organizations because the majority of the Chinese immigrants in the United States were male. And the unbalanced sex ratio continued until 1965, when the immigration regulation was finally relaxed.

⁴ Peter Kwong, 1979, *Chinatown*, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950; Sterling Seagrave (1995) *Lords of the Rim: The Invisible Empire of the Overseas Chinese*; Shih-Shan Henry Tsai (1983) *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868-1911*.

principally upon the geographical origin of an individual and family associations whose membership was defined by extended kinship through a common surname. Upon their arrival, immigrants were received by a particular organization, which provided them with temporary housing, food and helped arrange employment. In addition to offering protection against menaces from the outside, these organizations made the years of labor in a foreign land tolerable by providing social clubs, companionship, food for families, recreation and, most importantly, a link with the homeland. As a mutual aid system, these organizations also served to care for the poor, the old, the unemployed and the dead.

Fraternal welfarism was more than social welfare. It was also an enterprise, a profit-making machine. Operating on a global scale, it engaged in organizing the flows and interactions of Chinese people, labor power, money, and materials both inside and outside Chinatowns and across the Pacific Ocean. The network of this global operation consisted in (a) recruitment of laborers in the port cities in China under a credit-ticket system whereby a broker advanced passage money to an emigrant who then paid off the debt after arrival;⁵ (b) transportation across the Pacific Ocean;⁶ (c) employment agency, brokers and contractors located in both China and the U.S., who served to secure the labor force for employers; (d) industries that catered to the laborers, such as Chinese groceries, restaurants, lodging, banking, loan services and entertainment. And of course, illegal practices, such as opium smuggling, prostitution, and gambling parlors, were also part of this enterprise and generated considerable profit (Saxton, 1971).

⁵ Some laborers came under a contract labor system in which an immigrant had to work for his contractor and would not be freed until he paid off the debt. In other cases, the broker functioned as a loan company and did not restrict the freedom of the laborers.

⁶ Both Sandmeyer (1973) and Barth (1964) estimate that steamship companies which carried Chinese laborers between Hong Kong and San Francisco charged them high passage rates and made a good fortune.

Fraternal welfarism was essentially vertical. At the bottom were the laborers. Above them were foremen, agents, contractors and interpreters. At the top of the hierarchy were merchants, among whom the most prominent were generally associated with wealthier businessmen in China. Stressing common heritage of kinship, dialect and culture, it linked individual members from top to bottom across class lines (Saxton, 1971). The social welfare and profit-making enterprise were essentially two sides of the same coin. From top to bottom, fraternal welfarism had something in it for everybody. Yet, since available resources within the Chinese communities were limited, competition among individuals and businesses was intense and conflicts were unavoidable. Rivalries arose among various organizations which sought to look after the welfare of their members and to protect their interests. The very sense of brotherhood that brought strangers into families in a foreign land also divided the community into various groups with competing interests and territories.

To compete for economic and political dominance in Chinatown, an organization relied, in great part, on the size of its membership and resources (due to membership fees). Given that, organizations could not confine themselves to ancient traditional ties originating from China. New alliances were formed on pragmatic bases. Mergers among small organizations were also common, especially along family and regional lines. The Lin Sing association in New York is an example of a regional merger. Since the early Chinese immigrants came predominantly from one of the seven districts in Kwangtung, a province in South China and, among them, people from Hoy Sun County composed the majority. The Hoy Sun association thus assumed its dominance in New York City Chinatown. To challenge the Hoy Sunese dominance, people from all places outside of

Hoy Sun county formed a united front, called Lin Sing, which literally meant “united formation”.⁷ Through their alliance, a new kind of brotherhood was created, one that was defined by political partnership rather than shared dialect, culture, custom, village origin or kinship.

The other type of organizations that asserted the same level of authority as the regional and family associations were the secret societies (Ma, 1991). The secret society was traditionally an underground seditious organization in China aimed against the superior but unpopular imperial authority (Tsai, 1983). Those that flourished in the United States were branches of what Westerners have called the Triads. The Triad societies were essentially political organizations, whose goal was to overthrow the foreign conquerors of the Qing dynasty (the Manchu people) and to restore the Ming dynasty (the Han people).⁸ Over the centuries, the goal of overthrowing the Manchu was passed down from generation to generation, but these secret societies gradually lost their political character and became mutual aid clubs or mafia organizations, involved in illegal activities in China and in overseas Chinese communities (Tsai, 1983). Similar to the family and regional associations, the Tongs (the Triad lodges) were to look after the social welfare of its members and protect their interests. And, like family and regional

⁷ Lien-Cheng association was founded in 1900. See The Special Edition of the CCBA in New York. CCBA, 1995.

⁸ The triad societies had been in existence during the seventeenth century and had various names, such as the San-ho hui, San-tien hui, Tien-ti hui; and because of its connection with the Ming dynasty, which was founded by the Emperor Hung-wu in 1368, it was also known as the Hung League (or Hung-men, Hung family, or Red gang). With its goal to fight the alien Manchu, the secret societies formed alliances among people from various regions, clans and dialects. Through a specific initiation ritual, members were bound by oaths of blood brotherhood and pledged their loyalty to the Ming emperor. They described themselves as patriots. To outsiders, the various names and their mythical practices are confusing in the extreme. But that is the whole idea. These organizations have been obsessed with secrecy and mystification in order to protect themselves and their members from persecution by the central government or by the rival groups. See Seagrave, 1995; Ma, 1991; Tsai, 1983.

mergers, Tongs, in many cases, were formed to unite members of minority groups in protecting their business interests from majority groups. Maintaining the machinery and methods of the secret societies, Tongs were more equipped to protect their members and feuds among the Tongs were more vicious and damaging.

All of these organizations perceived Chinatown in terms of territories. In order to assure their control over the space, constant and active appropriation was necessary. Yet, successful control over the space could not simply rely on ties of brotherhood. Strict internal discipline had to apply. Stressing patriarchal hierarchy, fraternal welfarism demanded unquestionable obedience and total control (Kwong, 1979; Saxton, 1971). These organizations, some even having their own private armies, enforced their own regulations, settled disputes, and punished transgressors. This strong sense of boundaries was accompanied by a distinction between insiders and outsiders. Foreigners were outsiders and their intervention in the community was unwanted and had to be prevented⁹. To legitimate its authority over the community, in 1883, the Chinese Consolidated and Benevolent Association (CCBA) registered with the Imperial Manchu Court and obtained its recognition.¹⁰ Performing a quasi-government role in the Chinatown community, CCBA referred to its president as the “Mayor of Chinatown” and claimed its jurisdiction over New York City Chinatown and other Chinese communities in neighboring states as well. Under CCBA’s control, membership was mandatory and so were payment of dues. All the businesses (the majority of them being restaurants and laundries) were required to pay annual fees according to their place in the business

⁹ To prevent any foreign forces (non-Chinese) in Chinatown affairs was a shared principle among the traditional establishment in the community. CCBA, 1995.

¹⁰ CCBA of the City of New York, Special Edition. 1995. p4.

hierarchy. No business transaction was legitimate without the recognition of the CCBA. Members who failed to follow the rules were subjected to heavy fines and could not expect any help from CCBA.¹¹ It was a tight system.

These kinds of vertical alliances, which were created and constantly maintained through mutual assistance, mutual predation and self-governance in the form of fraternal welfarism, marked the “isolation” of Chinatown during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So far I have described the ways in which fraternal welfarism played out in New York City Chinatown. To fully understand how fraternal welfarism was constructed and maintained, we have to place fraternal welfarism in the broader historical context and examine the socio-political, economic and/or ideological functions it performed to maintain and advance an existing capitalist system. To do this I will now turn to the global restructuring during the second half of the nineteenth century when China was forced into the periphery of the capitalist world-system.

Global restructuring in the second half of the nineteenth century

Historian Eric Hobsbawm has observed that the second half of the nineteenth century was the period in which much of the world became one, united by a capitalist economy (Hobsbawm 1975). The technological development of the railway, steamer and the telegraph overcame the geographical limitations of the prior industrializations, thus accelerating the geographical expansion of a significant minority of industrialized countries. Capitalism now had much of the world at its disposal and the expansion of both international trade and international investment proceeded with zest and speed. As the industrial revolution transformed warfare, high explosives, machine guns and steam

¹¹ CCBA By Law in CCBA of the City of New York, Special Edition. 1995.

transport furthered the colonial conquests of the European powers without major resistance (Hobsbawm, 1975).

A self-sufficient agrarian country for thousands of years, China was not prepared for these changes. Up to 1840, China remained what Immanuel Wallerstein has termed a world-empire, not a nation-state. A world-empire claimed a universal authority and conceived itself the center and above all others (Wallerstein, 1974). Europe, until the eighteenth century, was merely a region of outer barbarians and did not pose any problem for the Chinese emperors. Though there were some groups of traders from the West, China was now, for the first time, brought face to face with Western nations. Defeated by the British naval force in the first Opium War (1839-42), the Qing Empire was shocked by the fragility of the imperial system in contrast to the strength of the Western technology and military power. Faced with continuous threats from the West, the Qing Empire did not have much choice-either to call for national resistance or to make concessions/collaborations with the West.

Yet internal civil rebellion further undermined the empire's power. The Taiping Revolution (1850-66), which was triggered by acute economic pressure and political discontent with the Qing, broke out in Kwangsi (a Southern province of China) and spread so rapidly that by the end of 1853 most of south and east China were controlled by Taiping militants.¹² Faced with a social revolution, the powerless emperor was reluctant to mobilize the enormous force of Chinese popular xenophobia against the foreign

¹²The Taiping revolution was dubbed the greatest revolution in the nineteenth century by historians: it lasted 15 years, killed at least 20 million lives, and left the central government bankrupt. See Hobsbawm, 1975; and Cohen, 1980.

invaders, for the Qing dynasty itself was imposed by alien conquerors.¹³ In order to maintain its own political power and legitimacy to rule, the Qing emperor rejected a policy of national resistance and adopted concessions with the West. With the help of foreigners (mainly the British army), the Qing emperor recovered from the civil unrest, but the price it had paid for recovery was heavy – a complete subordination to the interest of the Western powers (Hobsbawm, 1975).

While the economic and military expansion united much of the world into one global system, it also divided the world into two sectors: the winners – the developed, the dominant, and the advanced; and the losers – the lagging, the dominated, and the backward. The winners, in the contemporary economic, political and biological thought of the bourgeois world of that period, were the “fittest” and the “superior,” thus their domination was justified. The losers were the “unfit” and the “inferior,” and deserved to be dominated (Hobsbawm, 1975). The concept of superiority and inferiority measured by technology, military and economics also applied to the concepts of race and culture. The Chinese empire, which, with five thousands years of civilization, once regarded herself the center of the world and all others as barbarians, was now deemed underdeveloped and backward. These ideas about race, nation, culture, and what counted as progress were part of the ideological framework that guided and justified the expansion and domination of advanced capitalist countries. I will return to these ideas in section 2 of this chapter.

It is in the context of global restructuring in which fraternal welfarism came into play. The United States, with its growing demand for cheap labor, resources and market share, began to take an interest in China. In 1864, prompted by Northern capitalists’

¹³ The Qing dynasty was established by the Manchu tribe who originated in the northeast region of China and brought down the Ming dynasty.

needs for labor, President Lincoln signed the Act to Encourage Immigration, which allowed private employers to recruit foreign laborers on their own (Briggs, 2001).

American companies began to set up recruitment agencies in the port cities in China and encouraged poor Chinese peasants to come to the United States under a credit-ticket system by advancing passage money to them.¹⁴ Yet since emigration was prohibited by the Qing government, recruiting large number of laborers was not successful. Through “diplomatic negotiations,” in 1868 the U.S. government finally “convinced” the Qing emperor to sign the Burlingame Treaty, which, in addition to granting the United States control over inland trade and navigation, allowed free migration of the Chinese to the United States (Tsai, 1983). As a result, a large number of Chinese laborers were recruited to work in the mines and later in the construction of the transcontinental railroad.

However, American economic advancement in China also brought home a serious social problem. The large number of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. triggered the deeply rooted social anxiety over race because the Chinese were regarded as an inferior race and their presence posed a threat to American civilization and racial purity. Therefore, a series of legislation was designed to recruit the Chinese as merely temporary laborers and to prevent them from staying permanently. To prevent Chinese settlement, only male laborers were recruited and were discouraged from bringing their families to this country. From the early 1870s, the first decade of major Chinese influx, efforts by various levels of the American government were made to restrict the immigration of Chinese women

¹⁴ A flyer issued in Chinese and circulated in Canton reads: “Americans are very rich people. They want the Chinaman to come and will make him welcome...There will be big pay, large houses, and food and clothing of the finest description...Never fear, and you will be lucky. Come to Hong Kong, or to the sign of this house in Canton and we will instruct you...” (cited in Hoobler and Hoobler, 1994, p20).

(Chan, 1991). In addition, Chinese were barred from gaining citizenship through naturalization. In 1882 when anti-Chinese sentiment reached its height, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to prevent the entry of Chinese laborers entirely. Contrary to the common belief that Chinese were sojourners who came to the United States only to make money and never intended to stay nor integrate into the American society, Chinese laborers were prohibited from settling in the first place.

Discrimination against the Chinese was not merely expressed in government policies. During the depression of the 1870s, violence against Chinese escalated and the anti-Chinese sentiment became an organized political movement. The conventional view holds that the presence of the Chinese depressed the prevailing wage scale and caused the unemployment of white workers, thus aroused their anti-Chinese attitude. Chiu points out that such explanation reflected little of the economic conditions, but served to justify anti-Chinese racism (Chiu, 1963). Analyzing the role of Chinese immigrants within the framework of the general economic development of California, Chiu reveals that the Chinese did not compete directly with white workers, rather, they were concentrated in the low-price, low-wage jobs, primarily in agriculture and import-competing industries. Yet blaming the Chinese for the economic hardship of white workers proved to be a convenient and powerful political tool. For instance, the California Democrats, in their effort to stage a comeback after the Civil War, launched an offensive against the Chinese and fit the Chinese into the mental compartment which in the South had reserved for blacks (Saxton, 1971). The Chinese were a people of different color and, as the Democrats argued, though they were not slaves, because many Chinese worked under the contract labor system, they were not quite free either. During a period when the whole

country was still occupied with the question of slavery (even after the Civil War, the issues and antagonism of the war years remained very much alive), the tactic of attacking the Chinese as slave labor was a success, allowing the Democrats win the support from white workers.

Meanwhile, the non-Chinese workingmen of California and their leaders also discovered that the anti-Chinese issue provided a powerful tool to rally workers who had little in common and would be hard to unify. The underlying force that drew the various groups together was an intense shared sense of frustration and displacement, rather than similar background or common interests. Skilled craftsmen, unskilled workers, small farmers and businessmen, who were being, or were afraid of being, squeezed out by larger companies employing Chinese joined in self-defense against exploiters, big businesses and monopolists. They viewed the Chinese as tools of monopoly capital and considered themselves to be under attack from both above and below (Saxton, 1971). The Chinese were to be blamed for their economic hardship. Chinese exclusion was regarded as a cure-all. Class conflicts were turned into racial hatred.

The anti-Chinese movement reached its violent peak in the years from 1880 to 1900. Faced with hostile conditions, the Chinese were forced to make some major adjustments. Many returned to their homeland.¹⁵ The majority of those who stayed chose to leave their homes in small towns and head to large metropolises outside of California¹⁶ because the latter had a greater degree of law enforcement and less anti-Chinese

¹⁵ The Chinese population in the United States dropped from 107, 488 in 1890 to 89,863 in 1900. And the number continued to decrease until the 1940s (Bernard Wong, 1982, p34).

¹⁶ In 1880, 83 percent of the Chinese resided on the Pacific Coast; by 1900 the number dropped to 66 percent and by 1920 to 55 percent. (Kwong, 1979, p38)

resentment. Many came to New York City because of its geographical distance from the West Coast and its large immigrant population, which, the Chinese figured, would make them a less visible target. In addition to geographic relocation, there was an occupational readjustment. Restaurants and hand laundries seemed to be the new “niche” which required less capital and were not in direct conflict with the white employers or workers (Wong, 1988; Kwong, 1979).

Having laid out the broader historical context, I conclude that fraternal welfarism was a product of and also played an important role in the development of U.S. capitalist system during the late nineteenth century. The system of fraternal welfarism provided a successful means to control the large number of Chinese male laborers in the U.S., helping to reconcile the contradiction between U.S. economic interests and social anxiety over race in American society. By accommodating laborers’ basic needs and ensuring their well-being, various levels of fraternal welfarism (i.e. Chinese contractors, translators, employment agencies, mutual-aid organizations, and industries-food, health care, entertainment-that catered to Chinese workers) functioned to guarantee a proper supply of Chinese labor to America’s capitalist economy. At the same time, by creating a self-reliant community, fraternal welfarism limited the Chinese from interacting with outside world, making them less of a threat to American society, a society disturbed by the presence of an inferior race and the danger it posed to Anglo-Saxon purity.

While fraternal welfarism was a form of American racial domination, it had different impact on different classes in the Chinatown community. For the elite class, the tight social hierarchy of fraternal welfarism helped protect and promote their interests and power. For the Chinese laborers, who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, fraternal

welfarism provided a means for survival but was also a source of exploitation. The vertical hierarchy in Chinatown was further strengthened by the class bias of U.S. immigration policies. Although the anti-Chinese movement seemed to be directed at all Chinese, the exclusion laws mainly targeted the Chinese laboring class while keeping the door a crack open for merchants and elite (Chan, 1991). For instance, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and six subsequent acts barred the entrance of Chinese laborers for sixty years (Kwong, 1979), but gave exemption to the elite class (including teachers, students, merchants, diplomats, and travelers). The wives and children of the laborers who were already here were also added to the exclusion list. It was clear that this series of legislative attacks attempted not only to prevent the immigration of Chinese laborers, but also to eliminate them in the United States.

Sojourner mentality

The discrimination against the Chinese created a bachelor society, in which male laborers, single or married in China, were prohibited from reproducing biologically and socially in this country. This helped create a sojourner mentality. Although many of the Chinese laborers, at first, did not intend to stay permanently (because they were discouraged from doing so) many of them ended up staying. Those who stayed changed their plans, but the Chinese exclusions forced them to keep their sojourner mentality. Denied citizenship and the right of having families, Chinese laborers were geographically and socially confined within the Chinese community. They had no reason to identify with the U.S.. As a result, they tended to be more inward looking (focusing on Chinatown) and were more attached to their home country. They were actively involved in the economic

and political developments of China and were less concerned about what happened in the U.S.. Politically and economically excluded from American society, physically and socially segregated from the public life, and thousands miles away from their families, Chinese laborers were forced to rely on fraternal welfarism for protection and support. With the help of the U.S., they became “isolated.”

Fraternal welfarism and the construction of Chinatown’s borders

Fraternal welfarism imposed rigid borders that isolated Chinatown residents from the rest of the society. The Chinese exclusion laws which denied Chinese laborers citizenship and the rights of having families effectively segregating the Chinese laborers geographically and socially from American society. Chinatown’s borders were further maintained through the dominance of fraternal organizations. The elite leaders of fraternal organizations utilized various strategies to strengthen the vertical social structure in Chinatown in order to maintain and advance their power and privilege in the community. For instance, they implemented strict rules on their members, and obtained Qing government’s recognition to legitimize its control in the community. For the U.S. government, the dominance of fraternal organizations provided a means of control of the Chinese laborers, helping to minimize the “threat” of the Chinese to American society.

Chinatown’s borders were constructed along the colonial binary division and were defined by a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders. The construction of these borders always involved the processes of inclusion and exclusion, identification and othering. While Chinatown’s borders were patrolled by the fraternal organizations and by the U.S., the two had different conceptualizations on what was considered “inside” and

“outside.” For the U.S., Chinatown located “outside” of American society and always needed to be kept away. For elite class of the fraternal organizations, Chinatown was the “inside”; foreigners were outsiders and their intervention in Chinatown was not desirable. However, Chinatown’s borders created different experience for the Chinese laborers. On one hand, the borders provided some kind of protection against the brutal racism from the “outside.” On the other hand, within this “protective” borders they were also subjected to another kind of oppression.

The construction of Chinatown borders simultaneously involved the construction of subjectivity. Here subjectivity was also constructed along the dichotomy of colonial racial binaries, between inside/outside, Chinese/American, colonizer/colonized. These dichotomies provided the foundation for the psychological process of sojourner mentality. When the Chinese were rejected as the opposite of American and excluded to the outside, they were more likely to be attached to their homeland than to identity with this country.

However, these rigid and fixed racial borders were by no means impervious. In addition to businesses transactions (i.e. in cigar, laundry, restaurant industries), human desires, needs and struggles created possibilities for border crossing at different levels. For instance, the absence of Chinese women in Chinatown encouraged border crossings through different forms of sexual relations: interracial marriage (Chinese men marrying Irish women) and prostitution. Religion represented another site where racial boundaries could be crossed. During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a number of Chinese immigrants converted to Christianity or participated in religious activities or services (i.e. English classes) provided by churches. Through their

missionary and educational work, many Chinese Christians served as teachers, translators, social workers and street evangelists, seeking to not only address the welfare of Chinese immigrants, but to combat racist attitudes and activities against the Chinese (Woo, 1991). The Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown at the turn of the twentieth century represented another attempt to dismantle the racially defined boundaries. In the third section of this chapter, I will examine how this group challenged the racial borders by promoting a Chinese nationalist sentiment.

2.2 The construction of “Chineseness”: Chinese as a threat to American society

The “isolation” of this period was associated with the construction of two specific versions of “Chineseness.” In the demonized version, Chinese were regarded as an inferior race whose presence posed a threat to American society. In the romanticized version, the Chinese were regarded as an inferior race who needed American salvation. Both versions of “Chineseness” played an important part in supporting and maintaining “isolation” by helping to guide and justify American exploitation of the Chinese people.

During the 1870s when the question on Chinese immigration became a heated national debate, the question on whether Chinese immigration should be prohibited centered around the nature of the “Chinese race” and its impact on American society. Regardless of their opposing attitudes, both pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese groups had a shared assumption that the Chinese were an inferior race, although we need to give credit to a small number of people who did argue racial equality. Those in favor of Chinese immigration mostly spoke in the tone of Christian charity and argued that it was America’s duty to bring the Chinese American civilization and God’s blessing. Through

acculturation to the more advanced culture, they believed, the Chinese could become a “better” race. Opponents to Chinese immigration argued that the presence of the inferior Chinese posed a threat to American society: Chinese labor endangered the welfare of white workers because they were willing to work for lower wages and were often used as strike breakers; the low morality of Chinese male laborers who did not bring their wives and were addicted to opium and gambling threatened the welfare of white women and racial purity. In response to the optimism of their opponents, anti-Chinese groups argued that the Chinese were unassimilable and that would bring peril to American civilization. Such view was well summed up in a California Senate special report issued in 1877:

During their entire settlement in California, they have never adapted themselves to our habits, mode of dress, or our education system, have never learned the sanctity of an oath, never desire to become citizens, or to perform the duties of citizenship, never discovered the difference between right and wrong, never ceased the worship of their idol gods, or advanced a step beyond the traditions of our Anglo-Saxon life, they remain the same stolid Asiatics that have floated on the rivers and salved in the fields of China for thirty centuries of time ... Of all the vast horde not four hundred have been brought to a realization of the truth of Christianity ... It is safe to say that where one Chinese soul has been saved ... a hundred white have been lost by the contamination of their presence (cited in Lee, 1965, p25).

The two constructions of Chineseness – Chinese was inferior thus a threat and Chinese was inferior thus needed American salvation – were part of the dialectical structure of colonialism, which produces and imposes abstract binary divisions on the colonial world. As Hardt & Negri nicely put it, “colonialism homogenizes real social differences by creating one overriding opposition that pushes differences to the absolute and then subsumes the opposition under the identity of European civilization” (p128). In this process, the differences between Chinese and American were pushed to the extreme,

producing Chinese as the opposite of American, that is, the Other. The difference of the Other that is made absolute and natural further provides the foundation of American Self. Hardt & Negri describe this process a “negative dialectic of recognition”: “the colonizer does produce the colonized as negation, but, through a dialectic twist, that negative colonized identity is negated in turn to found the positive colonizer Self” (128). What was produced through the “negative dialectic of recognition” the notion of American as benevolent and superior.

The dialectical construction of “inferior Chinese” and “superior American” was part of framework of manifest destiny, the idea that America was racially superior and was chosen to carry out God’s mission. The two versions of “Chineseness” – demonized and romanticized – illustrated the two tones of manifest destiny. Here I will focus on its defensive tone, which involved the demonization of the Chinese as a threat to American society thus needed to be excluded. The paternalistic tone, which centered on the construction of a romanticized Chineseness, in which the Chinese were regarded as friendly and harmless people who needed American salvation, will be discussed in Chapter 3. By examining the two distinct formations of Chineseness, I will demonstrate that while colonial racial binary was made fixed and absolute, the boundaries of Chineseness were unstable and flexible, subjected to manipulation in the service of ideological needs. In the following, I will examine how the demonized version of the “Chineseness” was constructed and used to support “isolation.”

The demonized notion of the Chinese was expressed in different images during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. In *Oriental: Asian Americans in popular culture*, Robert G. Lee identifies several examples of how Chinese was

demonized in popular images during this period. They include: “heathen chinee,” in which the Chinese were the pollutant, threatening God’s free soil (California); “coolie,” in which the Chinese represented cheap and unfree labor, threatening the welfare of white workingmen; “deviant” which regarded Chinese prostitutes and Chinese male laborers (who worked as domestic servants and did not bring their wives) as sexually deviant, opening up possibilities for interracial sex and intimacy, thus threatening family stability and racial purity; and “yellow peril,” in which the Chinese was part of the flood of yellow races, threatening to swamp the white race and to destroy white civilization (Lee, 1991).

The demonization and dehumanization of the Chinese helped support “isolation” in different ways. First, by creating anxiety and fear, this image provided powerful ideological tool for white workers to provoke hostilities against the Chinese and to mobilize popular support for anti-Chinese causes. The idea that the Chinese were inferior further justified their discriminations and violence against the Chinese. For the employers, this gave them a justified reason to exploit Chinese laborers. Since the Chinese were inferior, it was OK to pay them lower wages and to subject them to cruel conditions. Moreover, the idea that the Chinese posed a threat to American civilization and racial purity justified the various exclusion policies of the U.S. government.

It is important to note that the demonized version of “Chineseness” was not simply a product of conservative, extremist reactionaries. Rather it was promoted by many intellectuals and the governing elite, who were by and large politically liberal and scientifically minded. The idea that the Chinese were a racial threat must be understood in the context of urgent preoccupation with social problems during the late nineteenth century. The receptiveness of the notion of racial threat was mainly because it touched

upon a deep anxiety about materialistic degeneration, loss of virtue, and doubts about inevitable progress of the mass society (Malik, 1996). By the end of the nineteenth century the United States had been hit by two severe economic depressions (1870s and early 1890s) and the social ills that seemed only to exist in Europe, such as poverty, urban slums, labor unrest, populist and socialist agitation and big corporations, had become familiar scenes in large cities in America. In addition, French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870) and the horrors of the Paris Commune (1871) brought attention to the issue of national degeneracy. As Kenen Malik points out, these events cast doubts on the idea of inevitable progress and intensified liberals' ambivalence towards social change. And more fundamentally they threatened the legitimacy of the elite to rule.

The sense of crisis was expressed through the discussion on degeneration. Degeneration was both a political and scientific concept. It was empirically measurable, explaining the nature of lower orders, the crisis of the governing class and the growing social disorder. Heredity was the cause of degeneration. The pathologies of the lower orders multiplied through self-reproduction, resulting in not only their own degeneration but also the decline of the society as a whole (Malik, 1996). In an era of mass immigration (20 million immigrants entered the U.S. between 1870 and 1910), the idea of decay and of the vanishing of native stock obsessed the elite class. Their growing concern was accompanied by dissatisfaction with the laissez-faire principle of social Darwinism, which provides no solution to these pathologies that seemed to lead the society into an inevitable decline. What was needed was intervention and planning by the intellectuals and elite using science to overcome the defect of human society. This view gave support

to the eugenics movement and the immigration restriction movement in which scientific discoveries and social policy went hand in hand.

Initiated in 1883 in England by Francis Galton, eugenics was a bourgeoisie political movement, urging upon governments implementing a program to improve the genetic condition of human race. The basic idea was that human qualities passed on from one generation to the next and that environment played insignificant role in this process, thus genius usually come from a genius family and the poor remain poor. Extreme eugenicists argued that social crisis was a result of the overbreeding of the incompetent class and the underbreeding of the “vigorous classes” (cited in Gossett, 1963, p158). The only way to ameliorate these conditions was by genetic improvement – by increasing the fit elements of the population (usually identified with the bourgeoisie and the Nordic race) and decreasing the unfit elements (usually identified with the poor and colored race). Eugenics became “scientific” after 1900 due to the rise of the science of genetics (the rediscovery of Mendel’s research on heredity), which seemed to confirm that most human traits were determined by genes and that genetic selection was possible (Hobsbawm, 1975).

In the United States, biological solution to social ills received enthusiastic support from the ruling elite. In 1893, Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston, the center of the native stock, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, educated bourgeoisie, with John Fisk, one of the earliest evolutionists in the United States, as the first president. His Colleague, Madison Grant, chairman of the New York Zoological Society and a vice-president of the League for 25 years, published *The passing of the great races* in 1916, alerting Americans that the superior races in the United States were in danger of being

swamped by inferior immigrants. Arguing that science is the only solution to race swamping (he completely rejected education), Grant advocated the implementation of complete segregation like the South African model, or sterilization, selective breeding, legal prohibition of miscegenation, and social engineering. "The only possible solution is to establish large colonies for the Negroes and to allow them only as laborers, and not as settlers. There must be ultimately a black South Africa and a white South Africa from the Cape to the cataracts of the Nile" (cited in Hannford, p358).

President Theodore Roosevelt was another influential supporter for eugenics ideas.

In 1913, he claimed

It is obvious that if in the future racial qualities are to be improved, that improvement must be wrought by favoring the fecundity of the worthy types and frowning on the fecundity of the unworthy types. At present we do just the reverse. There is no check on the fecundity of those who are subnormal, both intellectually and morally, while the provident and the thrifty tend to develop a cold selfishness, which makes them refuse to breed at all (cited in Malik, p114).

In response to the decimation of population during World War I which they saw as a catastrophe of the white race and the potential onset of racial decline, Paul Popenoe, editor of the *Journal of Heredity*, the organ of the American Genetic Association, and Roswell Hill Johnson, professor at Pittsburgh, published *Applied Eugenics*, seeking to provide solutions to the crisis. With the support from the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor, the Harriman family, the Carnegie Institution, and the YMCA, Popenoe and Johnson advocated legal, social, and economic adjustment to ensure that a large proportion of superior racial persons had children and the inferior did not. In addition to calling for a popular involvement in a national genealogical audit, they advocated sterilization, immigration restriction, and popular control to regulate the eugenically

inferior Negroes and Southern and Eastern Europeans, and to encourage Nordic colonization and repopulation. In 1920, William MacDougall, a Psychology professor at Harvard, published *Is America Safe for Democracy?*, which sent the nation another warning of the decline of the white race in America. A believer in innate racial differences in intelligence, he argued that racial swamping was leading America to destruction because it had resulted in a decline in mental quality of American people.

These alarms were quite effective. Between 1907 and 1931, thirty states had passed Eugenics Sterilization Laws, authorizing the forcible sterilization of the “intellectually and morally subnormal” (Malik, p114). By the 1920s, a series of immigration restrictions were passed. In addition to the Chinese, Asians and finally immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were added to the list of racial threats that needed to be excluded.

2.3 Struggles against “isolation”—the Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown

The Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown was an example of the struggles against “isolation” during this period. For the supporters of the movement, the “isolation” of Chinatown and its racially defined borders were an expression of American racial discrimination. In their view, the exclusion and discrimination against the Chinese in the U.S. was equal to the humiliation and suffering brought by Western imperialist powers to people in China. They attributed these suffering to the weakness of the Qing Empire, as evidenced by the empire’s failure to defend the country against foreign aggression and to protect its people overseas. They were convinced that racism against

the Chinese would not exist if China were strong. The ultimate goal of this movement was to create a strong, modern China capable of defending against Western imperialist powers. A strong China would then bring respect and equal treatment to the Chinese in the United States.

To achieve their goals, the supporters of the movement saw revolution, that is, to transform China from an empire to a modern nation-state, as the necessary means. They developed strategies to instill a nationalist consciousness in the Chinatown community, and to solicit support for the revolutionary activities in China. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Chinese revolutionary movement in China, came to New York City Chinatown several times and established a branch office for his Revolutionary Party in 1903. To gain wider support in the community, Sun became a member of the secret society, the Hung League, because the popular base of the secret societies and their strong anti-Qing sentiment made them potential revolutionary force. With their support, Sun was able to establish a newspaper, the Revolutionary Army, to deliver his revolutionary ideas in America, to raise fund to support the armed uprising in China, and, most importantly, to mobilize the popular force in the community (Tsai, 1983). For Chinese immigrants in the U.S., the revolutionary movement presented an alternative and gave them hope that their conditions could be changed. By participating in the broader movement of national resistance, they actively engaged in local struggles against American racism.

The foundation of the revolutionary movement was Chinese racial nationalism, which was based on the traditional sinocentrism and xenophobia combined with the newly emerged concept of Chinese nation (Dikotter, 1992). Chinese racial nationalism provided the Chinese immigrants a framework to understand racial discrimination they

encountered in the U.S. It also provided a powerful tool to mobilize popular support and to form a unified line of defense against U.S. domination. Moreover, Chinese racial nationalism provided the Chinese immigrants a sense of cultural superiority, helping ward off the dominant American conception that the Chinese were inferior people. The nationalist discourse helped establish a new community – a Chinese nation, in which loyalty was no longer confined to a particular region or kinship, but included national unity. It also created a new identity, enabling the Chinese to identify themselves emotionally with the Chinese nation and to be politically mobilized as Chinese people.

The Chinese racial nationalism had a great impact on the Chinatown community. The concept of Chinese race and Chinese nation provided an important framework that shaped the ways in which the Chinese defined themselves. The Chinese racial nationalism continued to serve as the foundation for the struggles against “isolation” in the following decades. In order to fully understand how it became a powerful tool in the struggles against “isolation” and its impacts on Chinatown, it is important to examine the historical context from which this concept was developed.

At the heart of Chinese nationalism was the concept of Chinese as a race and a nation. Such concept, as several scholars have agreed, did not develop in China until the end of the nineteenth century when the Chinese society that has retained its cohesion for two millenniums was shaken up by western military and economic penetration (Crossley, 1999; Dikotter, 1992). However, it would be wrong, in fact, Eurocentric, to assume that Chinese racial and national concepts were completely western. Although the Chinese social-political system precluded the development of the concept of race and nation, significant parts of the system laid the foundation for their development, predisposing the

Chinese to perceive the new world order dominated by western capitalist countries. In brief terms, the Chinese historical system was what Wallerstein has termed, a world-empire¹⁷. The Chinese empire perceived itself to be the whole and the only economy and assumed cultural superiority. In this view, China was the center of the world, and others were barbarians. The development of Chinese racial consciousness and national identity during the late nineteenth century was based upon the sense of cultural superiority and the hostility toward the outsiders deeply rooted in Chinese society.

Such development was associated with the transformations of the Chinese society triggered by western forces since the Opium War (1840). The penetration of imperialist powers in China, along with the introduction of western military force, technology and a capitalist economy, brought about radical changes in Chinese society.¹⁸ As China fell more and more under the control of the western powers, the traditional Chinese world-view was seriously challenged. In the new reality, China was no longer the center of the world, but merely one of the nations in the world system, at the mercy of the foreign powers.

However, this period was also marked by Chinese resistance to foreign penetration (Chesneaux, 1971). Resistance was led by three major forces in China. The

¹⁷ For detailed discussions on the Chinese historical system, see Chesneaux, 1971, Wallerstein, 1974, Hobsbawm, 1975

¹⁸ The traditional Chinese social system was shaken into the core. The quadripartite traditional hierarchy - scholars, peasants, artisans, tradesmen - which still characterized Chinese society in 1840, was completely broken up. The number of artisans declined, as well as the prestige of the Confucian scholars. In 1906 the imperial examination which had represented the very foundation for the scholar-gentry were abolished. As the old social classes declined, new social strata appeared: the modern intelligentsia, the young educated class, avidly interested in science and hostile to the old China (they were the western-educated minorities, representing the most powerful cultural legacy of imperialism); the bourgeoisie, who made rapid progress despite of the fierce competition they had to contend with from numerous foreign businesses; and the industrial proletariat, drawn from the poor peasants and the unemployed of the cities, wretched, lacking traditions, and completely without means of support (Chesneaux, 1971).

first one was the reformers, led by Confucian scholars of the imperial court. Impressed by the success of Japan's westernization, they initiated several modernization programs based on the western model. The second force was the ancient and powerful tradition of popular rebellion and secret societies imbued with ideologies of opposition. The cutting edge of these rebellions was traditional xenophobia and anti-modern, which was directed against foreigners, especially Christianity and machines. Both forces had failed. While the Reform was weakened by technological ignorance, the secret societies only intended to replace the Qing with a new empire, unable to provide any program or perspective for Chinese renewal. The third force was represented by the newly-emerged bourgeois class and the western-educated intellectuals, who fully embraced the modernization on a western model (because their interests lied in a modern system, rather than the traditional Chinese structure). This force grew first in southern China, where business and trade had always been important, and the impact of foreign imperialism was most profound (i.e. trading ports, missionary schools) (Hobsbawm, 1975). They were the revolutionaries.

To transform China into a strong country in the new international order, the newly emerged elite class faced two pressing issues. First was to eliminate the ancient regime that was degenerate, corrupt, an incapable of standing up to foreigners or of leading the country in the path of progress. Since they rejected emperorship, another key issue was how to construct a centralized rule in a profoundly fragmented, regionalized, and economically and culturally differentiated republic, that had remained under the control of a single individual (Crossley, 1999). While nationalism was a new concept that was somewhat beyond the comprehension of the population at large, racial hatred seemed to be ready and bountiful. To meet their political and ideological goals, the revolutionaries

drew upon traditional notion of xenophobia and anti-dynastic uprising as well as Western concepts of race. Beginning in 1895, social evolutionary theories, especially the works of Herbert Spencer and T. H. Huxley, were gradually translated into Chinese by western educated scholars (i.e. Yan Fu, Ma Junwu) and were well received. Survival of the fittest, Spencer's inter-group competition and Huxley's intra-group cooperation attracted many Chinese intellectuals. What emerged from this conceptual blending and reconfiguration were modern concepts of Chinese race and nation designed to meet nationalist revolutionary causes (Dikotter, 1992).

The Chinese racial nationalism was the central idea of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary thought. It provided a power tool to mobilize people in Chinatown in the national resistance, and, at the same time, in the struggles against American racial oppression. Through their efforts to create a modern China, a nation-state, the revolutionaries created new concepts of Chinese and a new identity – identifying Chinese as a race, a nation, a people, and as political citizens to the Chinese republic, rather than subjects belonging to the emperor. The claim to a national identity was the first step toward achieving racial equality for the Chinese in the United States because it affirmed the dignity of the people and legitimated their demand for equality, and, at the same time, it instilled racial pride which served to ward off the dominant discourse that labeled Chinese inferior.

Although the revolution movement was an effort to challenge American racial domination, it only achieved part of the struggles against “isolation,” because it did not challenge the internal hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations. In fact, the Chinese revolutionary movement worked to reinforce rather than challenge the fraternal welfare

structure. While stressing internal unity against foreign enemy, the Chinese racial nationalism promoted by the revolutionary movement also strengthened the vertical cohesion and power hierarchy of the Chinatown community. Moreover, while Chinese racial nationalism provided the Chinese a powerful weapon of defense against foreign domination, it could be easily turned into a repressive force that suppressed the very interior it sought to protect. The next chapter provides an example of how Chinese racial nationalism was used by the KMT to maintain and legitimate its dominance in the Chinatown community.

Chapter 3

Chinatown as a Chinese territory¹

The Chinese Revolution of 1911 had proved to be a disappointment to its supporters in the Chinatown community. Although it had accomplished the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China, the forces, a combination of military rebellion, republic insurrection and secret society revolt, that had brought down the empire, also plunged the country into anarchy and warlordism, characterized by constant regional warfare (Chesneaux et al, 1977; Hobsbawm, 1975). While the new nationalist government, established by Sun Yat-sen and his political party Kuomintang (KMT), was too weak to unify the whole country, regional militaries dominated the political landscape, their armies warring with each other for control of territories. In addition to internal chaos, foreign aggression which had gradually penetrated the Chinese political and economic system since the Opium War, continued with full force.² For people in Chinatown, the new China did not bring the kinds of changes they had hoped. The new government was unable to help them repeal the racist immigration policies and practices against the Chinese in the U.S.

The anti-Chinese exclusion and discrimination were quite effective. Between 1900 and 1940 the total number of Chinese in the U.S. declined.³ During this period, New York City's Chinese population dropped 27 percent in 1910, but gradually increased

¹ A prior version of this section was titled "Chinatown as a Chinese Colony" (Chen, 2002). I thank Wing Lam for pointing out that the term Chinese colony underestimates the involvement of the U.S. government in Chinatown affairs.

² Inequitable treaties were imposed on China since the Opium War. Treaties included territorial privileges, foreign control of public services and foreign investment and control of major industries.

³ Between 1900 and 1940, the Chinese population in the U.S. decreased from 89,863 in 1900 to 71,531 in 1910, further dropped to 61,639 in 1920, and increased moderately to 74,954 in 1930 and 77,504 in 1940. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Cited in New York City Department of City Planning, Manhattan Bridge Area Study: Chinatown. 1979.

in the next three decades due to the continuing relocation of the Chinese immigrants to New York City.⁴ By 1940, 16.5 percent of the total Chinese population in the U.S. resided in New York City, comparing to only 7 percent in 1900. Regardless of the changes, most of the Chinese in New York City remained concentrated in the four block area on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Geographical segregation was accompanied by occupational exclusion. Most of the Chinese could only find work in laundry and restaurant industries. By the mid-1940s, there were about five thousand Chinese laundry shops throughout New York City.

Although the Chinese revolution did not improve the conditions of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. as many had expected, it had a historical significance with respect to the “isolation” of Chinatown. The establishment of the Chinese Republic created new possibilities for Chinese in America, both politically and economically. Politically, the revolution transformed the relationship between overseas Chinese and the Chinese government. Owing much of its success to overseas Chinese (many contributed funds and some joined the revolutionary ranks), the grateful nationalist government lavished the overseas Chinese with praises and titles, calling them “mothers of the revolution.” The new constitution assured the overseas Chinese absolute equal rights to those who resided at home (Young, 1971). While such protection for overseas citizens had been taken for granted by Westerners, it was a significant progress for overseas Chinese communities. The Qing government, with its traditional hostility towards emigrants, had denied any

⁴ Between 1900 and 1940, New York City's Chinese population was the following: 6,321 in 1900; 4,614 in 1910; 5,042 in 1920; 8,414 in 1930; and 12,753 in 1940. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. Cited in NYC DCP, Manhattan Bridge Area Study: Chinatown. 1979.

protection to its subjects overseas.⁵ The most significant development was the formal participation of the overseas Chinese communities in China's new political system - the new government declared six senators out of a total of 274 to be chosen from the overseas Chinese (Young, 1971, p34).

Economically, the revolution opened the door for industrialization and capitalist development in China, which had already been initiated by foreign powers in the late 19th century. The withdrawal of the foreign competitions as a result of WWI further facilitated prosperity in some industries (Chesneaux et al. 1977). The economic expansion paved the way for the development and transformation of the business bourgeoisie, among which many Chinese in America participated. Many young businessmen and professionals who were educated in America but were excluded from the American mainstream returned to China to take part in this golden opportunity. Many Chinatown merchants also profited from the economic expansions in China. They did not rely on any professional skills or education, instead many of them allied with warlords to ensure high return on their investment in China (Lai, 1991).

Meanwhile, the integration of the Chinatown communities into China's political and economic system entailed the intervention of the Chinese government in Chinatown affairs. In contrast to the Qing government's antagonistic attitudes towards overseas Chinese, the Chinese nationalist government perceived Chinatown communities as part

⁵ Qing government's attitude toward Chinese emigrants was hostile. Its prohibitory emigration law prescribed the death penalty to those who left the country. Qing regarded emigrants as breaking dynastic law and ethical barriers, thus they did not deserve the protection of the emperor. When informed about the mistreatment and violent attacks against the Chinese overseas, the Qing government did not take any action nor address the grievance suffered by its people abroad. When Qing finally changed its policies (The Qing government enacted "The Law of Chinese Nationality" in 1909, two years before its final collapse, granting all Chinese born overseas of Chinese father the same privileges as those Chinese in the mother country), it was too late to have any substantial impact. See Henry Tsai, 1983; Zo Kil Young, 1971.

of Chinese territory. Such an arrangement and conceptualization had a political purpose. The newly established nationalist government had authority only over the southern provinces⁶ and was constantly threatened by military warlords. It needed the financial support of the overseas Chinese communities in order to maintain its power and in its struggles to unite the country. Institutions and liaisons were established to facilitate such a relationship. The KMT set up its New York branch in 1913 in Chinatown and its U.S. Eastern branch office in 1929 (CCBA, 1995). In 1921 a special Overseas Chinese Affairs Bureau was established within the KMT (Kwong, 1979). The result was the penetration of a foreign government (China) into an immigrant community (Chinatown) in New York City.

The direct involvement of the Chinese community in China's political and economic system and the penetration of the Chinese government in Chinatown marked the emergence of a new form of "isolation," which I refer to as "Chinatown as a Chinese Territory." I will now move on to the second historical period of the roadmap (Table 3-2). "Chinatown as a Chinese territory" signified the dominance of the KMT in the Chinatown community for more than half a century, spanning from 1911 to the early 1970s. The first section of this chapter explores how "Chinatown as a Chinese territory" was constructed. By situating it in a broader historical context, I will demonstrate that "Chinatown as Chinese territory" was another example of American colonial domination, which used the dominance of the KMT to advance its economic and political interests. As we will see, the borders imposed by fraternal welfarism were reinforced by the KMT,

⁶The northern provinces were under the power of Yuan Shi-kai and his supporters. Yuan, who was in control of the Beiyuan army, attempted to restore the imperial regime in 1915.

which used Chinese nationalism to maintain and legitimate its dominance in the Chinatown community.

“Chinatown as a Chinese territory” was associated with the construction of a romanticized version of Chineseness. The second section of this chapter explores how this notion of Chineseness was promoted by various political, economic and religious interests. My analysis reveals that this romanticized version of Chineseness was not very different from the demonized version that was associated with fraternal welfarism (see Chapter 2). As we will see, both versions were part of the dialectical construction of colonial domination, serving to justify American exploitation of the Chinese and to help construct an idealized American identity. The third section will discuss the struggles led by the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA) and examines how they used Chinese nationalism (popular nationalism as opposed to KMT’s elite nationalism) to mobilize the community to challenge the boundaries imposed by “Chinatown as a Chinese territory.”

Table 3-1 Roadmap 2: Chinatown as a Chinese Territory

Form of "isolation"	Fraternal Welfarism	Chinatown as a Chinese Territory	Model Minority	Chinatown as a Commodity
Historical periods	Late 19 th century to early 20 th century	From 1911 to early 1970s		
Construction of "isolation"	Tight social hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations	The dominance of the KMT in Chinatown		
Historical conditions	America's economic expansion during the global restructuring of the 2 nd half of the 19 th century	Chinese revolution and KMT's rise to power in China The Cold War		
Political, economic and/or ideological functions	To advance U.S. economic development To control Chinese laborers;	To protect U.S. interests in China and Asia To contain the expansion of communism		
Socio-psychological consequences in Chinatown	Sojourner mentality Reinforced the patriarchal hierarchy	Resources and energy diverted to political struggles in China rather than to the development of the community; Political silence		
Construction of Chinatown's borders	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and the dominance of fraternal organizations in Chinatown	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and KMT's domination in Chinatown		
"Chineseness"	Demonized "Chineseness": Chinese were a threat to American society	Romanticized "Chineseness": Chinese needed American salvation		
Local struggles	The Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown	Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance		

3.1 The construction of “Chinatown as Chinese territory”

The three spatial elements of “Chinatown as a Chinese territory”

“Chinatown as a Chinese territory” was characterized by the direct involvement of the Chinese nationalist government in the Chinatown community. This isolation was constructed through three spatial elements. In the sphere of *material spatial practices*, Chinatown was organized by the KMT in such a way as to support its political activities in China. Through its alliances with the elite class and with the support of the U.S. government, the KMT established its dominance and imposed social orders in the Chinatown community. In *the representation of space*, the KMT perceived Chinatown as part of China’s territory and created different kinds of institutions and liaisons, both in Chinatown and in China, to control its territory. In *representational space*, “Chinatown as a Chinese territory” forced Chinatown workers and residents to participate in China’s politics, reinforcing their attachment to their homeland and discouraging their participation in larger American society. Similar to “fraternal welfarism,” “Chinatown as a Chinese territory” was a form of American colonial domination. Supporting KMT’s dominance in Chinatown and in China was part of U.S. agenda to protect and promote its economic and political interests in Asia after WWII and to control the Chinese communities in this country.⁷

“Chinatown as a Chinese Territory” emerged after the revolution of 1911 and underwent several transformations. In each transformation, Chinatown was reorganized in such a way as to serve KMT’s political, economic and ideological interests in China. In the two decades following the revolution, Chinatown served as a revolutionary base for the KMT to continue its political struggle for national unity. During this period, the KMT was operating without a base in China. The U.S. General Branch in San Francisco, which could operate freely without interference from U.S. authorities, emerged as the headquarter for overseas party affairs. It had jurisdiction over KMT activities not only in North and South America, but also in Europe, South Africa and Australia (Lai, 1991, p182). Based in Chinatown communities, the KMT was in the forefront of advocating actions to defend China’s unity and sovereignty against Western imperialism. The KMT represented a radical force within the New York City’s Chinatown community previously

⁷ KMT were also active in other Chinatown communities in the U.S. See Lai, 1991.

controlled by the traditional establishment of fraternal welfarism. Through party newspapers, vernacular dramas, and Chinese schools, the KMT gradually instilled nationalist consciousness in the community (Lai, 1991). It attracted the more politically conscious people including intellectuals and workers and, by the early 1920s, the KMT had become a significant political force in Chinatown. For the conservative wealthy elite, the KMT's growing influence posed a threat to their authority in the community while its revolutionary principles jeopardized their interests in China. Their concern and fear was deepened as Sun Yat-sen formed an alliance with the Soviet Union and turned the KMT leftward (Lai, 1991).

The reorganization of the KMT was a result of the repeated failure in its struggles to unify the nation. The main obstacle to Chinese unity lay in the powerful alliances among warlords and foreign powers acting through warlords, offering foreign support for them to seize power against their domestic rivals, and in return, ensuring their political influence and protection of their economic interests in China.⁸ Having lost his faith in Western powers, Sun turned to the Soviet Union, whose plan to “take Imperialism from behind” by forming communist alliances in Asian countries sounded promising.⁹ In 1924, the KMT's First Party Congress approved the alliance with the Soviet Union and also with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and called for a joint alliance against the

⁸ For instance, the Fengtian faction, which controlled Manchuria, was backed by Japan. Chen Jion-ming, a warlord in Canton, received help from the British in Hong Kong. The Zhili faction, in control of the area around Peking, was pro-English but in some circumstances also formed alliances with Japan. The alliances assured financial support from foreign powers who were in direct control over China's custom revenues and government budget (Chesneaux et al., 1977, p119-121).

⁹ After the October Revolution, the Soviet Union had been systematically attempting to help form communist parties in Asian countries. It first earned prestige in China when it unilaterally renounced the privileges held by Tsarist Russia in China, breaking the common front of the Western powers profiting from the inequitable treaties. Representatives were sent by the Soviet government to make contact with Chinese left-intellectuals and to help organize industrial workers (Chesneaux et al, 1977, p86-97). Sun's decision was also influenced by the workers' movement during the early 1920s, whose militancy and dynamism demonstrated potential political power for China's unification and independence.

unequal treaties and the warlords.¹⁰ The reorganization of the KMT established the alliance between the proletariat, which was broadly represented by the CCP, and the bourgeoisie, to which the KMT was closely tied. With the aid of the Communists and the Soviet advisers, the KMT apparatus was restructured: a military government was consolidated (which seized Canton and became the Nationalist government in 1925), a military academy was founded to form a solid political unit, and the departments of organizing and propaganda were under communist leadership. The KMT now actively supported the popular forces, providing financial and political support to union strikes and peasant movements (Chesneaux et al, 1977).

Following the party's new direction, Chinatown was reorganized to support the new political objectives. KMT's political activities in Chinatown were no longer limited to soliciting financial support but shifted to politicizing and organizing the masses into political movements. The party's New York branch office began systematic recruitment and was active in establishing Chinese schools, newspapers and reading rooms in Chinatown to advocate its new political objectives (Lai, 1991). The reorganization of the KMT had a considerable impact on the power structure of the Chinatown community. It was the first time in the community that an alliance was organized by political ideology rather than by linkages of kinship and cultural heritage. As a political organization independent of traditional organizations, the KMT provided a political consciousness that was not subordinated to traditional fraternal ties (Kwong, 1979). It created new opportunities of political involvement for Chinese immigrant workers, whose voice was either excluded from the politics or seen as not important (Chesneaux et al, 1977). For

¹⁰ The Congress mapped out three new principles: collaboration with the U.S.S.R, alliance with the Chinese Community Party – admitting CCP members in the KMT - and support of the workers and peasants' movement (Chesneaux et al, 1977, p156).

obvious reasons, KMT's progressive activities were not welcome by the conservative elite in Chinatown.

However, the radical movement of the KMT in China did not last long. The popular forces which were important allies of the bourgeoisie in fighting the warlords now became a threat to them (Chesneaux et al, 1977). The success of the Northern Expedition¹¹ gave rise to Chiang Kai-shek's authoritarian regime, whose massacre of CCP members and supporters in Shanghai in 1927 decisively turned the KMT to the right. Chiang's action opened the door for the KMT to reach compromises with the established foreign and domestic conservative forces in China. Stressing "social order" and "stability," Chiang's regime was especially supported by the right wing of the KMT, the wealthy bourgeoisie, landlords, property owners, and foreign investors, all of whom threatened by the militancy of the unions and popular movements. In 1927, Chiang began to launch a series of campaign and military actions to eliminate these dangerous allies. The "movement for the purification of the party" expelled all those who were suspected of having Communist sympathies or who were simply moderates. Unions were dissolved, strikes were banned, the peasant unions were liquidated, the Communists were hunted down, and militant workers were fired. A wave of anti-Communist repression thus began and quickly became widespread in China as well as in overseas Chinese communities (Chesneaux, et al, 1977).

After the KMT consolidated its power in China and turned rightward, it abandoned its revolutionary ideology and no longer needed Chinatown as its revolutionary base. Chinatown was reorganized again to support the party's new direction. The KMT ceased to politicize and organize the masses into political movements, and

¹¹ A national military action to unite China.

sought to bring overseas Chinese institutions under its control by ordering all Chinese schools and organizations in Chinatown to register with the Chinese government. The party also started to increase its efforts to recruit the wealthy and the influential elite because they were important sources of financial support to the KMT. The KMT was most successful in forming an alliance with conservative Chinatown organizations. During WWII, the KMT took advantage of the patriotic fervor generated by the war and recruited many influential leaders in the community, offering them status and possible profits or beneficial connections (Lai, 1991; Kwong, 1979). Many powerful figures from the traditional fraternal organizations such as the CCBA, family and regional associations and Tongs, quickly rose to high positions in the party hierarchy in America.¹² By admitting influential leaders from traditional organizations, the KMT created a mutual-dependency with the power structure of fraternal welfarism. By the end of WW II, it was in the dominant position in the Chinatown community. To maintain and legitimize their dominance in the Chinatown community, the KMT and the conservative elements in Chinatown worked together to suppress radical ideas and called for the restoration of the old order in the name of national unity.

After the “loss of China,” the KMT became more fanatical about maintaining its power in the Chinatown community. Perceiving Chinatown as the last battlefield facing the danger of Chinese communist takeover, the KMT was devoted to defend its territory, seeking to eliminate any possible communist threats in the community. Chiang’s anti-communist obsession took advantage of America’s Cold War hysteria and formed alliances with groups of various political, economic and religious interests in the U.S. to

¹² The composition of the U.S. General Branch Central Committee increased from nine to eleven members in 1941, fifteen in 1944 and nineteen in 1946. (Lai, 1991, p.196)

advocate more U.S. support for Chiang's regime against the "common enemy" (the infamous China Lobby).¹³ In Chinatown communities, the KMT carried out its operation against its "communist enemies" in collaboration with the U.S. government – sometimes on its own and sometimes with the help of the FBI.¹⁴ KMT agents were sent out to spy on and disrupt any activities deemed "leftist." As a result, thousands of Chinese in America were illegally interrogated and harassed, many were incarcerated or deported as possible "communist sympathizers" (Chen, 2000). The terror generated by the anti-Communist fervor in American society allowed the KMT to maintain control of the Chinese community and to manipulate Chinese organizations, Chinese-language press, and Chinese schools as vehicles for carrying out Chiang's foreign policy objectives (Lai, 1991). In the 1950s, the KMT and the CCBA consolidated their power by strengthening their alliance. While the CCBA granted one of the seven permanent positions on its executive board to the KMT, in return, the KMT appointed prominent association leaders to the Taiwan National Assembly and rewarded exclusive trade privileges to loyal merchants in the community (Kwong, 2001).

It is important to recognize that "Chinatown as a Chinese territory" was not simply imposed by the KMT and the local elite. It was made possible in great part through the United State's active support of the KMT. After the U.S. entered WWII, the U.S. government began to provide financial and military aid to Chiang's regime. While this kind of aid was part of the wartime military effort against Japan's aggression, it was

¹³ See Ellen Schrecker 1994. *The Age of McCarthyism: a brief history with documents*; T. Christopher Jesperen. 1996. *American Images of China, 1931-1949*; Ross Koen, 1974, *The China Lobby in American Politics*.

¹⁴ Amy Chen, 2000. *The Chinatown Files*. A video documentary about the anti-Communist witch hunt in Chinatown communities during the 1940s and 1950s. Him Mark Lai 1991. *The Kuomintang in Chinese American Communities before World War II*.

also part of U.S. agenda to advance American political and economic interests in Asia. By supporting a pro-American government like the KMT, the U.S. ensured a more friendly condition for American investment. In 1943, *Fortune* reported that the nationalist government was considering relaxing restrictions on foreign companies and the end result would be “a grandeur of scope and promise that may set a new epoch in Asia” (Fortune, 1943, Oct 151-64, cited in Jaspersen, 1996). U.S. intervention in the Chinese Civil War followed the same logic. The defeat of the KMT in China would mean the loss of America’s economic potential but also its political influence in the region. During the Cold War, KMT’s dominance in Chinatown was part of the political strategy of the U.S. government to contain the threat of communism. Domestically, KMT’s dominance in Chinatown helped suppress Chinese communist infiltration in this country. On the international front, the U.S. government delivered millions of military and financial aid to Chiang’s regime to support its dominance in Taiwan as a means to contain the expansion of Chinese communist influence in Asia.

Attachment to China

“Chinatown as a Chinese territory” left devastating effects on the workers and residents in the Chinatown community. As Him Mark Lai points out, KMT’s dominance in Chinatown had injected China’s political conflicts and struggles into the Chinatown community, which often led to further divisions within the community (Lai, 1991). Since much of the community’s resources and energy was diverted to the power struggles in China, less was left to the development and growth of the Chinatown community. For workers and residents in Chinatown, “Chinatown as a Chinese territory” encouraged their

patriotism. It forced them to participate in China's politics, reinforcing their attachment to the homeland and discouraging their participation in larger American society. The traumatic experience of the anti-communist witch hunt during the Cold War further created political silence in the community. During this period, radical ideas were suppressed, political activities were halted and thousands of Chinese immigrants were persecuted by the KMT and the FBI. As a result, the majority of the Chinese in Chinatown were intimidated to voice their opinions, and shun away from any kind of organizing. Once again Chinese "isolation" was reconfigured and continued.

"Chinatown as a Chinese territory" and the construction of Chinatown's borders

The "isolation" of this period did not change but further reinforced the rigid borders previously imposed by fraternal welfarism. This time, the racially defined borders were maintained through KMT's dominance in the Chinatown community. With the support from the U.S. government and from the conservative power structure in Chinatown, the KMT imposed its social orders on the Chinese community and organized Chinatown in such a way as to support its political activities in China. The KMT established institutions and liaisons, and sometimes used secrete services to patrol this territory. Chinatown's borders continued to be defined by a clear distinction between insider/outsider, Chinese/American. For the KMT Chinatown was considered part of China's territory. For the U.S., Chinatown was considered a "foreign" territory where Chinese government established more agencies and asserted more authority than the U.S. government. This arrangement was beneficial to the U.S., for, during the Cold War,

KMT's dominance in Chinatown provided a successful means to suppress Chinese communist infiltration in this country.

For the majority of the workers in Chinatown, Chinatown's borders further reinforced their inward looking and attachment to the homeland as they were encouraged or forced to participate in the politics in China. The rigid dichotomy between inside/outside and Chinese/American continued to regard them as the Other, the opposite of American, and excluded them from participating in the political economy of American society. They were more likely to be emotionally attached to China than to identity with America.

3.2 The construction of "Chineseness": a romanticized image of Chineseness

The "isolation" of this period was associated with a romanticized image of "Chineseness," in which the Chinese were regarded as people who needed America's salvation. As I have argued previously, U.S. support played an important role in the construction of "Chinatown as a Chinese territory." Through economic and military aids, the U.S. government helped maintain KMT's dominance in both China and in Chinatowns as a means to protect and promote its economic and political interests. I argue that the romanticized image of "Chineseness" was part of the ideological foundation that guided and justified U.S. support of the KMT. In this section, I will explore the development of this romanticized "Chineseness" and how it was promoted by various religious, political and economic interests and how it functioned to support the "isolation." Although this romanticized image seemed to be more positive than the demonized "Chineseness" that I have discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that two

of them were not far apart. Both shared the same binary division: superior American and inferior Chinese.

The development of a romanticized China

The romanticized image of China has its origin in the missionary endeavors in China since the nineteenth century. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, the success of the Lord went hand in hand with imperialist expansion. While missionaries were the pioneers of trade and commerce, colonial conquest further opened the ways for effective missionary actions (Hobsbawm, 1987). American Protestants believed themselves, their churches and their nation had a special God given role to bring about a Christian world order. China appealed to America's evangelical sense of enlightenment and regeneration, especially, as one of the largest and oldest, and heathen countries, China presented one of the most challenging and critical tasks facing the Churches (Jespersen, 1996). Could these foreign elements be converted to Christian faith? For many missionaries, such task was seen as a divine test for the country and its institutions. As Walter Judd, a medical missionary, expressed in 1927, "one would be justified in concluding that apparently China exists for the missionary, rather than the missionary for China" (cited in Jespersen, p8).

The evangelical spirit was also expressed in a secular tone in which Americans would bring their civilization to improve the lives of millions of Chinese. The sentiment was the same: "the United States would give China the opportunity to remake itself in America's spiritual, political, and cultural image" (Jespersen, 1996). Religious opportunities translated to economic potentials in that religious conversion to Christianity

would prepare the Chinese to comprehend and enjoy democracy, which would make them active consumers of American products. The vision not only moved many missionaries to China, it also attracted business leaders and politicians.

During the 1910s and 1920s, Protestant missionary movements encountered setbacks both in China and at home as a result of the rise of Chinese nationalism and its anti-West, therefore anti-Christian element, and the fact that fewer Americans responded to the evangelical call. Yet, the enthusiasm and optimism with regard to American's role in China's future did not all disappear, and was revived during the early 1930s. The revival was related to several developments. Firstly, the nominal unification of China in the late 1920s under Chiang Kai-shek's regime, which has demonstrated its bourgeois nature by purging the communists and making concessions with warlords, the wealthy and foreign powers. For many in the U.S., this was a promising sign of economic potential. Secondly, Chiang's conversion to Christianity in 1931 further confirmed the belief that China was leading toward an American-style future. The same year was the publication of Pearl Buck's novel *The Good Earth*, which was awarded the Pulitzer prize, translated into thirty languages, and made into a Broadway play and a Hollywood film. Through its various forms, the romanticized portrait of Chinese peasants reached millions of American's hearts.

According to Jespersen, the most important person who gave the romanticized "Chineseness" a critical boost was Henry Luce. Through his multimedia empire, Time Inc. (which owned *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*, and produced radio programs and newsreel films), Henry Luce took up America's mission in China left off by his father, a missionary in China, and others of that generation. For several years, the three magazines,

Time, *Fortune*, and *Life*, featured China in the most favorable light possible and advocated America's responsibilities for the Chinese people. Their editorial strategies included drawing similarities between China and America; promoting the friendly relation between the two countries; depicting the nationalist government and army with admiration; glorifying Chiang Kai-Shek, and his wife, Madame Chiang, and more importantly Chiang became the personification of China. In addition, in those articles, accompanied with America's responsibilities was a promising vision of economic profit. For instance, *Fortune* advanced the idea about the potential of the China trade and showed China to be worth billions a year (Jespersen, 1996).

Another force that played a significant part in promoting positive images of China was the United China Relief (UCR), in which Luce also played an important role. UCR was a coalition organized to educate Americans about the wartime conditions in China and to coordinate fund raising and distribution to alleviate the suffering of Chinese people. To advocate humanitarian aid to China, UCR promoted positive images of China through radio broadcasts, educational pamphlets, and public lectures to sell "China to the American people" (cited in Jespersen, p50). Its strategy was quite successful. In 1941 alone, UCR had raised approximately \$3.25 million; and between 1941-1945 it had raised slightly over \$40 million. Again, aid to China was promised with economic profit in return. As its Executive Director B. A. Garside predicted "in the years just ahead, a free and independent China will turn to us for all the products that American industry and mechanical genius can produce" (cited in Jespersen, p57). Luce's missionary approach to journalism and UCR's humanitarian mission during the years before the U.S. entered

WWII had a great impact on American conceptions of China and Chiang's regime in the next two decades (Jespersen, 1996).

The romanticized notion of China and Chiang's regime was dramatically bolstered by Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor; suddenly, China and the United States became allies. The shock and outrage against Japan's aggression resulted in American's reassessment of their images of Japan, at the same time, brought about a new consideration of the Chinese as well. Japan was now the super military evil, hence, the Chinese, who had been resisting Japan's aggression since 1931, must be better than what were originally perceived. The Christian conception of China, long promoted by Luce and the UCR, now provided a convenient foundation for wartime ideological needs. While Japan was transformed from subhuman to superhuman (evil), the Chinese became the good friend to the U.S. This dramatic switch of American images of Chinese and Japanese was not difficult, since it did not require any conceptual change in the belief about America – America remain superior and special. The ideological blending of paternalism and racial superiority toward the Chinese was best illustrated in UCR's pamphlet, "HOW TO SPOT A JAP," adopted from a U.S. army manual and later published in *Life's* 1943 March issue.

"HOW TO SPOT A JAP" was supposedly an educational comic strip, featuring physical comparisons between a Japanese and a Chinese. Using pictorial illustration, it pointed out features in a Chinese man that were similar to those of an American and an European and different from those of a Japanese, implying that the Chinese, because of his physical similarity to American, was superior than the Japanese. For instance, "C [Chinese] is about the size of an average American: J [Japanese] is shorter – and looks as

if his legs are joined directly to his chest!” “C’s [Chinese] eyes are set like any Europeans’ or American’s – but have a marked squint. . . . J [Japanese] has eyes slanted toward his nose” (originally underlined). In addition to drawing similarity between a Chinese and an American or European, the pamphlet also dramatized the difference between a Chinese and a Japanese by demonizing the Japanese (cited in Jespersen, 73).

It is important to point out that not everyone was seduced by the romanticized image of China painted by Henry Luce and the UCR. However, for various reasons, their views were compromised or marginalized. For instance, many in the Roosevelt administration were fully aware of and concerned about KMT government’s corruption and failure to carry out economic and political reform concerned. However, Roosevelt went along with the unrealistic images, for China, despite its military and economic weakness, remained a crucial element in the war effort against Japan and in the global geopolitics in the postwar era. In fact, Roosevelt invited Chiang to the Cairo Conference in 1943 to join him and Churchill for discussions on finishing the war and the direction of the postwar peace. As Roosevelt wrote in 1943, “I really feel that it is a triumph to have got the four hundred and twenty-five million Chinese on the allied side. . . This will be very useful twenty-five or fifty years hence, even though China cannot contribute much military or naval support for the moment” (cited in Jespersen, p124). Although Roosevelt had different political purposes, the elevation of Chiang to the big four powers (along with FDR, Churchill, and Stalin) was one of the most significant boosts for the KMT government during the war.

The Truman administration was also disillusioned by the ineptness and autocracy of Chiang’s government (Schrecker, 1994). They knew clearly that to affect the outcome

of the civil war in a country of China's size would require massive U.S. military and financial support. They also doubted that such commitment would be supported by the congress or American public. However, because of the political pressures, the administration had to continue sending millions of dollars of aid to Chiang. After the Chinese Communist victory, the Truman administration attempted to defend its policies by releasing an official government report to document Chiang's responsibility for his own defeat (*United States Relations with China, with a Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949*, commonly called *The White Paper*). However, the tactic did not work out as hoped; it failed to counter the powerful image of the romanticized China. Jespersen points out the irony that Truman, who had initiated anti-communism for his own purposes (he set up a loyalty-security program to impose political tests on federal employees and applicants in 1947 well before Senator McCarthy), was now under attack by the same issue he had nurtured (Jespersen, 1996). Any critical evaluation of Chiang's government and America's involvement in China became a political suicide, for now to discredit Chiang was equated with disloyalty and unpatriotic to America. This kind of political climate was further reinforced by other events during the same period, including the Soviet explosion of an atomic bomb in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

In addition, many people in the Chinatown community were not fooled by the romanticized image of the Chinese government because they had the first hand experience with KMT's dictatorship and corruption. Since Chiang's rise to power, his regime devoted great effort to suppress opposition and control the community. When the news of the disastrous 1943 famine in Kwangtung (where most of the early Chinese

immigrants came from) reached the community, people in the Chinese community were more outraged after learning that the government was slow and inefficient in delivering relief to the victims and that the money they sent to relatives in China were drastically devalued by the inflated exchange rate (Kwong, 2001). After the KMT's collapse became foreseeable, many KMT officials fled to the U.S. The drastic contrast between their wealth and extravagant life style and the economic hardship facing ordinary Chinese people further confirmed their belief of KMT's corruption. However, these views were rarely voiced or heard, because in the political climate of the time anyone who was critical of Chiang's regime would be labeled a communist.

Although American conceptions of the Chinese seemed to take a positive turn (from a demonized to a romanticized version), it did not bring any real change to the Chinese in the U.S. The fact that discriminatory policies and practices against the Chinese continued demonstrated that this conceptual change was not genuine. For instance, the Chinese exclusion provision was not eliminated until 1943, and it was only a token elimination (only 105 Chinese were allowed to enter the U.S. each year). Meanwhile, the U.S. did not give up its extraterritorial privileges in China until the end of the war. The Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion was another vivid example. While claiming to fight for the equality for the Chinese, it tactically limited its membership "to American citizens not of Asiatic origin so as to give the impression that the demand was completely indigenous and not fostered by the Chinese or anyone with a personal axe to grind" (cited in Yu, 1998, p77). Other religious and humanitarian groups were not better. As Yu records, when Chinese organizations sought to help in the campaign, they were treated with a patronizing manner – they were told to simply refute

the notion that Chinese were inassimilable rather than to state their organizations' interests or goals (Yu, 77).

The romanticized "Chineseness" served more American needs than Chinese's. Like the demonized "Chineseness," the romanticized "Chineseness" was part of the dialectical structural of colonial domination. The construction of the notion that Chinese needed American salvation, in both religious and secular tone justified American imperialist practices in China and its exploitation of the Chinese people. It also justified and promoted U.S. support for the KMT, helping maintain its authoritarian control in the Chinatown community. In addition, it also helped reassure an idealized American identity – their racial superiority and unique place in history. The two distinct formations of "Chineseness" – the Chinese as a threat and the Chinese in need of American salvation – demonstrated the rigidity of the colonial racial binary (inferior Chinese vs. superior American). However, at the same time, the quick and easy shift between the two also revealed the instability and flexibility of the boundary of "Chineseness" and showed that the meaning of "Chineseness" was open to manipulations in the service of political and ideological need.

3.3 Struggles against "isolation": the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA)

This section examines the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance as an example of the struggle against "isolation" during the period. I will discuss how CHLA challenged the power structure behind "Chinatown as a Chinese territory," the strategies they used, the foundations upon which their struggles were based, the alternatives they sought to provide and the new identities they created. My discussion on CHLA relies mainly on

Renqi Yu's *"To Save China, To Save Ourselves: the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York"* (1992) and Peter Kwong's *"Chinatown, N.Y: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950"* (2001), both of which provide detailed information on CHLA using primary sources, including newspapers and interviews.

CHLA was initially organized by and for Chinese hand laundry workers in 1933 in response to a proposed discriminatory ordinance by New York City council of Alderman (similar to today's city council) and to the failure of the CCBA to protect the rights of its members. The proposed ordinance came at a time when Chinese hand laundry trade was already facing tremendous hardship due to the Great Depression and the fierce competition from the rapid mechanization of the U.S. laundry industry. As in the last economic crisis, Chinese again became the targets of attack. The ordinance, which proposed a \$25 annual registration fee and a \$1,000 bond to cover customers' property, would drive the Chinese out of the business, since it was impossible for a small-scale (mostly run by one to three people, with an annual profit of \$400 to \$500) hand laundry to raise that amount of money¹⁵. As a result of its collective action, CHLA won its first battle; it successfully persuaded the council to modify the ordinance. The victory boosted CHLA's confidence and popularity. A month after its formation, its membership had reached 2,400 (Kwong, 66).

Originally formed as a trade organization to protect the rights and interests of the Chinese hand laundrymen, CHLA gradually evolved into a community activist group as they began to take on wider issues that were facing the Chinese community. With the

¹⁵ Before the proposed ordinance, New York City's laundry organization launched a massive boycott of the Chinese laundries in retaliation against Chinese refusal to abide by the industrywide minimum prices it had established. Along with the boycott was a poster campaign that put up racist posters in store windows throughout the city, "showing a Chinese laundryman with queue and buckteeth using his spit to wet the clothing before ironing" (Kwong, 63)

goal to achieve political and economic equality for the Chinese in this country, CHLA identified American racism and Chinatown traditional power hierarchy dominated by CCBA and its allies, KMT, as major obstacles. Critical of KMT's monopolized domination and its alliance with the elite against the interests of ordinary Chinese people, CHLA was in the front line in advocating the reform of Chinatown's cultural practices and social structure. Democracy was regarded as both its strategy and ultimate goal. To ensure and advocate democracy, the Alliance established a democratic electoral procedure; founded a newspaper, *China Daily News*, that was independent of KMT's control (the local Chinese newspapers were biased since they were subsidized by the KMT) in order to provide more accurate information about the situation in China; promoted political participation through discussion forums; launched campaigns to encourage Chinese participation in American politics; and demanded a reform within Chinatown's traditional association; and founded a youth club (the Chinese Youth Patriotic Society) to provide a positive space for the young people, who otherwise would join unhealthy recreational activities (such as opium smoking, gambling) or have no place to go. In addition to promoting democracy within the Chinese community, CHLA was also active in the campaign to repeal Chinese Exclusion laws (Yu, 1998).

CHLA's democratic principle was imbued with a nationalist sentiment. Since its inception, CHLA had been active in patriotic activities, participating in discussions and rallies for Chinese nationalist causes. After Japan's invasion in China, CHLA was in the forefront in supporting China's resistance against Japan. Its campaign "*to save China, to save ourselves*" exemplified its nationalist approach in connecting its struggle for equal treatment in the U.S. with its patriotic support for China's war against Japan (Yu, 1992,

1998). Like the Chinese revolutionaries in the early twentieth century, CHLA members were convinced that a strong China would bring to an end the racism against the Chinese in this country. Yet the kind of nationalism promoted by CHLA's had some new elements. CHLA's nationalism sought to create a dualistic identity for the Chinese in America – they were Chinese, at the same time, American. The search for a dualistic identity was expressed in an editorial in CHLA's newspaper: "So we regard overseas Chinese concern about their motherland as a natural expression of normal human feelings, and their efforts to permanently develop their settlement [in the U.S.] as a rational development" (cited in Yu, 1998, p73). For participants in CHLA, their identity was linked to their active involvement in a nationalist struggle against Western domination in China and in the struggle against racism in America.

It is important to point out that although both CHLA and KMT promoted Chinese nationalism as their political strategy, and both inherited the concept of Chinese racial nationalism emerged during the late 19th century, their nationalist approaches were not quite the same. KMT's nationalist ideology was essentially an "elite nationalism," in the sense that its class basis has always been the literate upper stratum and that its interests have always allied with the bourgeois class.¹⁶ The elite nature of KMT's nationalist cause was revealed in its lack of popular base and its limited aims in the reorganization of the Chinese society. In contrast to KMT's "elite nationalism," CHLA nationalist ideology was "popular nationalism." Critical of KMT's authoritarianism and elitism, CHLA was determined to ensure democratic practices and to promote political participation among ordinary Chinese whose voices had long been ignored or suppressed. With its popular

¹⁶ Several scholars have made the distinction between two types of Chinese nationalism: "elite nationalism" and "popular nationalism", the former promoted by the KMT and "popular nationalism" promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. See Xiaoyuan Liu (2001); Zhihia Shen (2001).

base, CHLA soon emerged as a leader in mobilizing community support for national resistance. CHLA's growing popularity in the Chinese community seriously threatened CCBA and the power hierarchy it represented. Its open attack on KMT's anti-communist obsession policy that prioritized the elimination of communist force over national resistance against Japan's aggression also made them the number one enemy of the KMT. Both CCBA and KMT had used various tactics to undermine CHLA's popularity, but their actions only brought more sympathy and support for CHLA in the community.

To be sure, CHLA was not the first, nor the only group that challenged the power structure behind "Chinatown as a Chinese territory." As early as the late 1920s, Chinese Left and members of the CCP, who were expelled from KMT and persecuted by Chiang's force, established the Chinese Anti-Imperialist Alliance (it was first established in the West coast as the Alliance of Chinese Workers and Peasants). Critical of KMT's conservatism and corruption, and its failure to bring social change to China, the Anti-Imperialist Alliance, following the principles of Leninism-Marxism, saw proletariat revolution as the only way to achieve China's independence from foreign domination. In addition to making alliance with the U.S. Left, the alliance sought to organize Chinese workers to join the struggle against capitalism and imperialism, since, as they reasoned, Chinese workers were the most exploited and most oppressed, thus potentially the most militant. However, their organizing was not successful, in large part, due to their own eliticism and dogmatism – that is, only considering industrial workers as potential revolutionaries – which alienated them from the masses of the community (Kwong, 2001).

From the perspectives of orthodox Marxist groups, CHLA was not a working class struggle. Since the majority of the Chinese laundry were small-scale, operated by family or clan members, who were sometimes partners, the distinction between employers and employees was less significant than their shared concerns as workers discriminated against by American society and exploited by the Chinatown traditional establishment. Regardless of their “political incorrectness”, CHLA’s organizing effort was quite successful. In fact, its success was in large due to its moderate approach. For instance, in their effort to create a united Chinatown anti-Japanese organization, CHLA allied with any group that shared the same patriotic goal and the same antagonism against the autocracy of Chiang’s regime and its failure in resisting Japanese aggression. For that reason, CHLA allied with the left, the liberals and even conservative groups in a joint patriotic movement, which seriously weakened KMT’s power in the community (Kwong, 2001).

Charged with a nationalist sentiment and a strong belief in democratic principles, CHLA was in the front line in the struggle against the power structure behind “Chinatown as a Chinese territory.” Through political organizing, speak-outs, expressing opinions on newspaper, CHLA has helped promote political participation and challenged the political oppression of the KMT in the Chinatown community. When the Chinese Civil war resumed after Japan’s defeat, CHLA and a few other groups urged the formation of a coalition government in China and openly denounced KMT’s one-party dictatorship. In addition, CHLA also advocated for U.S. nonintervention in Chinese domestic affairs. They openly enlisted support from congressional leaders and American public to oppose military aid to Chiang’s regime. At the same time, they also organized

various discussion forums, speak-outs and protests to support a democratic China (Kwong, 2001).

However, CHLA's activism did not last long. With the rise of anti-communist activities in the U.S., CHLA was persecuted for being leftist or communists exactly because of their open opposition against Chiang's regime. It was a severe setback to CHLA. Because of its refusal to join the Chinatown Anti-communist League, a red-baiting tactic organized by the KMT, CHLA became an outcast in the community, since any association with it would bring political trouble. Under KMT's pressure, the China Daily News, CHLA's newspaper, lost the majority of its business advertising and subscription. CHLA members were branded as communists or communist sympathizers and were harassed and persecuted by the KMT and the FBI (Kwong, 2001). They were also constantly harassed by the Justice Department and the INS on charges such as illegal entry. CHLA's youth club quickly dissolved by the mid-1950s. The final blow came in 1952 when the paper's editor and president, Eugene Moy, was found guilty of violating the "Trading with the Enemy Act," based on the allegation that the paper accepted advertising revenue from Bank of China, the national bank of Communist China, and that its staff had sent money to relatives in China. Its potential allies, the left and labor leaders, were themselves under fire, too scared to lend any support (Kwong, 2001).

Chapter 4

Interlude: the passage from “colonial isolation” to “disciplinary isolation”

The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans.
Harry S. Truman, 1949, cited in Hardt & Negri, 2000

For all practical social purposes “race” is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth. The myth of “race” has created an enormous amount of human and social damage.

Ashley Montagu, 1972, cited in Malik, 1996

The “isolation” of Chinatown underwent a transformation in the postwar era during which colonial mode of domination was gradually replaced by disciplinary mode of domination. This transformation had its historical root in the economic and socio-political restructuring of the capitalist world-system after WWII. As an introduction to Part III, this section explores some of the developments during the postwar global restructuring that underlay the transition in the form of American domination of the Chinese from “colonial isolation” to “disciplinary isolation.”

The first important development associated with the transition was the growing significance of the Asia-Pacific region in American postwar planning. As Shoup and Minter point out, internalization of capital was central to American postwar development. Toward the end of WWII, American policy makers began to draft a postwar economic project on a global scale, because they understood that the economic life of American capitalist society as was currently organized could not be self-sufficient and had to rely on imported raw materials, export markets and the exploitation of labor in other parts of the world. Haunted by a postwar depression and its political consequence, American policy makers saw reconstructing a stable capitalist economic system which depended on

the unobstructed movements of capital as a guiding principle. To realize this, the United States had to maintain its supremacy in the world (Shoup & Minter, 1977).

The development of the Asia-Pacific region became important in America's postwar global agenda. In addition to raw materials, this area's vast not-yet industrialized population provided potential cheap labor source and huge export markets, both of which were crucial to American economic development. Recognizing the economic values of this area, American planners sought to develop a stable Asia-Pacific region favorable to American economic development. Various strategies and activities, such as military intervention, foreign aid, and information programs, were taken to ensure the stability of this area (Chapter 5). In the Asian countries, American investments gave rise to a new professional and middle class, and later large-scale corporations, and at the same time, the mass of peasants were uprooted from their land and integrated into factory production. The integration of capital and labor (both high-skilled and low-skilled) in this region into the global production system continued to play an important part in supporting U.S. economic development.

The second development was the growing liberation movement in the Third World countries and the civil rights activism in the U.S. Both had seriously challenged American colonial domination and the racial ideologies it associated. During the Cold War, U.S. imperialist practices and its treatments of the minorities at home seriously undermined its influence in the Third World countries and questioned its moral authority as a leader of the free world. In order for U.S. capitalist system to continue to grow, a different, and more legitimate strategy of control was required.

Finally, associated with these changes was the emergence of a new racial ideology. In the U.S. and other western countries, the atrocity of the Nazi regime, the growing liberation movement in the colonies, and the ideological contest between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the Cold War led to the moral condemnation of scientific racial theories. The ideas of racial equality, national sovereignty, self-determination were promoted by the UN charter. In addition, with the aim to undo the scientific accounts of racial categories, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sponsored an international project to discredit racial science. The project marshaled the authority of internationally prominent scientific experts, especially biologists, since they bore much of the responsibility for having constructed race as a scientific object of knowledge in the first place (Haraway, 1997). The key ideas of the UNESCO statements focused on the plasticity, educability and invalidity of racial typology and concluded that there was no scientific evidence of inherited racial inequality, race was merely a social myth, and to cast group differences racially was bad science. On the part of Western governments, there was also a conscious effort to depoliticize the issue of race and to remove it from political agenda. Race was replaced by ethnicity, a cultural category which provided political acceptable language for the discussion on social differences and new basis for considerations of social policy (Malik, 1996).

It is important to point out that although no longer a scientifically valid object of knowledge, race never disappeared from scientific inquiry entirely. By transforming itself through the discourse of genes, race that was attached to messy living bodies, was now reduced to a clean, linear code of information. Human genome replaced racial hygiene

and eugenics as the scientific and politically acceptable project committed to progress and the future, thus continued to perpetuate racial exploitation, only in a different form (the privatization of genes subject the indigenous people to patent monopoly) (Haraway, 1997).

Although the shift from race to culture had an anti-racist tradition, the conceptual change was far from a radical break from colonial racial ideology as it claimed to be. In Chapter 5, I will discuss why the discourse of culture failed to bring real social change and how it helped reconfigure and sustain the racial hierarchy created by colonialism.

“Disciplinary isolation”

The growing significance of the Asia-Pacific region in American postwar planning, the decline of colonial form of domination, and the emergence of a new racial ideology provided the foundation for the transformation in the form of American domination of the Chinese. The new mode of domination, “disciplinary isolation” did not depend on explicit conquest and exclusion or the construction of colonial racial binaries. The Chinese were no longer excluded as undesirable aliens, but were included and played an important role in the global network of production, reproduction and consumption. The inclusion of the Chinese was not merely in political, economic and territorial terms, but also in terms of the construction of identities. No longer an “Oriental Other,” the Chinese became an ethnic minority who were part of American multicultural society.

The chapters in Part III examine two examples of “disciplinary isolation”: “model minority” (chapter 5) and “Chinatown as a commodity” (chapter 6). As in part II, part III is organized by three main themes. The first theme explores how “disciplinary isolation”

was constructed, how it used cultural reproduction as the mechanism of control, and the socio-psychological impacts it created in the Chinatown community. The second theme examines the construction of “Chineseness” that was associated with “disciplinary isolation.” By tracing the historical transformation of “Chineseness” from a racial category to a cultural category, I attempt to provide a critical assessment of the discourse of culture and multiculturalism and to understand how they reinforced Chinese isolation and racial inequalities. Finally, I examine the struggles against “isolation” and the construction of “Chineseness” through these activist movements.

As Hardt & Negri have noted, with the transition from “colonial” to “disciplinary” regime, theories and practices whose critique remained holding onto the colonial model of domination eventually lost their explanatory power and effectiveness. In the case of Chinatown, I argue that any liberation struggle that fails to recognize the new forms of exploitation and domination will end up being ineffective, or worse, reinforcing the very structure they seek to challenge. It is within this framework, I examine the limitation of the politics of difference advocated by identity politics, postmodernist and post-colonial critiques, and how they failed to provide an ineffective weapon to challenge “disciplinary isolation” (Chapters 5 and 6). I will discuss how CSWA, whose organizing efforts were based on a different foundation, provided an effective strategy to break through “disciplinary isolation” (Chapter 6).

Chapter 5

Model minority

At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities... At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent on uplift the Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own-with no help from anyone else... Winning wealth and respect by dint of his own hard work... In crime-ridden cities, Chinese districts turn up as islands of peace and stability...(U.S. News and World Report, 1966).

The late 1960s witnessed a rapid transformation in the American public consciousness in reference to the Chinese and Chinatown communities. Articles began appearing in the popular press calling attention to the seemingly remarkable success of Asian Americans, especially Chinese and Japanese Americans. These success stories depicted Asians as hardworking individuals who have finally overcome their adversities all by themselves and have become accepted into mainstream American society. In this image, hard work and self-sufficiency were considered the keys to Asian success; these qualities should serve as a guide for other minorities who wish to have the same level of achievement. Asian Americans became a “model minority” (Monk, 2000; Grove & Wu, 1991; Lee, 1996; Takaki, 1995; Yun 1989).

As many researchers have shown, the “model minority” narrative oversimplified and distorted the reality. They point out that the success story of Asian Americans was only true for a small number of people, especially for those who came from middle class backgrounds. Although individual efforts cannot be denied, the emergence of the middle class Asians was not simply a result of upward mobility, but a result of U.S. immigration selection. During the arm race with the Soviet, the need for skilled labor, especially in science and technology, urged the U.S. government to use immigration to recruit highly

educated foreign workers to work in aerospace and defense industries¹. As a result, during the period between 1964 and 1970, Asian scientists and engineers increased eight-fold. By 1970, Asians had become the dominant minority in the scientific, engineering and technical fields (Ong & Liu, 1994). Within the Chinese population in the U.S., the newly emerged middle class was significantly different from early Chinese immigrants. Brought with them both financial and human capital, this group had a better chance to “succeed” and “integrate” into American society. They now lived in the suburbs, attended elite colleges, and worked in professional fields. They attested the image of “model minority.”

However, for the majority of the Chinese who still worked and lived in Chinatown, the emergence of the “model minority” concept created a new form of “isolation” and its impacts were devastating. Firstly, the glorifying portrait of Chinese immigrants, which was only true for some individuals, masked issues around poverty, inadequate education and other forms of social inequality that remained facing the working class people in Chinatown. In addition, the successful image of Chinese immigrants erased the violent history of Chinese in America, a history that had been essential in motivate political actions to demand racial justice and equality. Finally, the exaggerated representation of Chinese immigrants created hostility toward Chinese among other minority groups, pitting one against the other, making it more difficult to establish political coalitions to fight against white domination.

¹ The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 granted visas to foreign workers with education, technical training or exceptional abilities that could benefit the United States. The Immigration and Naturalization Reform Act of 1965 also contained provisions that sought to facilitate the entry of a professional work force. See Briggs, 1984.

“Model minority” was significantly different from the other forms of “isolation” discussed in the previous chapters. Firstly, “model minority” was a mechanism of “disciplinary” domination, not “colonial” domination. Disciplinary domination no longer relied on explicit force of conquest or alienation, but on the process of social and cultural reproduction. The racist policies against the Chinese had lost their effectiveness and legitimacy. Instead, the norm became the new principle of control. Through the establishment of norms, individuals were judged, differentiated, and rewarded or punished accordingly. “Model minority” imposed a new regulatory system. By defining hard work and individual success as the norm, it rewarded (or promised rewards to) those who conform while regarding those who did not as aberrations.

Secondly, disciplinary power did not depend on a centralized control or deployment of forces, thus was harder to detect. However, this kind of power was more effective and far-reaching because it created subjects who take up the norm, enact the practices and discipline themselves. At the individual level, through the system of reward and punish, Chinese immigrants were motivated to conform to the norm (hard work and individual success) and to become a model minority. At the community level, “model minority” promoted “voluntary” conformity within the Chinese community by praising the Chinese and attributing their success to Chinese cultural heritage. In addition, “model minority” also functioned as a tactic to divide and conquer, helping to maintain the differences and hierarchy among ethnic groups.

“Model minority” represents the third historical period in my roadmap (table 5-1). The first section of chapter explores how “model minority” was constructed, examining the historical context in which this concept came into play. I will demonstrate that

“model minority” was a political response to the “urban crises” of the mid 60s and to the increasing significance of the Asian and Pacific region in America’s geo-politics after World War Two. The second section of this chapter explores the ideological shift associated with the emergence of “model minority,” that is, the transformation of Chineseness from race (a biological category) to ethnicity (a cultural category). By tracing how the concept of culture became an explanatory factor for human differences, my analysis reveals the conservative elements of culture theories and multiculturalism. In addition, the fetishization of culture further shifted our attention from political and economic structure to culture, from society to individuals, masking the real inequalities that continued to be one of the organizing principles of American society. This will help us understand the regulatory function of culture which “model minority” depends upon. This chapter will be concluded with a discussion on the struggles led by the Asian American movement. I will examine how it challenged Chinatown’s borders by creating a political unity of Asian American as the source of empowerment.

Table 5-1 *Roadmap 3: Model Minority*

Form of "isolation"	Fraternal Welfarism	Chinatown as a Chinese Territory	Model Minority	Chinatown as a Commodity
Historical periods	Late 19 th century to early 20 th century	From 1911 to early 1970s	Late 1960s to present	
Construction of "isolation"	Tight social hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations	The dominance of the KMT in Chinatown	Positive image of the Chinese	
Historical conditions	America's economic expansion during the global restructuring of the 2 nd half of the 19 th century	Chinese revolution and KMT's rise to power in China The Cold War	"Urban crisis"; Vietnam War; Increasing significance of Asia in America's postwar global agenda	
Political, economic and/or ideological functions	To advance U.S. economic development To control Chinese laborers;	To protect U.S. interests in China and Asia To contain the expansion of communism	To maintain white privilege. To promote U.S. foreign policy	
Socio-psychological consequences in Chinatown	Sojourner mentality Reinforced the patriarchal hierarchy	Resources and energy diverted to political struggles in China rather than to the development of the community; Political silence	Masked the continuing racial and economic inequalities Uncritical acceptance of Chinese traditions Created hostility toward the Chinese	
Construction of Chinatown's borders	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and the dominance of fraternal organizations in Chinatown	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and KMT's domination in Chinatown	Old boundaries reconstituted in cultural terms, maintained through cultural preservation. Borders became more open for middle class Chinese, but remained closed for working class people	
"Chineseness"	Demonized "Chineseness": Chinese were a threat to American society	Romanticized "Chineseness": Chinese needed American salvation	Good cultural heritage Model minority	
Local struggles	The Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown	Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance	The Asian American movement	

5.1 The construction of “model minority”

The three spatial elements of “model minority”

While “model minority” appeared to function at the level of representation, a close examination reveals that “model minority” was constructed through three spatial domains. In the sphere of *material spatial practices*, the regulation of social relations and practices in Chinatown did not depend on a centralized force. Instead, “model minority” imposed social orders in the Chinatown community by encouraging individuals to conform to cultural traditions, family values and work ethics. Repressive coercion, such as the one exercised by fraternal organizations and the KMT, was replaced by “voluntary” conformity.

In the *sphere of representations*, Chinatown was regarded as an island of “peace and stability” in contrast to other crime-ridden neighborhoods in the city. Since Chinese culture was considered a good culture, Chinatown, which was a site that embodied and reproduced Chinese culture, must be maintained in order to preserve its cultural heritage. In the *representational space*, “model minority” functioned as a driving force that motivated individuals to conform to the norms. For the working class people in Chinatown, this force was indistinguishable from individual desires and impulses and motivated them to work hard and to conform because “model minority” guaranteed that hard work, rather than protest or disobedience, would lead to success and rewards. By promoting a positive image of Asians, “model minority” also played specific political and ideological functions in American society. Domestically, it helped contain black insurgencies during a period of social unrest; internationally, it helped promote U.S. foreign policies, especially in third world countries.

As scholars have pointed out, the political implications of “model minority” went beyond simply paying tribute to Chinese Americans (and Asian Americans) for their hard-earned achievement (Lee, 1999; Walker-Moffat 1995). We can begin to appreciate some of the political implications of this framework by examining the opposite of Asian “success”, namely the “failure” of African Americans. While the success of Asians was attributed to hard work, strong cultural values and family ties, the failure of African Americans was implied to be a result of individual and cultural deficiency. It suggests that, unlike Asian Americans who work hard to overcome harsh conditions, African Americans just “complain” or adopt militant strategies. Why did success become

associated with individual effort and family unity? How did issues around social inequality become associated with cultural heritage? Whose interests were involved? To approach these questions, I will now turn to the “urban crises” of the 1960s from which the discourse of model minority emerged.

“Model minority” and “Urban crises”

Since this narrative is likely familiar to most readers, I will briefly review the urban crises of the 1960s. “Model minority” emerged at a time of political turbulence. Mass protests and riots were carried out by minority groups, especially African Americans and Latinos, demanding political and economic equity. As Piven and Cloward have pointed out, growing black demands and their insurgency were disturbing to many and forced both local and federal governments to respond to their demands. However, governments’ concessions proved to be disingenuous and tactical (Piven & Cloward, 1971). “Model minority” was part of the tactics to maintain white privilege.

While black concentrations in large Northern cities had begun after WWII, municipal governments rarely paid attention to the needs of the growing black population, who concentrated in the slum ghettos in the inner cities and faced deteriorating conditions in housing, schools and economic opportunities. It was not until the blacks became more politically organized, both in the street and at the polls, governments began to respond to their demands. Municipal officials were reluctant because any concessions to the blacks (such as to halt slum clearance, integrated schools, the enforcement of fair employment, or access to white neighborhoods) would doubtlessly enrage their traditional white constituencies. The failure of the local

government to respond to blacks' demands had great impact on national politics because the Democratic Party, after losing the support of the white South (because of the civil rights bills), became more dependent on urban black votes in the North in their effort to capture the presidency (Piven & Cloward, 1971).

To secure black support in the North and to do this without alienating white voters, the federal government devised a series of new programs that served these two ends. On one hand, federal money was directly channeled into ghetto communities to create services for blacks, bypassing municipal and state governments which had been in control over the distribution of municipal services but hadn't been responsive to black needs. The Great Society programs launched by the federal government called on community participation to solve ghetto problems – mainly poverty. Various store-front service agencies were established and community activists were recruited into the program. In addition to placating minority groups, the Great Society programs also functioned to reform the local political machine by encouraging minority communities to challenge local governments and their policies. With the litigation and protests from the ghetto community, the federal government strategically involved itself in local politics, cultivating the allegiance of urban black voters by extending a greater share of municipal services to them (Piven & Cloward 1971).

On the other hand, the Great Society programs were carefully designed and delivered in such a way to avoid white antagonism. With their emphasis on “community development,” the great society programs reassured whites that the assault was on the ghetto, not on white privileges in neighborhoods, schools, jobs or public services. The urban crises were framed as a black problem. Juvenile delinquency, inner city poverty,

family deterioration, welfare dependency were now understood resulting from the “tangle of pathology” of the black family, as nicely illustrated by the infamous “Moynihan Report” (Oltman, 2001). By promising to solve these problems through community participation, or in other words, self-help of the ghettos, the great society programs not only placated the blacks but also avoided objections from the whites to whom the programs seemed less threatening (Piven & Cloward 1971).

The politics around “urban crises” helps us understand why the “model minority” narrative was widely accepted and how it functioned as a tactic to maintain white privilege. Similar to the Great Society programs, “model minority” stressed “self-help” and community participation of Asian Americans, shifting the attention away from white privileges in schools, neighborhoods and in political and economic opportunities. By attributing Chinese success to individual effort and family unity, “model minority” was used as evidence that ethnic groups could succeed in the existing structure without affirmative action or special program support, helping to validate the pathology of the black family and reframe “urban crises” as a black problem. The model minority narrative fitted well into a conservative agenda to attack the demands for structural changes by minority groups and to oppose federal spending on social services for blacks and reallocation of municipal services, services which had been traditionally delivered to white ethnic communities.

In addition, “model minority” functioned to protect white privilege by promoting conformity within minority groups and creating divisions among them. It was used as propaganda to send a message to minority groups that conformity, rather than militancy, was the way to success. Within the Chinese community, the positive image of the

Chinese was hard to reject. Many celebrated this change as a sign of improvement – after decades of discrimination, the Chinese had finally earned the respect they deserved. For them, “model minority” provided a source of cultural pride and encouraged conformity in the name of preserving cultural heritage. In that sense, “model minority” was an effective tactic to divide and conquer used by the dominant group. By pitting the Chinese (and Asians) against other minority groups, it undermined their efforts to establish joint resistance against white domination.

“Model minority” and American postwar global agenda

While “model minority” served to protect white privileges in the U.S., it also had a crucial international dimension – to facilitate U.S.’s advancement in Asia. In order to fully understand the ways in which “model minority” served to promote national interests of postwar America, I will first briefly review American postwar agenda in the context of global geopolitics. My analysis will show that the “model minority” narrative helped promote U.S. military actions, economic policies and information programs which aimed to create a stable Asia Pacific region favorable to America economic development.

As I mentioned earlier in this study, a stable Asia Pacific region was key to American postwar agenda. The economic values of this region (raw materials, labor force, and potential export markets) played an important role in supporting American economic development. The same important was the geopolitical significance of this area. As John King points out, for officials in the State Department, Southeast Asia occupied a position of global strategic importance comparable to Panama and Suez: its great international air routes brought together the West Coast of the U.S. and Australia

and Europe. In the hands of a hostile power, the region would cut the world in two, endangering both the security and economic development of the U.S. and its allies (King, 1956). Recognizing the economic value and strategic position of the Asia-Pacific region to postwar security and prosperity, as the war drew to a close the U.S. government began to devise various strategies and activities to ensure the stability of this area. As we will soon see, “model minority” was part of the agenda to achieve this goal.

The first step was to maintain a strategic control of this region through military actions. Using a posture of collective responsibility under the United Nations as a disguise, the U.S. imposed unilateral control over a Pacific “security zone,” maintaining more than thirty naval bases and airfields in the Pacific (Dower, 1969). In addition, through mutual defense treaties, the U.S. constructed a network of security alliances and extended its defense perimeters to include countries in both Northeast and Southeast Asia.²

Foreign aid (in the forms of military aid, economic aid and technical assistance) was another instrument to construct a stable Asia Pacific region favorable to the development of U.S. capitalism.³ In some cases, aid was used as a political leverage to

² Japan was given a key role in the American “defense perimeter” in Asia, and this role became even more significant after the Communist victory in China. See Dower, 1969. Under the Japanese Peace Treaty (1951), a bilateral military treaty between Japan and the United States (also in agreement with 52 Asian countries), the U.S. obtained the right “to dispose United States land, air and sea forces in and about Japan” and that no other country would be given military rights in Japan without the consent of the United States. In the same year (1951), the U.S. government also signed a Tripartite Security Treaty with Australia and New Zealand (the ANZUS Pact) and Mutual Defense treaties with the Philippines, the latter formalizing an already existing understanding of security ties between the Philippines and the U.S.. The mutual defense treaties with the Republic of Korea and with Formosa, signed in 1953 and 1954 respectively, extended the outer boundaries of American security concerns in the Pacific even further. In 1954, American defense perimeters were extended to include Pakistan, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and the southern zone of Vietnam through the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (the Manila Pact). See John King, 1956.

³ See Payer, 1975 and Hayter, 1971 for more detailed discussions on how the U.S. and her capitalist allies used aid to create or continue the exploitation of developing countries.

ensure alliance between a local government and the U.S. Sometimes, aid was used to finance U.S. exports-aid funds were “tied” to the purchase of American goods.⁴ More importantly, aid was used to build up specific social and economic conditions desirable to creditor countries, conditions ensuring that debts were repaid, that profits could be remitted abroad, that restriction on exchange and imports were removed, and that potential revolutionary changes could be defused.⁵ By the end of the war, the U.S. had superseded Britain, France and the Netherlands in many of their former colonies or countries indirectly controlled by them, as these countries began to receive U.S. aid in large scale.⁶

Parallel with military deployment and foreign aid were information programs, such as the “Campaign of Truth” during the Truman administration, designed to promote positive images about the United States to counterattack Soviet propaganda. Speaking of his “Campaign of Truth,” President Truman stated “we must make ourselves known as we really are, not as Communist propaganda pictures us” (King, 1956). In addition, the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 authorized an overseas information program and in a year \$18,000,000 was appropriated by Congress to support the Voice of America.

⁴ As the U.S. implemented the practice of aid-tying, the proportion of American aid spent on American goods rose from 41 per cent in 1960 to 79 per cent in 1963, and to 94 per cent in early 1965. At present, almost all aid funds are tied to purchases in creditor countries. This is generally termed the tied aid. Payer, 1975, p29.

⁵ Upon borrowing the money, the receiving government must commit to an economic policy desirable to the creditor, such as liberalization (or abolition) of foreign exchange and import control, anti-inflation policies which control government deficit, bank credit and wage raises and greater hospitality to foreign investment. Payer, 1975 and Hayter 1971.

⁶ For instance, between 1946 and 1961, the Chinese Nationalist government (Taiwan) received approximately \$3,990 million in U.S. aid, including military grants, economic grants and loans. In the same period, the amount of U.S. aid given to Thailand, Vietnam, and Burma was \$600 millions, \$3,585 millions, and \$99.7 millions respectively. From 1953 to 1963, Cambodia received \$350 millions in U.S. aid. See Montgomery, 1962, p281-289.

All these efforts were carried out to preserve America's strategic position in the Asia Pacific region because the loss of the area would devastate the economic and political influence of the United States. However, America's role as the principle organizer of the postwar order, the leader of the free world, was discredited by its discriminative domestic policies and practices against minority groups. During a period when Third World nations, largely peoples of color, strove for independence, self-determination, and economic development, the unjust treatment of minorities in the U.S. would seriously undermine U.S. government's influence in these countries (Lee, 1999). The Truman administration recognized this potential damage. It stated "the Chinese Communists will continue to exploit the xenophobia latent in most of South eastern Asia for decades, implanted there in some part by the Oriental exclusion features of past American immigration law" (U.S. Congress, House, President's Commission on Immigration and Naturalization, 1952, 52, cited in Ong and Liu, p48). The Justice Department also made this point clearly:

The existence of discrimination against minority groups in the U.S. has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries.... Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills and it raises doubts even among friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith.

The Justice Department's *amicus* brief in *Brown v. Board of Education* (cited in Lee, 1999, p157)

As evidenced from U.S. postwar agenda and the geopolitical struggle in the Asia Pacific region, it becomes clear that "model minority" functioned to promote U.S. foreign policies. As the United States engaged in increasingly fierce struggles with nationalist and communists insurgencies to protect (or advance) her interests in the Asia Pacific

region, the successful image of Asians as a model minority helped promote the image of the U.S. as a liberal democratic state where people of color could enjoy equal rights and upward mobility.

“Model minority” and its socio-psychological consequences in Chinatown

The emergence of the “model minority” discourse created a new form of “isolation.” Its impacts were especially devastating for residents and workers in the Chinatown community. Unlike middle class Chinese who now resided in the suburbs, attended elite colleges, and went to Chinatown for shopping and eating during weekends, those who still worked and lived in Chinatown continued to suffer economic inequalities, inadequate education, deteriorating housing conditions. Their needs were often ignored or denied because of the general conception that Chinese were and would eventually become successful by themselves.

For Chinese workers and residents, “model minority” imposed social orders in Chinatown without using an external repressive force. Instead, through the establishment of the norms, individuals were judged, differentiated, rewarded or punished accordingly. Psychologically, “model minority” became an inner driving force, motivating individuals to conform to the norm, to take up the practice and to become a model minority. At the community level, “model minority” and its cultural obsessions encouraged uncritical acceptance of Chinese traditions, which helped perpetuate the authoritarian and patriarchal hierarchy in the families and in the community. Furthermore, the exaggerated promotion of Chinese immigrants not only erased the violent history of the Chinese in America (since the Chinese could succeed without any help, discrimination against the

Chinese might not have been that bad after all), but also generated hostilities toward the Chinese among other minority groups, making it difficult to establish political coalition to fight for social justice and equality.

“Model minority” and Chinatown’s borders

The emergence of “model minority” was associated with the transformation of Chinatown’s borders. The racially defined borders previously constructed along the racial dichotomy under colonial domination were rejected. However, Chinatown’s borders did not disappear, but were reconstituted in cultural terms. The enforcement of the new borders were not written in the laws, nor depended on local authoritarian agencies (i.e. fraternal organizations or the KMT). Rather, Chinatown’s borders were enforced and maintained under the guise of cultural preservation. By promoting conformity within the Chinese community and creating divisions among minority groups, “model minority” helped enforce Chinatown’s borders while maintaining racial hierarchy and inequalities.

The new borders had different meanings and impacts on different classes of the Chinese. For middle class Chinese who now lived in white neighborhoods in the suburbs and attended elite colleges, Chinatown’s borders became more open. Such opening was not only expressed in geographical terms, but also in terms of identities. With the emergence of the “model minority” concept, Chinese became an ethnic minority. The hyphenated Chinese-American no longer posed a rigid, biologically determined racial boundary between Chinese and American. However, for working class people who still lived and worked in Chinatown, Chinatown’s borders remained unchanged as they

continued to be excluded from participating in the political economy of American society.

5.2 The construction of “Chineseness”: from a racial to a cultural category

Having situated “model minority” in the context of the post WWII global relations, in this section, I want to take a step back to examine the ideological shift associated with the emergence of “model minority,” that is, the conceptual transformation from Chinese as a race, a biological category, to Chinese as an ethnicity, a cultural category. I will examine how the concept of culture replaced race and became the explanatory factor for human differences. Although the discourse of culture has an anti-racist tradition, I will demonstrate that the shift from “race” to “culture” is far from a radical break from the colonial racial hierarchy. Rather the discourse of culture articulates a kind of conservatism which helps preserve racial differences under a different guise.

The replacement of racial discourse with cultural discourse was a liberal compromise in the sense that it creates some changes without a complete overhaul of the system. By tracing the development of the culture concept, how it became the hegemonic ideology in most Western societies and what functions it played in postwar capitalist development, I attempt to provide a critical assessment of cultural pluralism, and multiculturalism (which became popular during the 1970s and 1980s) in order to understand why their politics of cultural difference failed to end racial inequalities. The discourse of culture and multiculturalism were the ideological foundation upon which “model minority” rests. This kind of analysis will help us better understand how “model minority” functioned as a form of “disciplinary isolation”, and how it helped maintain the racial inequalities created by colonialism.

From racial determinism to cultural determinism

Because of the negativity associated with the concept of race during WWII, the discursive shift from “race” to “culture” as an explanatory factor for human differences was a smooth transition. Fueled by ideological commitment of Western liberals, the discourse of culture soon became the new orthodoxy and was generally exempt from critical examination. In the absence of a critical understanding of the rise of culture theories, Kenan Malik’s work becomes important. In *The Meaning of Race* (1996), Malik traces the historical development of the idea of culture and points out the conservative elements in culture theories and policies of cultural pluralism. The conservative nature associated with the cultural discourse explains how it failed to provide a solution to end racism and how it helped reinforce the very inequality it claims to reject. In a society whose development remains relying on capitalist exploitation and social inequality, the discourse of culture was the new politically accepted concept, which replaces race to reconcile the conflict between the belief in equality and the persistence of social inequality. However, what Malik fails to recognize is that “culture” does not simply occupy the place that was previously held by “race,” and that present racism is no longer a continuation of the scientific racism from the mid nineteenth century; in fact, the concept of culture was now operating in a new system that has been substantially transformed by the new reality of capitalism.

According to Malik, the emergence of the concept of culture to explain human differences owed much to the work of Franz Boaz (1858-1942). During a time when scientific racial theories dominated the political discourse and eugenic was lauded as a scientific solution to social problems, Boaz was a leading figure in attacking the

biological basis of race and introducing culture as the key object of anthropological study. Boaz's critique on scientific racism has two main focuses: (a) race is not determined by biology alone, but was also defined according to culture and language; and (b) human beings are biologically similar and that the differences are an expression of the particular culture to which one belonged. The kind of cultural relativism put forward by Boaz has tremendous influence on contemporary ideas of pluralism and multiculturalism. Yet, while Boaz renounced biologically determined racial hierarchy, it is important to note that his idea of human equality was an ambiguous one. For Boaz, humanity was equal not because differences could be overcome through social progress, as prescribed by the Enlightenment tradition, but because every difference was equally valid and should be accepted as part of the common humanity. This has important implications. While in the Enlightenment tradition, culture is progressive and transforming because human beings are believed to be conscious, active subjects capable of making and remaking the world around them, Boaz saw the particularity of culture in each society – customs, rituals and habits – as something that molds the behaviors and thinking of individuals and helps them continue everyday existence in their society, thus is fundamental to maintaining social stability. A Boazian sense of culture is adaptive, but is essentially anti-progress and anti-change (Malik, 1996).

The prominent role given to culture and the conservative outlook for social development was further developed by various branches of anthropology and sociology in their study of "primitive cultures." Despite the often bitter disputes among the different approaches, they had a shared political attitude. That is, as Malik notes, a rejection of biological determinism, an equalitarianism expressed through a relativist outlook, and the

emphasis on the plasticity and malleability of human beings which gave culture a determinant role. The underlying assumption is that culture theories can free us from biological determinism. Since human differences are socially and culturally determined, then all humans are in principle equal. However, the shift from racial determinism to cultural determinism was not as liberatory as many have assumed. In the discourse of culture, humanity remains imprisoned by forces beyond its control, not by biology but by culture. There is no biologically determined racial hierarchy, but only insoluble cultural differences. At the cost of rejecting the biologically determined racial hierarchy, culture, like race, now functions like nature locking individuals and groups into an immutable origin, “appears as a transcendental category outside of our immediate consciousness” and “is transmitted from generation to generation” (Malik, p162).

This turn-around effect of culture theories is demonstrated in the work of Levi-Strauss, one of the greatest figures in anthropology. Levi-Strauss argues that human unity exists at the biological level, but culture expresses its differences. Each culture possesses certain features, which are absent from other cultures. It is the possession of these features that makes one culture different from another. Rejecting racial determinism, Levi-Strauss argues, “...the cultural forms adopted in various places by human beings, their ways of life in the past or in the present, determine to a very great extent they rhythm of their biological evolution and its direction. Far from having to ask whether culture is or is not a function of race, we are discovering that race ... is one function among others of culture” (cited in Malik, 165). Rather than seeing culture as the outcome of human creativity, Levi-Strauss sees culture as burdens imposed upon human beings. The kind of politics advocated by Levi-Strauss is that communications and contacts

between different cultures and peoples pose a threat to the particularities of each culture, thus should be kept at a minimum level. Cultural determinism and relativism end up supporting the very inequality they seek to reject.

The conservative element of the culture discourse became even more obvious when we look at its related concept – pluralist society. The idea of pluralism emerged through anthropological studies of colonial societies, in which different groups live side by side within the same political unit but each group continued to hold its own religion, culture and language. Within the framework of cultural theories, the conditions of colonial society were rationalized as products of different culture and lifestyles rather than a result of Western domination. Such concept was appealing to both colonial administrators and to Western liberals. For the former, pluralism provided a rationale for the practice of “indirect rule” – to maintain Western control through “traditional” structure managed by local elite. For liberals, pluralism has a higher moral ground than assimilation because it protects colonial subjects by preserving their traditional cultures and allowing them to follow their own developmental path without threatening the development of the capitalist system. Far from challenging colonial practices, pluralism fitted well into the logic of colonialism. In his eloquent analysis on colonialism, Frantz Fanon notes, rather than destroying traditional cultural forms, colonial system “mummify” them:

The setting up of the colonial system does not itself bring about the death of the native culture. Historical observation reveals, on the contrary, that the aim sought is rather a continued agony than a total appearance of the pre-existing culture. This culture, once living and open to the future, becomes closed, fixed in the colonial status, caught in the yoke of oppression. Both present and mummified, it testifies against its members. It defines them without

appeal... Thus we witness the setting up of archaic, inert institutions, functioning under the oppressor's supervision and patterned like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions (Fanon, 1969, cited in Malik, p172).

The idea of pluralism remained limited to colonial societies and only became applied to Western societies during the postwar period. During this period the capitalist system and its social structures were facing tremendous challenges, from the liberation movements of the minority groups and the formally colonized people to the large inflow of immigrants in advanced capitalist countries. Pluralism provided a new language to understand and maintain social differences without invoking the negative consequences of racial concepts. It created a certain degree of change – more equality for colonized people, yet did not completely overhaul the prewar social hierarchy. In fact, its notion of preserving “traditional” culture helped preserve the inequalities of colonial legacy by reinforcing the mummified and archaic culture created by the colonial system. As Malik concludes, the discourse of cultural diversity developed in the postwar years was not means to establish social equality, “but as an accommodation to the persistence of inequality” (p177). In the case of Chinatown, while the community remained isolated and Chinese people excluded from political and economic opportunities, their mentality, lifestyles and community structure were rationalized not as the negative results of racism but as the positive products of cultural differences.

Etienne Balibar takes this argument a step forward. He points out that the anti-racist nature of the culture theories have been attacked from behind. This “turn-about effects” constituted what he called neo-racism, or racism without races. The first turn-about effect is that cultural determinism is adopted by neo-racists to naturalize human behaviors and differences and leads to the preservation of racial hierarchy without

invoking racial concepts. This effect I have just discussed. The second turn-about effect requires more attention here. Since culture difference is “natural,” the abolition of that difference is against “nature” and will inevitably generate defensive reactions, “interethnic conflicts” and aggression. These reactions are considered “natural” too. This kind of neo-racism, argues Balibar, is a theory of “race relations” within society, “*which naturalizes not racial belonging but racist conduct*” (p22). It follows that racists conducts are natural reactions, thus they should not be blamed. Instead, it is those who provoked racist reactions should be blamed. A clear example of this neo-racism is demonstrated in an anti-Sweatshop campaign in Chinatown, in which activists who exposed the inhuman conditions of the factories and fought for the rights of immigrant workers were being accused of invoking negative images of Chinese immigrants and of provoking the deep-rooted anti-immigrant hostilities in American society (Tchen, 1998).

Multiculturalism and “disciplinary isolation”

Having laid out the historical development of the culture discourse and its conservative elements, I will move on to discuss the interconnectedness between the politics of multiculturalism and “disciplinary isolation.” One key element to their connections is the process of “ethnicization.” As I have suggested, through ethnicization, the politics of multiculturalism promoted a politics of conformity. Its promotion of “separate but equal” cultures and fetish of “traditions” encouraged uncritical acceptance of “traditional values” within ethnic groups, while at the same time, maintaining the differences (and inequalities) created by the old colonial system.

In “disciplinary isolation,” in which the Chinese were incorporated into the global system of production, ethnicization served as the mechanism of regulation. I have argued previously that the process of ethnicization is one of the basic structural features of the capitalist world-economy, serving to organize the division of labor within a given state’s boundaries (Wallerstein, 1991). Ethnicization was realized through household, the basic unit of ethnicity located inside ethnic communities. According to Wallerstein, household is the key institution of the capitalist system because it allows the reproduction of labor power without increasing the hourly wages and because it fulfills and maintains the occupation hierarchy without coercion. Through culture reproduction within the household and community, children are socialized into a set of rules and behaviors which prepared them for a certain kind of work force. Ethnicization provided legitimacy to the social hierarchy of capitalism – while under the colonial regime it was achieved through force and oppression, it was now realized through voluntary conformity in the name of preserving cultures and defending social identities (Wallerstein, 1991). In addition to promoting conformity within ethnic groups, ethnicization also helped preserve the social hierarchy of capitalist system by providing an effective mean to divide and marginalize minority groups.

My historical analysis concludes that the politics of multiculturalism was not a radical break from the racial inequalities of colonialism as it purported to be. On the contrary, it fitted well into the logic of “disciplinary isolation,” helping continue the “isolation” of Chinatown under an equalitarian guise. It articulated a kind of conservatism, which helped maintain the static and mummified version of culture created by the colonial order. “Model minority,” despite of its positive image of the Chinese,

instilled a static version of Chinese culture, denying any creativity, flexibility or transformativeness for the Chinese as human beings. Through “ethnicization,” multiculturalism encourages conformity within the Chinese community and continued to maintain the racial divisions and hierarchies without enforcement. In addition, the “ethnicization” of the Chinese shifted our attention away from the terrain of political economy to that of culture, masking and depoliticizing the political and economic inequalities that continued to face the Chinese community and rationalizing them as the positive outcomes of Chinese culture.

To be sure, my critique of multiculturalism does not suggest that I deny the values and contributions made by culture theories or rejecting the ideal of a multicultural society. What I object is an uncritical acceptance of multiculturalism and the celebration ethnic identities as a point of liberation. While acknowledging its values of contribution, we need to recognize the regulatory function of the culture discourse in that it sanctions and regulates the very identities it produces. My conclusion is that as long as our social system remains one that depends on capitalist exploitation and remained organized around social inequalities, any conceptual or ideological change will ultimately fail to bring about real transformation. As my historical assessment demonstrates, without any structural changes, the discourse of culture cannot eradicate racism neither can multiculturalism undo colonial racial hierarchy. At worse, they help reinforce the very inequalities they seek to reject. This view provides the framework for my review of the Asian American movement in the struggle against “isolation,” which I will now turn to.

5.3 The Asian American movement: the contributions and limitations of the politics of ethnic identities

In William Wei's study of the history of the Asian American movement, he refers to the late 1960s as the watershed in the history of Asians in America. As part of the ethnic consciousness raising movements at the time, Asian American movement challenged the social inequalities faced and continued to face the Asian communities in this country. The movement represented the struggle against the "isolation" of Chinatown during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Unlike the struggles against "isolation" in the previous periods which used Chinese nationalism as a weapon for change, the foundation for the Asian American movement was based on ethnicity. At the center of the movement was the creation of a new social political entity called Asian American, which sought to forge a unity among culturally diverse Asian groups in order to form a more effective struggle to raise their sociopolitical status in the United States. Identifying U.S. imperialism as their main adversary and the isolated Chinatown as an "internal colony" or "Third World within," Asian American activists linked U.S. racial oppression of the Chinese with U.S. imperialist aggression in Asian countries. The Asian American movement created a generation of activists, who became important agents to bring changes to the Chinatown communities. The claim to an Asian American ethnic identity was empowering. Its principle of self-determination served as a powerful weapon to reject the Eurocentric model that had previously defined Asians as inferior aliens and excluded them or praised them as "model minority"; to instill cultural pride and self-confidence; to demand equal resources for the community, and to help build a pluralist society of which the Chinese will be treated as equal members (Wei, 1993).

However, while the significance of the Asian American movement cannot be denied, its impact on Chinatown was more a cultural change than political or economic transformation. It is better characterized as “cultural activism,” or “race pride movement,” to use Joseph Tilden Rhea’s terms, which sought to challenge the white cultural model that continued to support and reproduce racial inequalities (Rhea, 1997). While the early period of the movement was charged with militancy opposing American imperialism, when the Vietnam War ended, the movement lost its chief enemy and its radical elements soon disintegrated. The most lasting impacts were the public recognition of “Asian American” within the framework of multiculturalism, and the institutionalization of Asian American studies and community-based service agencies in which the former-revolutionaries served as faculty, directors, and executives. By the 1980s, the Asian American movement at the community level was absorbed into the mainstream political system as many former activists now actively participating in or seeking electoral offices. While few have benefited from the politics of Asian American and gained representation in mainstream American culture, the majority of Chinatown members, most of them new working class immigrants, remained isolated and continued to face political and economic inequalities.

In this section I want to evaluate the contributions made by the Asian American movement as well as its limitations in the struggle against “isolation.” As we will see, while the claim to an Asian American ethnic identity was the source of empowerment and undoubtedly had challenged the power structure behind “isolation,” its sole dependence on ethnic identities as the foundation also imposed its own limitation. The unifying notion of ethnicity masked or even reinforced the class exploitations that already

existed and were increasingly intensified. More importantly, with the passage from “colonial isolation” to “disciplinary isolation,” we encountered a new paradigm of power, in which domination no longer depends on racial binaries and exclusion, but on differential inclusion through cultural reproduction. Thus, one important question that needs to be explored is whether the Asian American movement, which attacks and seeks liberation from colonial mode of domination, is still a viable means to challenge today’s “disciplinary isolation”? My analysis suggests that the politics of Asian American that remains holding onto the past form of rule has gradually lost its effectiveness and explanatory power. In particular, after the decline of the colonial power, the politics of Asian American cannot challenge the new form of power and the neo-racism it embodies, and worse, it ends up supporting the new strategies of rule.

Establishing counterculture and counterinstitution

As William Wei observes, the Asian American movement began in the late 1960s and was associated with two important historical developments. One was the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and the other was the public protests against the Vietnam War (Wei, 1993). Both were results of the global restructuring during the postwar period. The investments of American transnational corporations in Asia during the postwar period and the recruitment of foreign trained professionals, especially in science and technology, to meet the demand for skilled labor during the Cold War gave rise to a group of middle class Asian immigrants in this country. In addition, the partial relaxation of the immigration laws during the war years began to open the door for women to enter. Unlike the early generations of Asian immigrants who

produced few children due to the exclusion laws, this generation created a baby boom of Asian American children, who reached their college age during the 1960s. Having witnessed the profound social unrest in American society, many of this college generation participated in the civil rights, New Left and other kinds of social movements, but only on individual basis. It was the antiwar movement that brought them together politically and psychologically. By linking America's war in Asia to its oppression of Asian minorities in the U.S., many of them became aware of the unique experience of "Asianess" and of the need to create their own social movement to address their specific needs (Wei, 1993).

While the antiwar movement brought about its inception, the Asian American movement was in great part shaped by the Black Power movement and in many ways modeled its philosophy and strategies. Black Power challenged the limitations blacks still faced after the legal breakthroughs of the mid-1960s, and rejected the integrationist ideology and approaches of the civil rights movements as viable means to change the deteriorating conditions of blacks in this country. Wei points out two aspects of the Black Power Movement that were most influential to the Asian American movement. The first was its conception of the ghettoized and segregated black America as an "internal colony," thus linking Black Revolution to the Third World anti-imperialist struggle for national liberation. Though most of the Asian American activists did not have real connection with the Asian countries, the concept of internal colony provided Asian American activists a tool to articulate racial oppressions they encountered and to identify with Asian liberation movements to free themselves from American imperialism. However, as Victor E. Wolfenstein points out, the internal colony paradigm with its

nationalist framework is limiting. For African Americans (and this applies to Asian Americans too), who were culturally diverse, economically dependent, and lacking a geographical base, the concept of nationalist liberation could only serve as a tool for political education and liberation, rather than to bring about any real political and economic change (Wolfenstein, 1981).

The second was its cultural nationalism, as it came to be called. Black cultural nationalism attacked the white cultural hegemony as the source that continued to support and produce racial inequality. Through the knowledge-production institutions, such as museums, schools and universities, the white cultural hegemony not only controls the ways in which blacks were represented in the public perception, but also has great influence on how blacks see themselves—a negative black identity (Rhea, 1997). In their influential book, *Black Power: the politics of liberation in America* (1967), Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton called this “cultural terrorism” and argued that “our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity” from it (Rhea, p103). The Black Power movement saw the dangers of losing the past as the history of slavery and black oppression encountered “whitening” or “institutionalized forgetting” since the Civil War. By attacking white cultural hegemony, blacks could destroy the culture that continued to produce racism and to assert themselves in the national culture. As Rhea describes, intensive emphasis was placed upon uncovering, preserving, and celebrating black history and cultural heritage both as an end in itself and as a means towards achieving critical cultural, political and psychological goals. The celebration of the Afrocentric holiday Kwanzaa, the establishment of black museums, the introduction of black history in schools and museums, the creation of Black national historical landscapes, and the

institutionalization of black studies in universities are among the cultural products of Black Power in the 1960s (Rhea, 1997). Inspired by the power of black racial pride, Asian American activists identified with the critique of the white cultural hegemony and sought to create and redefine their own cultural identity.

In search for an Asian American identity, the movement redefined a unique culture and history that is neither American nor Asian, but Asian American. Such project involved three elements: (a) rejecting stereotypes that have been imposed by the Eurocentric culture, i.e. inferior race or model minority; (b) reclaiming the past that has been misinterpreted or buried, i.e. the exclusion of the Chinese and the interment of the Japanese during the war; and (c) creating a collective culture (Wei, 1993). The principle was self-determination, or in other words, authenticity, which meant free of the contamination of white cultural hegemony and the rejection of assimilation as a desirable goal. Michael Omi describes this as a process of “decolonization,” which seeks to recover the “buried past” of Asian American history and to achieve a “true” reflection of Asian American experience and perspectives (Omi, p32). Through Asian American press, social science research, historical projects, and arts, activists sought to recover, reclaim and celebrate Asian American’s authentic voices, experiences and histories.

One important legacy of the movement is the institutionalization of Asian American studies in universities. Between 1968 and 1973, through student militancy, Asian American studies were established on campuses throughout the country. For instance, as the result of their participation in the Third World Strike at San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley in 1968-1969, Asian American student activists established Asian American Studies, an entire new field, to which they

have the right and responsibility to manage. In 1971 the City College of New York granted an Asian American Studies program after a three-day takeover of the Asian Studies Department by a group called Concerned Asian Students. By gaining control over one of the sites that produces cultural representations, activists attempted to produce and disseminate “correct” knowledge about Asian Americans, to raise ethnic-consciousness among Asian American students, to legitimize Asian American history as part of American history and, more importantly, to return resources to the communities. However, the institutionalization of Asian American Studies also led to its “academicization” along traditional lines since these counter institutions were subjected to constrain and regulations of university administration and funding (Omi, 1988). As former activists became faculty and staff, in the face of the decrease in university funding, their concern for long-term survival, tenure and academic publications gradually detached them from the communities.

Outside of the college campuses, other activists also began to make “Asian American” presence in the communities. It was made possible in great part through the programs of War on Poverty. As I have discussed previously in this chapter, the War on Poverty, like other Great Society programs, delivered federal funds directly to urban ghettos, bypassing state and local governments which failed to respond to the needs of minority groups (Piven & Cloward, 1993). Asian American activists, most of them college educated or professionally trained, joined the line to demand equal resources for the Asian communities, such as Chinatowns, Little Tokyo, Manila town, whose needs had long been ignored by the government. Initial efforts were unsuccessful because of the model minority stereotype which created an illusion that all Asian Americans did not

suffer poverty and did not need help (Kwong, 1996; Wei, 1993). Only after persistent lobbying and protests did activists win a share for Asian Americans in the War on Poverty programs. As a result, New York City Chinatown began to see the emergence of community-based social services organizations providing residents various social, health, and legal services that they were entitled to and desperately needed.

The introduction of the new service organizations, funded by the government and run by professionally trained, bilingual Chinese Americans, brought changes to the Chinatown community. It challenged the model minority concept in the public perception and for the Chinese themselves. To some degree, the Chinatown community was for the first time included in the urban politics, at least in terms of the distribution of resources, though the consequences were not all positive. I will discuss this controversy in a moment. More importantly, by providing Chinatown residents services which were previously controlled and administered by traditional organizations, these new organizations gradually weakened the power monopoly of the traditional elite, and, at the same time, created political power bases for their own. For instance, the Chinatown Planning Council, the largest social-welfare agency in Chinatown with annual budget of \$12 million, and connections to city agencies and local politicians, has greatly undermined the authority of CCBA (Kwong, 1993).

The establishment of federal programs in Chinatown was viewed with suspicion by some activists. For them these programs served to pacify or subvert the Asian American movement – by dividing Asian American communities, pitting one group against another; by creating welfare-dependency in the community; by coopting community leaders and dissidents (Wei, 1993). Their suspicion was not just the product

of the political paranoia of the late 1960s, but had some grounds. As I have discussed earlier, the Great society programs were designed and delivered in such a way to placate blacks without instigating white antagonism and, at the same time, to reform the municipal political machine in order to secure black votes. With the emphasis on “community development” and, “maximum feasible participation,” these programs directed their attacks on the ghettos, rather on white privileges in schools, jobs, neighborhoods or public services, thus making them less threatening to the whites. As a result, poverty, segregation, juvenile delinquencies, drugs were framed as a black pathology and needed to be fixed by themselves.

In addition, while the principle of “maximum feasible participation” granted decision-making to local leaders, the programs actually became a surveillance system, a “name-taking web that helped to identify and isolate” the militant ghetto leaders (Yett, 1973) and eventually absorbed them into the urban political system (Piven & Cloward, 1993). That is, as civil rights leaders became community program directors or executives, they became government employees or contractors, subjected to the restriction and guidelines of federal funding. Or worse, they became subjected to all the factional competition for positions and patronage that the system encourages. From the perspective of incorporating blacks into the political system, the Great Society Programs was quite a success, as evidenced by the numbers of the former community-action program leaders seeking municipal electoral offices (Piven & Cloward, 1993). In Chinatown, for instance, the Chinese Planning Council has become a political steppingstone for those who seek public offices. Over the years CPC has developed close relationship with the local government, especially during the Koch administration. The connection was mutually

beneficial – it gave local politicians some kind of community support, and, at the same time, provided CPC leaders political opportunities, such as appointments to community boards or commissions of local agencies (Kwong, 1996).

Critical of government-funded community service agencies, the more radical activists argued that only a sociopolitical transformation of the nation would solve the problems of Chinatown. They identified with the Black Panthers, the Chinese communist revolution and Third World liberation movements opposing American imperialism. In New York City Chinatown, I Wor Kuen, a Maoist group, was first founded in 1969 to prepare the community for revolution (Wei, 1993). Several others soon followed its course. In the early 1970s, they launched a series of militant attacks against racism and exploitation, including mobilizing residents to protest against police brutality and Anti-Asian violence, against the discriminative hiring practices in the construction of the Confucius Plaza, a federal-funded low-to-middle income housing project in Chinatown, against tourist buses in Chinatown, which they saw as an a form of racism against the Chinese community. However, their Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology and militant approach alienated many Chinatown residents who were either still traumatized by the terror of the McCarthy era or disillusioned by the dark side of the Chinese Communist Party, or simply because they were new immigrants and did not share or identify with the history of oppression against Asians in this country. In response to these obstacles, the radical organizations moderated their approach by creating front organizations to provide social services as a way to attract community interests (i.e. Asian American For Equal Employment and Chinese Progressive Association belonged to this kind). Yet, they still failed to develop a strong popular support and revolution was hard put to carry out.

Kwong attributed their failure mainly to their belief in “vanguard politics.” That is, the radical activists, most of them from middle class backgrounds, saw themselves leading and fighting for the masses, not with them, and tended to stay away from the day-to-day struggles of the common people (Kwong, 1996).

These radical groups did not last long. When the Vietnam War ended and the antigovernment sentiment dissipated, they lost their chief enemy and encountered increasing difficulty to sustain themselves. The scarce revolutionary resources not only facilitated their decline but also increased rivalries and sectarianism. Ironically, with the dissolution of the revolution activities, many of those who survived now became actively involved in the electoral politics or engaged in social services to compete for community residents’ support, both of which were the very kind of activities they had previously denounced (Wei, 1993). For instance, both AAFE (Asian Americans For Equality) and CPA (Chinese Progressive Association), two radical groups that survived and continued their presence in Chinatown, took a new direction in the 1980s by participating fervently in electoral politics. Beginning in Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, both groups began to build alliances with liberal and minority factions in the Democratic Party, supporting political candidates or having their own members run for electoral offices at the state and city levels (Kwong, 1993). Lamenting on how the “radical” politics of the 1960s has given way to participation in mainstream politics in the 1980s, Michael Omi reflects, “I am amazed how Marxist-Leninists, who just a few years ago were telling me that electoral politics were bourgeois sham, are now running for public office at the state and local level.” At the same time, community-based organizations that called for “self-determination” have become “direct service agencies attempting to navigate the often

treacherous waters of mainstream local/state/federal politics” (Omi, 1998, p33). Although minority representation in the political system is important, unfortunately, much of the Asian American political action in Chinatown is limited to the kind of “descriptive representation” – to elect an Asian American as an end to itself (Saito, 2001).

The historical significance of the Asian American movement, both its reform and radical versions, of the 1960s and the early 1970s in the struggles against “isolation” is undeniable. Emerged during a turbulent period in American history, the movement was in the front line attacking the white cultural hegemony, the system that supported and reproduced “model minority” and other forms of racial dominations. It has raised Asian American ethnic consciousness, created changes in cultural attitudes and representations, and gained legitimacy for “Asian American” as a political unity and a self-determined identity. The claim to an Asian American ethnic identity was empowering. Politically, it creates a unity among different groups who are small in number, thus increased their visibility as a political force. It provided a language to articulate the racial oppression against the Chinese and a weapon to demand equal treatment and respect for the Chinese in this country. The struggle against “isolation” of Chinatown was elevated to another level – it was not simply a unique suffering of the Chinese; rather it was shared by all Asian people as well as all people of color, who were confronted with political powerlessness, economic despair, ghettoization of their communities. Psychologically, by rejection the dominant conceptions of Asians as “inferior race” or “model minority”, “Asian American” is both liberating and self-affirming. It provides a source of cultural pride, serving to boost the self-esteem of the group. It also created a space, both spatially and culturally, for Asian Americans to express their voices, creativity, and critical

perspectives, which were otherwise suppressed or not welcome in American mainstream culture. At the community level, the Asian American movement created a generation of activists who played an important role in creating changes in Chinatown, from bringing in resources, to challenging traditional power monopoly, and to politicizing community members. All of these, in one way or the other, had challenged the power structure that supported and reproduced “isolation.”

However, the Asian American movement that depended on the politics of identity as the source of empowerment also imposes its own limitation. That is, on the one hand, the claim to “Asian American” helped form a fortified line of defense against “external enemy” – white domination; on the other hand, this progressive weapon can easily be turned into an oppressive one against the “interior” it claims to protect. This oppressive element has already been articulated by several Asian American feminist critics. For instance, Chinese American feminists who spoke out about patriarchy in Chinese culture were often accused of betrayal (Bow, 1995). In addition, the notion of ethnic solidarity is often used as a tactic by elite and capitalist class to disguise class exploitations within the Chinatown community and to suppress workers’ struggles. Thus, the claim to an Asian American identity, though liberating and self-affirming, assumes and demands a certain level of conformity within the ethnic group. That is, it sanctions the very identity it produces. While the Asian American movement created openings, at the same time, they also imposed a new kind of border on the Chinese community.

With the transition from American colonial domination to disciplinary domination, the limitation of the Asian American movement as a politics of liberation for Chinatown became more obvious and acute. The new form of domination did not depend

on a centralized control or an external force. It rejected racial hierarchies and promoted Chinese (and Asians) as model minority who possessed good cultural heritage. It did not exclude but incorporated the Chinese into the network of production. Therefore, liberation struggles that remained holding onto the old colonial model and continued to depend on politics of ethnic identity were no longer viable means to challenge contemporary “isolation”. They not only failed to challenge the new form of domination, but also fitted into its logic and unwittingly support its strategies of rule.

Chapter 6

Chinatown as a commodity

“Manhattan’s most exciting new luxury condominium. Fabulous duplex, spectacular river view. Huge four bedrooms, elegant living room, three baths, dressing room and large kitchen. Featuring rooftop garden, heated swimming pool, 24 hours doorman, indoor parking and many more. STEAL IT! \$500,000”

In his article for the *Village Voice* in 1982 (6/8/82), John Wong predicted that if Chinatown continued its rapid growth, an ad like this would soon appear in the real estate section of the *Sunday New York Times*. In fact, this kind of development had already begun. In 1982 alone, three luxury residential buildings were being planned in the core of Chinatown, with projected prices for each unit ranging from \$150,000 to \$500,000 (Lin, 1998). The thriving real estate market was accompanied by the rapid growth of Chinese population and blooming business activities in Chinatown, and consequently, the expansion of Chinatown’s boundaries. By the early 1980s, Chinatown had expanded over its traditional core at Mott and Canal Streets, reaching northward and eastward into the predominantly Italian and Jewish neighborhoods.

Against the economic decline and capital disinvestments throughout the city during the 1970s, Chinatown’s economic vitality and its potential for further development caught the attention from the city government, which has neglected and excluded this community for almost a century. In September 1974, Chinatown was identified as a “booming area” by the New York City Department of City Planning and was selected as one of the four historic neighborhoods to be studied in the Bicentennial Project, a project seeking to improve city life.¹ A statement in the final report can best illustrate the rising status of Chinatown in the urban political economy. “A plan for “Street Revitalization in

¹ The other areas selected included Montague Street in Brooklyn, Union Square in Manhattan and Alexander Avenue in the Bronx (NYC Department of City Planning, 1976).

Chinatown” may sound like too much of a good thing, considering how few neighborhoods can match Chinatown’s vitality” (p12). The changing status of Chinatown in New York City’s political economy had a historical significance to the community. This was the first time the city government took “constructive” measures to facilitate the development of Chinatown, proposing ways to beautify the streetscape, to ease congestion and to attract tourists. However, the “constructive” measures need to be examined carefully, which I will do so throughout this chapter.

Chinatown’s growth in the 1970s was related to two historical developments. One was the rise of the garment industry in Chinatown. The newly arrived Chinese immigrants, especially women, provided available and cheap labor force for New York City’s garment industry that was in serious decline as a result of labor shortage caused by decades of urban renewal policies that drove manufacturing factories and immigrant workers out of the Lower East Side. The second development was the inflow of overseas Chinese capital. As Chinatown’s garment industry flourished, it initiated an on-going cycle of growth: more capital was attracted to Chinatown, resulting in the expansion of other businesses, such as restaurants and services catering to Chinese families, which further attracted more new immigrants and capital into Chinatown. As a result, the community experienced unprecedented growth. While the old Chinatown expanded, new Chinatowns in the outer boroughs also experienced rapid growth (i.e. Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens). Manhattan’s Chinatown was transformed into a multi-facet commercial district characterized by thriving economic activities in manufacturing, commercial, real estate and tourism.

However, Chinatown's vitality and the positive attention it received from the city government should not be mistaken as a sign of the end of "isolation." Behind the façade of economic vitality were highly exploitative and often illegal labor practices under the control of Chinese capital. On one hand, Chinese capital operated globally flowing back and forth between Asia and the U.S., and, on the other hand, it was locally and ethnically bounded in Chinatown taking advantage of the already isolated community to maximize the return of investment. As a result, Chinese workers were locked into Chinatown's business system, working long hours and in sweatshop conditions for daily survival. Yet, at the same time, they were forced out by soaring real estate prices and re-isolated geographically in outer boroughs, such as Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens. The manipulation of pro-business U.S. government (both at the federal and municipal level) continued to work against the working class people in Chinatown, enacting policies to protect business interests and to facilitate investment at the expense of the welfare of the working people. In these conditions emerged a new form of "isolation", which I call "Chinatown as a commodity."

"Chinatown as a commodity" represented the contemporary form of "isolation" in my roadmap (Table 6-1). In the first section of this chapter, I will examine how "Chinatown as a commodity" was constructed. I will demonstrate that the commodification of Chinatown was part of the agenda to make New York City "capital attractive" and "business friendly" with the aim to enhance its competitiveness in the new global economy. The second section examines a specific notion of "Chineseness" associated with "Chinatown as a commodity": a category that has become increasingly flexible, changing, and self-selecting. While the new notion of "Chineseness" was

celebrated and promoted by postmodernist theorists as a sign of liberation, I will argue that postmodern thinking and the politics of differences it advocated were not as liberatory as they claimed to be. Rather, the affirmation of differences and hybridity was in line with the tactics of disciplinary power, which promoted differences and fluidity. The third section examines the liberation movement led by the Chinese Staff & Workers' Association. I will discuss the ways in which CSWA challenged contemporary "isolation," and how its grassroots organizing moved beyond the racially defined borders of Chinatown.

Before I move on, I should explain how I use the concept of commodity and how the commodification of Chinatown fits into "disciplinary isolation." Commodity is used here in a Marxist sense, which refers to the abstraction and reduction of things to the common measure of money. Through this process, domination and exploitation of labor behind the production of the commodity are masked or obliterated by money and exchange market. This condition Marx calls the fetishism of commodities. The commodification of Chinatown would mean three things. First, the space in Chinatown was commodified. With growing real estate investment, the construction of the Chinatown space became primarily geared toward the preservation or enhancement of exchange values (i.e. property values) as oppose to use values for daily survival. The development of modern offices and luxury apartments became the priority, instead of affordable housing and community facilities. As a result, working class people were forced out of the community where they worked and lived. Secondly, Chinese culture and Chinatown were commodified as they became cultural goods produced for the purpose of exchange in the market. Chinatown was constructed, packaged, sold and consumed in

and by American society. The market value of Chinatown was its ethnic features. The recommendation made by the Hunter College Neighborhood Planning Workshop illustrated this point: “if Chinatown is to remain a vibrant tourist attraction, the ethnic character of the area must be maintained” (1992, p27).

Finally, Chinatown residents and workers were absorbed into the process of making Chinatown a commodity, thus became subjected to the manipulation of the globally mobilized capital. The first development in this process was the entry of the masses of Chinese workers into the modern capitalist production, though mostly at the lower end, i.e. garment factories and service industries. A large number of Chinese immigrants from rural areas of China now worked in routinized assembly lines in the factories. Secondly, as they entered the wage system, the workers were turned into consumers whose needs, desires, and demands were also subjected to the manipulation of capital. This means that their perception of needs and desires were less determined by the basic requirements to reproduce themselves, but were conditioned by a certain type of lifestyle associated with consumption of certain commodities. As Chinese workers were absorbed into the process of making Chinatown a commodity, both as producers and consumers, the consequences of capitalist accumulation now permeated every aspects of social life.

How does this fit into “disciplinary isolation?” In the last chapter I have discussed “model minority” as one form of “disciplinary isolation,” which functioned as a Foucaultian discursive/power discipline compelling individuals to conform to the norm of model minority. This chapter intends to show that discursive/power discipline is inseparable from the process of capitalist accumulation in which, through the processes

of production and consumption, Chinese workers were shaped, reshaped and disciplined into docile bodies according to capital's requirements. The body is the foundational concept and irreducible basis in Foucault's disciplinary regime, in which discourse/power disciplines the bodies by coding body practices, which he calls political technology, or bio-power. The use of the term "body" does not imply a Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind. Rather, it is grounded in the idea that the body is the fundamental and irreducible basis of human experience in which desire, feelings, and motivations intertwined with social orders.

Foucault recognizes that discursive discipline of the bodies is inseparable from the process of capital accumulation. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues:

In fact the two processes – the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital – cannot be separated; it would not have been possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital (1975, p221).

However, Foucault does not give any account on what the connections between body politics and the accumulation of capital really are or how they work. Elaborating on Marx's concept of laboring body, David Harvey (2000) provides the connections by showing that capitalist system operates as a constructive/destructive force on laboring bodies through the processes of production, exchange and consumption. As Harvey argues, capitalist accumulation is about shaping the working body. As workers become producers and consumers, their bodies – including physical, emotional and intellectual powers – were shaped to different directions according to capital's requirements. This process requires some kind of disciplinary apparatus of surveillance, reward/punishment and ideological control, which Foucault has elaborated upon (Harvey, 2000).

Following this argument, I conclude that the commodification of Chinatown functioned to produce disciplined Chinese workers by constantly constructing and destructing their working bodies. For analytical purposes, I further distinguished two different, yet interconnected ways in which discipline power was exercised. On one hand, urban administrations and Chinatown business leaders worked together to discipline Chinese workers. Through systems of surveillance, ideological control, and rewards and punishment, Chinese workers were forced to endure highly exploitative labor practices in Chinatown. Chinese workers were inserted into specific production processes (i.e. garment factories, restaurants, or other tourism related industries) and physically and mentally shaped to fit specific requirements. For instance, garment workers were shaped to adapt to repetitive tasks at a high speed; to meet certain physical challenges (working in a spatially confined area for long hours without breaks), and to obey the authority.

On the other hand, discipline power did not act like an external force that dictated individual practices or repressed her/his their desires. Rather, it created desires and compelled individuals to pursue them. The effectiveness and intensity of discipline power lied in the fact that the exercise of power was immanent to the bodies and subjectivities under its commands. By establishing hard work and individual success as the norms and by constructing certain conceptions of desires and needs, discipline power compelled Chinese workers to comply with the norm, to work hard to pursue material rewards or to avoid punishment (lack of material rewards or loss of jobs). Discipline power became an inner compulsion, indistinguishable from their desires and will.

Table 6-1 *Roadmap 4: Chinatown as a Commodity*

Form of "isolation"	Fraternal Welfarism	Chinatown as a Chinese Territory	Model Minority	Chinatown as a Commodity
Historical periods	Late 19 th century to early 20 th century	From 1911 to early 1970s	Late 1960s to present	Late 1970s to present
Construction of "isolation"	Tight social hierarchy dominated by fraternal organizations	The dominance of the KMT in Chinatown	Positive image of the Chinese	The development of the community was geared toward enhancing its market value
Historical conditions	America's economic expansion during the global restructuring of the 2 nd half of the 19 th century	Chinese revolution and KMT's rise to power in China The Cold War	"Urban crisis"; Vietnam War; Increasing significance of Asia in America's postwar global agenda	Intensified inter-urban competition in the new global economy
Political, economic and/or ideological functions	To advance U.S. economic development To control Chinese laborers;	To protect U.S. interests in China and Asia To contain the expansion of communism	To maintain white privilege. To promote U.S. foreign policy	To enhance NYC's competitive position in the new global economy
Socio-psychological consequences in Chinatown	Sojourner mentality Reinforced the patriarchal hierarchy	Resources and energy diverted to political struggles in China rather than to the development of the community; Political silence	Masked the continuing racial and economic inequalities Uncritical acceptance of Chinese traditions Created hostility toward the Chinese	Violent destruction of the working bodies Workers were forced to endure deteriorating working and living conditions, deprived of health, lives and dignity
Construction of Chinatown's borders	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and the dominance of fraternal organizations in Chinatown	Rigid boundaries defined in racial terms, maintained through U.S. racism and KMT's domination in Chinatown	Old boundaries reconstituted in cultural terms, maintained through cultural preservation. Borders became more open for middle class Chinese, but remained closed for working class people	Boundaries defined in cultural terms. Borders become more flexible and open in order to attract capital investment and consumers, but remained closed for working class people
"Chineseness"	Demonized "Chineseness": Chinese were a threat to American society	Romanticized "Chineseness": Chinese needed American salvation	Good cultural heritage Model minority	Flexible, hybrid and fluid identities
Local struggles	The Chinese revolutionary movement in Chinatown	Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance	The Asian American movement	Chinese Staff & Workers' Association

6.1 The construction of “Chinatown as a commodity”

The three spatial elements of “Chinatown as a commodity”

“Chinatown as a commodity” was constructed in three spatial domains. In the sphere of *spatial practices*, social relations of production and reproduction in Chinatown were organized by Chinatown elite and local governments in such a way as to promote Chinatown’s economic development. While Chinatown elite sought to maximize the return of their investment, local officials saw Chinatown’s development as part of the plan to make New York a “capital attractive” and “business friendly” environment. Part of the agenda was to create a disciplined Chinese labor force who could meet the demands of capital. In the *representations of space*, Chinatown was perceived as a special Chinese district with great potential to generate profits by the Chinatown elite and local officials. Strategies were used to highlight ethnic features of Chinatown (i.e. Chinese style architectures and street ornaments) to meet Americans’ growing demands for cultural consumption. In the *representational space*, “Chinatown as a commodity” created obedient Chinese workers who were forced to endure deteriorating working and living condition because they were made to believe that working harder would bring them rewards and upward mobility. The result was extreme violence on the working bodies. Workers were gradually stripped of health, live chances and future prospect.

“Chinatown as a commodity” was a result and a process of a new phase of urban political economy associated with contemporary realization of globalization. In order to understand how “Chinatown as a commodity” was shaped by the new urban political economy and the roles that urban administrations and local elites played in this process, I will briefly review the political and economic changes in New York City associated with globalization. I will demonstrate that “Chinatown as a commodity” was part of the agenda to make New York City “capital attractive” and “business friendly” in order to enhance New York City’s competitive position in the new global economy.

One of the most notable analyses on the new urban political economy is David Harvey’s account of postmodern urbanization (Harvey, 1989, 1990). Harvey regards the new urban form as an expression and strategy of the new phase of capitalism, which he calls flexible accumulation. Flexible accumulation was capital’s response to the global

crisis of the early 1970s, which brought an end to the three decades of postwar prosperity in most of the advanced capitalist countries. Flexible accumulation refers to the flexibility with respect to production processes, labor markets, products and pattern of consumption. In contrast to Fordist standardized mass-production system, flexible accumulation is characterized by the emergence of new sectors of production (i.e. service-sector), the increase in sub-contracting, part-time, or temporary employment, the shift to small-batch production, small-scale market and just-in-time delivery system, and new informational technologies that linked up in real time financial centers around the globe and allowed multinational firms to organize an assembly line in the same time frame.

The passage to flexible accumulation had destructive impacts on large cities (Castells, 1980). For them, the new model translated to the increasing mobility of capital and the decrease in federal funding. Policies of deregulation and major tax cuts for the wealthy and large corporations helped accelerate capital flight and factory relocation that have already taken place. The “revenue-sharing” proposal of the Nixon’s administration and Reagan’s “New Federalism”² further attempted to decentralize significant social programs, on top of the substantial cuts in social benefits. As a result, the already devastated cities became, more than ever, dependent on private investments, thus more vulnerable to the threat of capital flight (Piven & Cloward, 1984). This gave rise to what Robert Goodman has called “public entrepreneuring,” in which state and local governments engage in fierce competition for migrating capital for their economic survival (Goodman, 1979). As Goodman observes, the competitions between local

² In 1982 the administration went much further toward decentralization, proposing a transfer of program authority as well as a shift in revenue sharing responsibilities to the local governments. It was dropped facing the oppositions from city and state officials. (Piven & Cloward, 1984, p403).

governments were no less aggressive than those of private business. In addition to offering better incentives to outdo other localities, local administrations also hired promotion agencies and engaged in public campaigns (or advertisements) that involved not only self-promotion but also outright sniping at others.

Harvey theorizes four possibilities by which urban administrations seek survival in the intensified inter-urban competitions. These opportunities are not mutually exclusive, including: (a) competition within the spatial division of labor; (b) competition within the spatial division of consumption; (c) competition for command functions (i.e. political or financial capital); and (d) competition for redistribution of government resources (i.e. federal military spending) (Harvey, 1989, p45-50). New York City scored high on the first three possibilities. The city was blessed with a mix of highly skilled technocrats and a mass of recent immigrant workers. To compete for corporate capital and jobs, the urban government acted both as an entrepreneur offering baits to corporate capital and as a manager, disciplining labor by cutting wages, rolling back social benefits, relaxing labor standards or mobilizing a cheap industrial reserve army. To compete for consumption dollars, business elites, urban planners and politicians have worked together to encourage real estate development, to create consumer palaces (i.e. the South Street Seaport, Time Square), to support cultural activities, events or other services to attract tourists. To maintain New York City's position as a financial center, a private-public coalition has worked to provide efficient and adequate infrastructure, including office spaces, supporting services, and certain kinds of education to produce a labor force with necessary skills.

The result was reorientation of urban economic activities into business services based on finance, insurance and real-estate, and, more importantly, intensified polarization in terms of work force and urban space (Reichl, 1999). As Alexander Reichl points out, the work force was polarized into the highly educated, well-paid professionals at the upper level, and low-skilled workers, usually minority and recent immigrants, at the lower end, who serve to accommodate the advanced service economy and its workforce. Geographically, cities became increasingly divided into areas of consumption for the rich and areas of despair for the poor.

It is in these contexts that “Chinatown as a commodity” emerged. Because of its capacity to absorb and control a large pool of immigrant labor force, to attract local and foreign capital, and to produce culture for consumption, the development of Chinatown became crucial to enhance New York City’s competitiveness in the new global economy. In the following, I will consider the development of Chinatown with respect to the spatial division of consumption and the spatial division of labor in turn. This will help us understand how local governments and the Chinese business leaders worked to shape Chinatown into a capital attractive and business friendly district and to create a disciplined Chinese labor force to meet business’s needs. It also shows that when community development is running like a business model and when business interests are prioritized over people, there is not room left for social justice and equality.

Competition within the spatial division of consumption

To compete for consumption dollars, local government, urban planners and business elites have worked together to create consumption palaces, to promote real

estate development and, more importantly, to make the city innovated, exciting, and creative in terms of life-style, high culture, and fashion in order to meet the demand of the fast changing consumption pattern. The commodification of Chinatown's space and culture was part of these agenda. The result was the displacement of the working class Chinese and the transformation of the Chinatown community into a business district for the rich.

Commodification of Chinese culture

To attract consumption dollars, both municipal and state governments were active in developing Chinatown as one of New York City's tourist attractions and consumer environment. The key strategy was to call for "cultural preservation" to promote the cultural theme of this neighborhood. Yet, beneath the mask of "culture preservation", the kind of "Chineseness" being "preserved" has less to do with the real life of the Chinese people in the community than to provide a distinctive way of entertainment for American public. Initiated by Chinatown business leaders in coordination with the city government, Chinese architectural ornaments, such as pagoda roof, Chinese lantern-like streetlights, were added to Chinatown's streetscape to create more cultural flair. Buildings and spaces were labeled with Chinese names. Tourism initiatives that highlighted cultural and historical richness of this area, such as historical tours and cultural events, were also launched by a coalition of local businesses, political leaders, and community groups.³ In

³For instance, historical tours and cultural events were organized by the Manhattan Neighborhood Renaissance Local Development Corporation, a community organization funded by the Urban Development Corporation (UDC)-a state agency sponsoring economic development projects throughout the state (later renamed the Empire State Development Corporation) – highlighting cultural richness, ethnic diversity, and historical significance of the neighborhoods in the Lower East Side (Lin, 1998).

addition to setting up special offices, local government also gave grants or financial assistance to community organizations to facilitate tourism.⁴

Commodification of Chinatown space

Promoting real estate development is another way to capture consumption dollars. As federal funding decreased, city officials look to private development, through joint ventures with property owners, developers and financiers, as a means to “upgrade” neighborhoods.

In the mid 1970s, New York City Chinatown began to witness heavy property market activities. Middle-class and wealthy Chinese who were anxious about the political instability in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other regions in Asia sought America’s real estate market as a safe haven. However, most of Chinatown’s housing stock was old and lacked adequate facilities (NYDCP, 1979), thus, could not accommodate the wealthy. Further, the existing zoning regulation that permitted only low-rise development imposed limitations on new development. Upon developers’ requests for zoning change, New York City Department of City Planning recognized such limitation in their 1979 Manhattan Bridge Area Study and recommended rezoning the Chinatown area. As a result, the Special Manhattan Bridge District (SMBD) was established and adopted in 1981, with the main objective to upgrade Chinatown by stimulating private investment in high-rise, high priced towers (Wang, 1982). Immediately following the passage of the SMBD, two major high-rise condominium residence projects that involved both local and overseas investment capital were announced. Both proposed projects, Henry Street

⁴ For instance, a state-sponsored Chinatown Tourism Council was established by the Manhattan Borough president’s office in 1992 (Lin, 1998)

Towers at 60 Henry Street, and East-West Towers at 87 Madison Street, targeted at the affluent Chinese population, with price tags ranging from \$150,000 to \$500,000 per unit (Lin, 1998).

The SMBD plan was backed by a powerful alliance of developers, landlords, and prominent individuals and groups in Chinatown, who welcomed the measure to upgrade Chinatown property values and masked their greed in the name of community interests. Allied with the wealthy, the city planning officials never appropriately informed the non-English-speaking, working class majority in the community, and refused to acknowledge the strong protest of many community groups about its negative impacts. After several lawsuits, official investigation and community protests, the two luxury developments were scaled back but the SMBD remained. Regardless, upscale developments in Chinatown continued.

The establishment of the SMBD and the subsequent high-rise and high-priced developments helped speed up the process of gentrification that was already on the way in this working class community, as evidenced by increasing tenant harassment, land speculation, and rising profits to landlords and developers. Although the new zoning regulation required developers to provide neighborhood amenities, such as low-income housing or community facilities, in exchange for floor area bonuses, developers rarely choose low-income housing as an option, because the incentives were low (the bonuses for community facilities were higher than that for low-income housing) and the presence of low-income population would affect the market value of their luxury developments.

With the powerful alliance between the Chinatown elites and city officials, the community continued to be shaped according to their plan, which sought to develop

Chinatown into a district filled with high-rent offices and luxury apartments without the mess of factories and poor Chinese immigrant workers. Their agenda was made explicit in the late 1990s when a group of real estate companies and business leaders saw "modernizing" Chinatown as the next wave of economic prosperity and actively campaigned to transform Chinatown into the next stop of New York's "Silicon Alley." Recognizing the potential profits of having dot-com tenants (while traditional factories have paid between \$8 and \$12 per square foot, dot-com companies are willing to pay more than \$20 as of 2000 – of course, this was before the recent economic downturn), many Chinatown landlords used various tactics to get rid of their old manufacturing and residential tenants and converted their buildings into commercial offices or luxury apartment complexes.⁵ Once again working class Chinese were "isolated," this time quite literally from the community in which they lived and worked.

Competition within the spatial division of labor

Within the intensified inter-urban competition over capital investment and jobs, urban administrations were preoccupied with creating a "friendly business climate" to keep capital remaining in an area and to attract new ones. According to Harvey, this can be achieved in two ways, in both of which local governments play a crucial role. Firstly, urban administrations act as an entrepreneur offering bait to the highly mobilized corporate capital. Secondly, the urban administrations take up the role of manager disciplining the labor force, thus created a favorable labor condition for businesses.

⁵ The loft-conversion program adopted by the Board of Estimate in 1981 designated Chinatown area as a "mixed-use" zone, which meant that landlords could easily convert their loft space that was for manufacturing use to residential or commercial uses (Dao, 1990).

When the urban administration acts as an entrepreneur

Mayors and governors now traveled all over the country and abroad with an arsenal of financial weapons to capture corporate capital. Companies were offered attractive packages with low tax rates, low-cost factory buildings, loans, grants, tax-credits, and free-job training and public subsidies. For instance, in 1979, New York City, hunted by its mid-1970s financial crisis, was offering what it called “the most comprehensive package of financial incentives of any city in America” (cited in Goodman, 1979, p12). According to the city’s Industrial Development Agency (IDA), the savings to business, from tax abatements, tax waivers and interest rate reductions, could “equal or even surpass the initial project cost” (Goodman, p12). Foreign investments were also an important source. New York State has been one of the most important states in the United States for foreign investment. Its Empire State Development Corporation (a state agency sponsoring economic development projects throughout the state) had six international offices throughout the world, with the goal to bring in foreign capital (ESDC website). To facilitate capital inflow, New York State and federal legislators made banking easier for foreign investors. Federal banking acts passed in 1978 and 1981 relaxed the banking process, allowing foreign banks to enter the U.S. retail banking market. The International Banking Facilities in New York City were established to handle foreign lending, exempt from U.S. reserve requirements, interest rate ceilings, and city and state taxes. As a result, the number of foreign facilities in New York City reached 356 in 1986 (Lin, 1998).

Chinese capitals were generally in smaller scale, but they have grown substantially as a result of American investments in Asia. The concerns over the political

instability of the area further facilitated their escape to the U.S. Initially the majority of the Chinese capital came through Hong Kong. After Taiwan's restriction on outward investment was lifted in 1987, the inflow volume of Chinese capital was further boosted⁶. Business leaders in the Chinatown community played an important role in enticing overseas Chinese capital and served as a bridge between city officials and overseas Chinese investors. In 1988, Alair Townsend, the deputy mayor of NYC, led a delegation of city representatives and leaders of the Chinese business community to meet with the Hong Kong Development Trade Council to encourage investments (Lin 1998, p156). Danny Li, a Chinatown businessman and real estate investor, who was at the forefront of the major's Hong Kong investment venture, openly envisioned his dream to make Chinatown "a Pacific Rim financing center" (Daily News, 4/29/90).

When the urban administration takes up the role of manager disciplining labor force

Since labor condition are a major factor by which companies decided their locations, local and state governments have been aggressively packaging and merchandising anti-labor policies to make themselves "business friendly." The results included reductions in wages and social benefits, relaxation on labor standards and hostility towards labor establishments. While "Right-to-Work" states proudly boast of their anti-union position and promoted themselves as having the most loyal, hardworking, nonmilitant and low-paid workers, other states also found ways to "improve" and promote their labor conditions. Strategies included mobilizing an industrial reserve army (usually minorities, women, immigrants), and streamlining state minimum wage (states

⁶ It was estimated that investment from Taiwan in the U.S. jumped from \$70 million in 1987 to \$349 million in the first eight months of 1989 (Lin 1998, p86)

can set its minimum wage to be higher or lower than the federal minimum and decide its coverage) and workers' compensation rates (employer funded insurance to cover all work-related injuries) (Goodman, 1979).

To promote its business friendliness, in 1988, New York City ran a sixteen-page advertisement on the *Wall Street Journal*, which headlined New York City's cheap labor by providing the following table (cited in Fitch, 1993, p18):

New York City Industrial Wage Chart (\$)

Detroit	13.74
Seattle	11.77
Columbus	11.22
Houston	11.15
Minneapolis	10.99
Denver	10.79
Stamford	10.74
Baltimore	10.46
Chicago	10.46
Philadelphia	10.43
L.A	10.37
Westchester	10.28
Bergen/Passaic	10.13
Boston	10.12
Atlanta	10.11
U.S Average	9.73
Dallas	9.45
New York City	9.10

Reducing worker's compensation rates was another avenue to "improve" labor conditions. Between 1970 and 1995, New York State was considered "expensive" with regard to workers' compensation rates. But it has dramatically changed since George Pataki took office as the governor in 1995. Within a five-year period, the rate was reduced by 40%. The reduction was hailed by the business circle as the right move to improve New York State's business climate.⁷ As in 2002, New York State's workers' compensation rate is considered fairly competitive, ranked 11th in the country.

⁷ The Business Council of New York State, Inc. News Release. 2000.

In addition to taking hostile measures against labor, the discipline power of the new urban political economy can also be exercised at another level. The discourses of “competition,” “free market” and “globalization” have become formidable business propaganda to persuade workers and the publics about the inevitable primacy of markets over politics, and of capital over labor. Using the threat of job loss, corporate relocations or disinvestments, capital effectively increased its bargaining power and, at the same time, weakened the resistance of the workers.⁸

From the perspective of disciplining labor, Chinatown provides an additional effective means to maintain and control a pool of captive and compliant labor force. Under the control of Chinese capital, which took advantage of the already isolated Chinatown community by making alliance with the traditional elites, Chinatown was developed into a “protective” zone in which highly exploitive and often illegal labor practices were set up to give Chinese businesses certain competitive advantages. In Chinatown, violation of minimum wage regulations, overtime requirements, and occupation safety and health standards were common. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nine out of ten garment factories in Chinatown violated minimum wage and overtime laws, comparing to two out of three in the city as a whole (Kimberling, 1999).

⁸ Although the attack upon labor’s standards of living and the working class institution were also seen in other advanced capitalist countries in Europe, American labor is in a weaker position than their European counterparts. As Kessler-Harris points out, in the U.S. many fundamental social rights vital for survival such as health insurance, unemployment benefits, retirement pensions and workers’ compensation are derived from employment, in contrast to most European countries, which provide such benefits as a matter of right to all citizens or residents. This arrangement results in the dependence of the workers on employers, thus increases the power of the employers and the vulnerability of workers (Kessler-Harris, 2001). In addition, as Stanley Aronowitz has argued, American workers’ political power was further weakened because the culture and law of labor relations is tilted toward employers. While in many European countries collective bargaining was established as a right, whether workers joined unions or not, in the U.S. bargaining rights are only granted to those groups who choose them (Aronowitz, 1998). Workers’ vulnerability became more visible and more obnoxious when it comes to people of color and women (Gordon, 2002).

For instant, most garment workers were subjected to long hours of work (60 to 70 hours a week is common), poor working conditions, and retaliations when they complained or spoke out. In many cases, they were owed backwages and unable to recover them because the bosses have closed down the factories and left or reopened a new one under a new corporate identity.

While abuses of workers were carried out internally by Chinese employers, governments' pro-business policies, negligent attitudes and lack of labor law enforcement also played an important role in enhancing business's ability to force workers to accept lower wages and worse conditions. The passage of the employer sanction provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 represented one of the most significant government actions that helped boost the discipline power of employers. Under the sanction, the employers were required to perform a verification process to ensure that all of their employees have the legal right to work in the United States. In theory, the sanction was intended to eliminate illegal immigration by penalizing employers for up to \$10,000 if caught hiring undocumented immigrants. However, in practice, by shifting the responsibility from the government to employers to determine the legality of the applicants, the act actually encouraged (and increased) the hiring of undocumented workers and granted employers more discipline power over them. As a result, the employers continued to profit from hiring illegal workers at a lower wage and substandard conditions, and, at the same time, they ensured worker's compliance by framing the employment as a "favor" to them or by reporting or threatening to report to the INS.⁹

⁹ "Treated Like Slaves": Donna Karan, Inc. Violates Women Workers' Human Rights. Center for Economic and Social Rights, 1999.

Violence on the bodies

Now I have addressed how urban administrators and Chinatown business leaders worked together to create a disciplined labor force. I will turn to discuss how discipline power functioned at the psychological level. In order for the “isolation” to function properly and to sustain, discipline power needed to create obedient Chinese workers who believed that working hard was the only option for survival and would eventually bring them rewards. Here, discipline power did not act like an external force. By creating desires, rather than suppressing them, discipline power has become an inner drive, indistinguishable from individual’s desires and motivation. This kind of power was subtle and hard to identify, yet it was extremely effective and far-reaching. This way, social relations of domination were easily masked and further rationalized as “voluntary” acts. Failed to recognize how discipline power works, one is likely to accept the common assumption that Chinese were docile workers willing to work in sweatshop conditions.

For the workers in Chinatown, “Chinatown as a commodity” imposed extreme violence on the working bodies. Working bodies were violently shaped to meet capital’s requirements: working on repetitive tasks at a high speed for long hours in confined spaces and, oftentimes, unsafe environment. Further, the lack of affordable housing in Chinatown means that people either endured crowded and below-standard rooms in old tenement buildings or lived in remote areas (such as Brooklyn or Queens) where rent was cheaper. The dependence on public transportation translates to limited housing choices and long distance commute to jobs and between jobs. Long hours of work and commute means no time to rest and no time for their families. Long-term stress and exhaustion led

to poor health, which were exacerbated by the lack of affordable medical care, thus increased the tendency of work-related injury (either accidents or occupational diseases). When working bodies were injured, deformed and disabled, they were often not given any chance for recovery. As a result of the state government's cost-cutting effort to create a business-friendly environment, injured workers were often delayed or denied workers' compensation benefits (including medical treatments and living expenses). Some of them were forced to go back to work in pain, while others became a burden for their families. In an urban environment where business profit was prioritized over workers' health and lives, workers were afraid to speak out or to complain because they faced the threat of the harsh consequences they and their families would have to suffer – losing jobs or being blacklisted.

While “Chinatown as a commodity” represented a unique form of disciplinary domination, Chinese workers were not alone in facing this kind of violent destruction on their bodies. The growing number of “working poor” – fully employed individuals or families whose incomes fall below the official poverty line – is alarming. It means that people were working hard but still unable to get by. Working on a minimum-wage job without benefits was hardly sufficient to live on, not to mention to raise a family. Minority and female workers suffered the most, since their colored and gendered bodies were mostly likely segregated in the impoverished zones and trapped into the dead-end low-paying jobs without future prospect. This kind of violence cannot be defined in a traditional sense. By pushing the bodies to the extreme, denying livable wages and medical care, depriving economic progress and human dignity, this kind of violence tortured and killed people slowly yet at a far higher rate. As S. L. Washburn rightly

points out, the social consequences of contemporary discrimination against communities of color are more severe than lynching: “a ghetto of hatred kills more surely than a concentration camp, because it kills by accepted custom, and it kills every day in the year” (Washburn, p131).

“Chinatown as a commodity” and the construction of Chinatown’s borders

Geographically, the thriving real estate development and business activities pushed Chinatown’s borders beyond its traditional core area, which had expanded northward and eastward into the predominantly Italian and Jewish neighborhoods. The driving force behind the expansion was led by Chinatown business leaders and landlords. The expansion of Chinatown’s borders did not simply mean the growth of the community, but the transformation of this area from a working class community into a business district for the rich. It not only displaced Chinese working class people but also low-income people in the Lower East Side. The expansion of Chinatown’s borders created antagonistic relations with its neighbors as many saw this a sign that Chinese were “taking over” their neighborhoods (NYT, 4/14/1996).

“Chinatown as a commodity” created a new set of openings in Chinatown’s borders as local administration and Chinatown business leaders and elite groups worked together to attract American tourism and to facilitate capital investment and business activities. However, these openings were limited to the affluent Chinese. For the working class people in Chinatown who were trapped in the sweatshops and had no say in community development, the borders remained tight and fixed and they continued to be isolated (or-re-isolated).

6.2 The construction of “Chineseness”: flexible, hybrid and fluid identities

The construction of “Chinatown as a commodity” gave the notion of “Chineseness” a new set of meanings. It was now associated with the rising power of Chinese capital, the expansion of Chinatown, and the various cultural artifacts in which traditions were re-created in contemporary forms (i.e. watches with Chairman Mao’s icon). In addition, to meet consumers’ fast-changing tastes, “Chineseness” had become more flexible, shifting and hybrid (i.e. mixture of old and new, or east and west). This kind of “Chineseness” was also associated with style and choice, because they were not imposed by westerners, but were imposed by the Chinese themselves. From a postmodernist perspective, the flexibility, hybridity and fluidity of the “Chineseness” would be regarded as a sign of liberation. I argue that it was only liberating for the middle class and the elite Chinese. For the working class people in Chinatown, the impacts were far from liberation. In this section, I want to discuss the racial politics of postmodernist and postcolonial theories that emerged since the 1980s and its political impacts with reference to the “isolation” of Chinatown.

It cannot be denied that postmodern and postcolonial theories have provided necessary radical critiques of the modern Euro-American domination including racism, colonialism and patriarchy. They challenged the binary logic of Self and Other and the universalizing discourses and structures of power by asserting the hybridity, fragmentation, and localization of social identities and cultures. However, in terms of politics of liberation, these perspectives are quite limited. I will suggest in this section that postmodern thinking and the politics of difference it advocates cannot adequately

address the disciplinary domination of “Chinatown as a commodity” because they remain fixated to the old form of domination thus fail to provide an effective strategy of liberation against the new enemy.

While postmodern and postcolonial theories encompass a wide-range of intellectual practices, generally they share a common rejection of two aspects of modernity. First, as Hardt & Negri point out, postmodern and postcolonial theories reject the dialectical form of modern domination, exclusion and command, and the universality of reason, which are one of the foundations white male European supremacy rests (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Postmodernists and postcolonialists contest the construction of binary divisions (such as white/non-white, colonizer/colonized, masculine/feminine), and the essentialism and homogeneity of identities these binaries imply, all of which, they argue, serve to maintain the systems of domination, including racism, colonialism and sexism. Contrary to the fixed, universalized, homogeneous modern subjects and the hierarchies they impose, postmodern and postcolonial theories insist on difference, hybridity and fluidity of social identities and cultures.

Secondly, the rejection of the totalizing structures of power and reason leads to the rejection of another aspect of modernity, that is, the humanist belief (in both liberal and Marxist versions) that humankind can transform society through the agency of its own efforts. As Kenan Malik notes, in postmodernist perspectives, colonialism, holocaust, facism, and other forms of western barbarism of the twentieth century are products rather than failures of modernism and the humanism it prescribes (Malik, 1996). The defeat of the student revolt of May 1968, the collapse of the socialist movements in the 1980s, and the demise of the Third World liberation movement all contributed to the

rejection of the revolutionary spirit of humanism and the belief that social transformation is not possible. The social and political solutions provided by postmodernists and postcolonialists are not the politics of equality of the 1960s liberation movement, but a politics of difference that seeks the affirmation of differences and hybridity as the means to subvert the binary structures of social hierarchy. bell hooks explains this change:

In the wake of the black power movement, after so many rebels were slaughtered and lost, many of these voices were silenced by a repressive state; others became inarticulate. It has become necessary to find new avenues to transmit the message of black liberation struggle, new ways to talk about racism and other politics of domination. Radical postmodern practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a 'politics of difference' should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people" (hooks, 1991, cited in Malik, p265).

While postmodern and postcolonial theories provide lucid critiques of the logics of modern Euro-American domination, their politics of difference offered limited solution to the contemporary reality under the new global power and to the disciplinary mode of "isolation." First of all, postmodern and postcolonial theories remain fixated in combating the old forms of domination. In Hardt & Negri's words, "they mistake today's real enemy" (p137). According to them, the assertion of hybridity, differences, and fluidity "is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions" (p142). The new form of power no longer operates through a dialectical and binary structure; it has no interests in establishing a center of power or fixed boundaries. In fact, the territorial boundaries and the racial binaries and hierarchies defined by imperialism are considered barriers to the new global order. "Empire," as Hardt & Negri put it, "manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command" (xii). There is no doubt about the antiracist, anti-colonialist and anti-capitalist intentions behind

postmodern and postcolonial theories. However, their failure to recognize the contemporary object of critique has rendered them ineffective. Worse, they are attacked from behind. As Hardt & Negri argue,

When we begin to consider the ideologies of corporate capital and the world market, it certainly appears that the postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists who advocate a politics of difference, fluidity, and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power. Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference (p138).

The celebration of difference and fluidity of postmodernist practice coincides with and supports, rather than challenges the ideology of corporate capital and the world market. The correspondence is reflected in the realm of production and consumption, as contemporary capitalism requires flexibility of individuals both as a producer and a consumer. In the process of production, the organizational structure has shifted from standardized mass production towards one with greater flexibility, such as just-in-time, small-batch production, subcontracting, and outsourcing. Through the process, the laboring bodies are constantly re-shaped to meet the changing needs. In the realm of consumption, fashion is mobilized to speed up the pace of commodity consumption not only in terms of clothing and products, but also in terms of recreation, culture and life style. In postmodern production and consumption, differences are not something needed to be repressed or homogenized, rather they are celebrated as opportunities and promoted as strategies.

Another limitation of postmodernist and postcolonialist theories as politics of liberation is their lack of concern in political economy. Because of their rejection of any translocal structure or metanarratives, postmodernist and postcolonialist theories tend to

avoid confronting the realities of political economy and structurally produced modes of exploitation and oppression. In addition, their insistence on local cultures and the priority they give to questions of identity production also shifts our attention away from the terrain of political economy to the terrain of culture. David Harvey points out the danger of the rhetoric of postmodernism:

Postmodernism has us accepting the reifications and partitionings, actually celebrating the activity of masking and cover-up, all the fetishisms of locality, place or social grouping, while denying that kind of meta-theory which can grasp the political-economic processes (money flows, international divisions of labor, financial markets, and the like) that are becoming ever more universalizing in their depth, intensity, reach and power over daily life (1990, 116-117)

There is more to this danger. The call for attention to the free play of differences around boundaries and the rejection of any determining social forms has given all kinds of difference equal weight, making it impossible to distinguish them politically. As Malik argues,

The problem arises, however, when all 'identities,' of whatever form, are treated as of equal social validity, so that personal lifestyle preferences such as "music styles," physical attributes such as 'disability' and social products such as 'race' and 'class' are seen as being of the same moment, while, at the same time, the determinate relations between identity and society are denied. The result is that fundamental social relations such as racial oppression become reduced to lifestyle choices (1996, p251).

Finally, we need to consider the class dimension of the postmodern and postcolonial discourses in order to fully understand their political implications and impacts. As Hardt & Negri remind us, "postmodern and postcolonial discourses are effective only in very specific geographical locations and among a certain class of the population" (p154). Their liberatory potential "only resonates with the situation of an elite population that enjoys certain rights, certain levels of wealth, and a certain position in the global hierarchy", such as the elite intellectual segment of Europe and North

America (including intellectuals from other parts of the world who participate in this circle) (p156). From the standpoint of many around the world, including the working people in Chinatown, hybridity, mobility and difference do not seem to be liberatory. For them, mobility is a source of suffering because they are often forced to leave their homes, families and lands by poverty or war. It also means the instability of work (i.e. migrant workers), the lack of a stable home, and the loss of a sense of belonging in foreign places. For the workers in Chinatown, the celebration of cultural differences is far from emancipatory. Rather, the fetishism of Chinese culture is a source of imprisonment and suffering. In the name of cultural preservation, Chinese culture and Chinatown became cultural goods produced for the purpose of exchange in the market. In the process, business interests are prioritized over human needs, and all the traces of exploitation and oppression are concealed.

Recognizing the limitations of postmodern and postcolonial theories does not mean a total rejection of the notion of hybridity and the free play of differences, or a return to uniformity and essence. Hardt & Negri provide a solution that takes postmodern liberation to another level. They write:

Difference, hybridity and mobility are not liberatory in themselves but neither are truth, purity, and stasis. The real revolutionary practice refers to the level of *production*. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but taking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixture is (p156).

Their argument points to a liberatory vision with regard to the “isolation” of Chinatown. For the working people in Chinatown, inclusion of differences, integration or “de-isolation” is not liberatory, rather, taking control of the production of “isolation” is. In the next section, I will focus on the work of Chinese Staff & Workers’ Association, a

workers' center in Chinatown. Its organizing work, I think, represents an attempt to take control of the production of "isolation." Its approach that focuses on organizing workers to fight for the control of one's time, health, and life has provided a special set of openings to change the politics of how the working bodies are constructed, destroyed and "isolated" under the discipline regime of "Chinatown as a commodity."

6.3 Struggles against "isolation": Chinese Staff & Workers' Association

"It felt like being in prison." In a demonstration in front of DKNY's midtown headquarter, Ms. Lai, speaking in Cantonese, told a large group of supporters about the abusive conditions in one of DKNY's factories. In a big room with rows and rows of machines where workers were monitored under three surveillance cameras, "we had to keep our heads down at all times once started working. No looking up. No talking to anyone." No phone calls, no drinking water, and the bathroom was often padlocked. Ms. Lai and other workers were now holding DKNY accountable for the abusive labor practices in its contractors' factory and for closing down the factory when workers spoke up for their rights.¹⁰

"We are treated like garbage." Ms. Liao, speaking through a translator, testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Safety, and Training in Washington D.C. about the inhuman conditions that were stripping of workers' health and dignity day by day. Like thousands of garment workers, Ms. Liao worked 14 hours a day, 6-7 days a week. The crushing hours destroyed her health and family lives and eventually left her permanently disabled after a near-fatal accident at work. Five years after she applied for Workers Compensation benefits, Ms. Liao still has not received a penny. Speaking slowly due to her brain injury induced by the accident, Ms. Liao questioned, "how could it be that in the United States it is legal for bosses to force us to work these overtime hours and fire us if we dare to refuse? In a country that prides itself on its human-rights record, countless working people are being killed slowly." She called on the Senate to take immediate action to address the long work hours and the delays in Workers' Compensation benefits, because "we [the injured workers] are sick and tired of being sick and tired" and "we want a fighting chance at a life of good health and dignity."¹¹

¹⁰ CSWA News, Winter 1998-1999 Volume 6-1.

¹¹ Ms. Liao's testimony. Hearing on "Workplace Safety and Health for Immigrant and Low Wage Workers" before Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Subcommittee on Employment, Safety, and Training (2002).

In their own stories, Ms. Lai and Ms. Liao articulated the ways in which the working bodies were dehumanized and destroyed under the discipline regime of “Chinatown as a commodity.” Like thousands of workers working in garment shops and restaurants, they were forced to endure deteriorating conditions and were gradually stripped of their health, lives and dignity. However, their stories did not just tell us how their bodies were destroyed; they also showed that they had stood up and fought back.

Both women were ordinary Chinese immigrant workers; yet, they demonstrated extraordinary courage, willing to risk their jobs or their safety to fight for their rights. Both of them came from China during the 1980s and 1990s, one from Hong Kong and the other from Kwongdong. Neither of them spoke English well or received education more than high school. Contrary to the public image of exploited immigrant workers, they did not work in some kind of underground factories; rather, both of them worked in unionized garment shops. Their courage and actions have demystified the common stereotypes of Chinese workers – docile workers who are willing to work hard and never complain. More importantly, these women were not fighting back alone. They were members of the Chinese Staff & Workers’ Association (CSWA), a community-based organization in New York City Chinatown that has been organizing workers to fight for justice both in the workplace and the community for more than 20 years.

I consider CSWA to be the leading force in the struggle against contemporary “isolation” of Chinatown. Based on my participation in CSWA, this section explores the ways in which “isolation” was conceptualized by this group, identifying its approaches to address the brutal violence imposed upon the working bodies, the foundation upon which the struggle was built, the visions and alternatives it provided and the new identity it

sought to create. As I will show, different from the liberation movements discussed in the previous chapters, the foundation of CSWA's struggle was not "peoplehood" – Chinese as a nation, race, and ethnic minority. Rather, it has built a movement based on the class category and its organizing efforts have moved beyond the boundaries defined by the notion of Chinese nation, race and ethnicity.¹²

Background

CSWA was founded in 1979 in New York City's Chinatown by a group of Chinese restaurant workers. Many of them were pioneers in unionizing some of the large-scale uptown Chinese restaurants to join the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union, local 69 (later renamed local 100). However, they were frustrated at the union's bureaucratic hierarchy and enraged at its racist practices against Chinese workers.¹³ In response, a group of both unionized and non-unionized workers formed CSWA to create a workers' space for experience sharing, mutual assistance and to address the specific needs facing Chinese immigrant workers. Initially established as a voluntary membership group, CSWA has grown into a direct membership organization of over 1,000 members, with three full-time staff organizers, a 17-member board of directors, and two workers' centers, one in Manhattan's Chinatown and one in Brooklyn's Sunset Park. Over the

¹² This does not mean that CSWA did not recognize racism as a form of oppression. CSWA acknowledged the racial inequality facing the working people in Chinatown, yet its philosophy and organizing strategy *emphasized* class exploitation as the foundation for all forms of oppression. Other organizations addressed class issues as well, but they tended to emphasize race or ethnicity as the foundation of their organizing strategies.

¹³ The base of Local 69 was in the large hotels and high-priced restaurants and had shown little interest in organizing Chinese restaurants which are generally small and scattered. As Peter Kwong reports, after the few Chinese restaurants joined the union, the union rarely enforced contract aggressively and allowed managements to get away with violation of labor standards (Kwong, 1987). Two of CSWA's original founders also recalled that the union was insensitive to Chinese workers' needs, and in some cases workers were being sold out by the union.

years, CSWA has become an important activist voice for social change in and beyond the Chinatown community. At the same time, it has maintained its worker-centered principle – processes of decision-making and planning were in the control of its membership – and has fiercely protected its independence. Politically, it did not seek cooperation with employers or rely on elected politicians; financially it has paid its way by combining financial resources from private foundations with workers' donation and membership dues.

Based on the worker's center model, CSWA defined itself as an independent community-based organization led by and for working people. Its constituency included "working people of all trades, incomes, and skill-levels, including the unemployed, retirees, youth, students, union and non-union workers" (CSWA website). By such definition, CSWA identified itself as engaging in and leading a new labor movement to address the new socio-economic realities that traditional labor movements had failed to respond. The new reality was characterized by steadily falling wages and widespread sweatshop conditions (i.e. long hours, unsafe environment) in which working people, especially women, people of color and immigrants suffered the most. CSWA was critical of the framework of traditional trade unionism – including its business nature, its racist and anti-immigrant tradition, its tendency of compromising, its increasing reliance on legislatures and electoral politics, and its narrow focus on economic gains rather than the development of its members. CSWA also challenged the more conventional binary divisions between employed and unemployed, citizens and immigrants, unionized and non-unionized, male and female, workplace and non-workplace, divisions that marked the limitation of the traditional labor movement and, in many ways, contributed to its

own decline. The ultimate goal of CSWA is “liberation for working people.” Liberation does not simply mean better wage or working condition. Rather, for CSWA, true liberation for workers means to “end exploitation of business, government and elite institutions” and to fundamentally change the class relations in the existing system (CSWA website).

The “isolation” of Chinatown was a modern form of slavery

CSWA regarded Chinatown as a modern form of slavery, where highly exploitive and often illegal labor practices were set up by Chinatown’s “unofficial feudalist government” comprised of the traditional organizations, bosses, business elites and organized crime structure, to protect and promote their shared interests. In Chinatown’s two main industries, restaurant and garment industry, employers’ anti-labor practices were common: failing to pay federal minimum wages and overtime, stealing waiters’ tips, nonpayment of wages, various forms of harassment, brutal authoritarian management, and using various tactics to threaten and retaliate against workers who complain or attempt to organize, including physical violence, blacklisting, and deportation. Using their influence in the media, bosses and the elite class effectively dominated public opinions in the Chinese community since most of the immigrant workers did not speak English and solely relied on Chinese press and radio to learn about news in China, in the community and about the “outside” world.

Such system could not be sustained without the help of the pro-business and anti-labor U.S. government at both federal and local levels. From various tax benefits for the rich, zoning regulations that encourage high-priced real estate development, to the

Employers' Sanction Act of IRCA (see 6.1), to the lack of labor law enforcement, government policies and practices have been geared to protect and promote business interests and to keep Chinese workers in their place.

Although unions are supposed to protect the rights of the workers, the experience of many workers in Chinatown tells a different story. The majority of the garment shops in Chinatown were unionized, represented by the local 23-25 of UNITE (the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees). However, faced with capital flight, plant closing and corporate downsizing, UNITE, like other unions, has lost its bargaining power and was preoccupied with making concessions with employers in order to keep the contracts. The union has conceded wages and working conditions, and has ceased to address the problems of workers, allowing pervasive violation of wages, hours and health and safety standards. Some critics have pointed out that the union acts more like an insurance company than a labor movement because it focuses on administering health fund and uses its health services to recruit and maintain its membership (Aronowitz, 1998). This argument is consistent with the experience of many workers. Many women decided to enter or remain in the garment industry, despite the falling wages and deteriorating conditions, simply because this was the only way they could obtain health insurance for the family. This kind of arrangement helped secure union's membership but left workers more vulnerable to employers' manipulation and abuses. In this respect, the union has lost the progressive elements it might have and helped isolate Chinese workers in the Chinatown slavery system.

Challenging “isolation:” CSWA’s strategies and activities

To break through “isolation,” that is, to challenge the ways in which workers are dehumanized and destroyed by the discipline power, CSWA’s strategies focus on three key elements.

(1) Prioritize Workers’ organizing

To change the ways in which workers are treated, CSWA saw workers’ organizing as the top priority. Its fundamental belief was that workers are the source of knowledge and energy because they have the first-hand experience of how the system works and they have been struggling on their own. Therefore, the task was not to teach workers how to survive but to connect individual struggles and transform them into a collective force to change the root causes of their problems. For CSWA organizers, such transformation required the process of learning and consciousness raising. Through organizing, organizers learned about workers’ struggles and the present conditions by listening to their needs and ideas. Organizers then summarized these ideas, which tended to be unsystematic, scattered and individually oriented. From there, they began to articulate a broader, more systemic perspective that connected individual needs to a more general and long-term goal. As these goals were put into actions, organizers engaged workers in various activities and helped them see the connections between their individual needs and the long-term goal of systemic change. Through this process, organizers and workers helped each other raise their thinking to a higher level.

In this regard, CSWA’s model differed from that of service providers or advocacy groups. When workers came in for help, they were not treated like victims or clients, but

were encouraged to take an active role to solve their problems. For instance, CSWA provided a labor rights clinic where workers could come in for help on issues related to employment, housing, or others. Workers were encouraged to join CSWA's campaigns to work with other members who were facing similar issues, to organize their co-workers, and to build a network of support to involve friends and families in their struggles. Through the campaigns, workers began to see that they were not the only ones facing the problem and that a long-term solution to their problem was to organize other people to change the system that has caused their problem in the first place.

Another important aspect of CSWA's organizing is that it fostered workers' leadership skills and potentials. The kind of leadership promoted by CSWA can be characterized as organic and action-based. That is, the leader of the group is not assigned or pre-determined but always emerges spontaneously through actions. Wah Lee, a former restaurant worker and now a staff organizer, described that when a committee was formed to focus on a particular case or issue, automatically someone will emerge as the leader and take on the responsibility. This does not mean that the leader does everything or makes important decisions for the group. Rather, she or he acted as the focal point for a group, responsible for updating the group on new information and involving the group in the process of decision making and planning. For instance, in one case in which a group of garment workers worked together to recover nonpayment of wages after the contractor closed down the factory, group leaders played an important role in coordinating this collective action. They articulated the members' demands, coordinated actions, and formulated the directions and strategies of the struggles, including meeting

with lawyers, mobilizing other workers' support, and forming a 24-hour shift outside of the factory to ensure that the boss would not remove the machines and disappear.

In addition to taking on the responsibility for their own cases, workers are also encouraged to take leadership roles at all levels of the organization, from organizing meetings, campaigns, to participating in the board of directors.

(2) Systemic transformation

In order to fundamentally change the ways in which workers were dehumanized and destroyed, CSWA also sought to transform the social relations and institutions that control them. I will highlight two unique aspects of the organization's strategies in this regard.

Improvement of wages vs. control of time

Different from most unions and labor rights groups, CSWA did not simply focus on the improvement of wages (i.e. minimum wage and living wage campaigns) and working conditions. For CSWA, fighting for higher wages and better working conditions was important, however, its impact was limited to certain groups of workers (those who make just above minimum wage) and would not fundamentally change the ways in which workers were exploited by the system. Instead, CSWA focused on fighting for the control of time. To have more control of time means two things. In the short term, it means to work for shorter hours while still being able to live on and to have the right to reject overtime without the threat of being fired. In the long term, the control of time means the right to control one's health and life. With the right to control their time, workers will have more control over the speed of their work and to have more free time for themselves

and their families. In addition to protecting physical health, the right control time will give workers the opportunity for social and psychological development because they will have more time to participate in the cultural and political activities outside of factories.

Fighting for the control of time will bring in a fundamental change in terms of how workers are treated in the process of capital accumulation. First, it addresses one of the most dramatic forms of violence on the working bodies – long hours and its destruction to workers' families and lives. Moreover, it challenges the commonly accepted notion that workers are simply tools for capitalist accumulation and that work is the most important thing in their lives. To fight for the control of time is to fight for recognition that workers are equal members of the civil society, entitled to and capable of participating in various social, cultural and political activities. Therefore, the control of time is the necessary condition for workers to reclaim their humanity.

To fight for more control of time, CSWA's campaigns pushed for stronger legislation that would give workers the rights to reject overtime and advocated the right to 40-hour workweek at a livable wage. In addition, CSWA took a step further to challenge the traditional definition of work and to fight for recognition of various forms of unpaid labor, such as childcare and housework, labor that were done outside of workplace and mostly performed by women. I will discuss this as the second unique aspect of CSWA's organizing strategies.

Re-definition of work

For CSWA, the narrow scope of the traditional industrial organizing model which considers only labor done inside the workplace as work has failed to provide an effective approach for systemic change. The reality in Chinatown and in other low-income

communities revealed that capitalist exploitation was not limited to factories or workplace but has expanded to other aspects of social life. The employed, injured workers, mothers, and caretakers, although they did not fit into the traditional definition of worker, were subjected to the same exploitation and face similar issues, such as poverty, long hours of work, poor health, and displacement. In addition, the narrow definition of work continued to subject women to double exploitation as they continued to work simultaneously as wage earners and as caretakers in the families.

To confront these issues, CSWA's organizing strategy focused on multiple fronts to include people who work inside and outside of the workplace, including unemployed, retirees, injured workers, students and workers of all trades. At the same time, the organization also sought to change the values of society, fighting to expand the notion of work and workers. It called attention to various forms of unpaid and unrecognized labor that were done outside the workplace and insisted that they were equally valuable, if not more important, to our society, thus should be considered as work and be compensated.

(3) Building a movement based on common grounds

CSWA's organizing strategy focused on "common grounds." At the individual level, it encouraged workers to see their problems not in terms of individual cases, but as common problems facing other people. Workers were organized and mobilized through committees and campaigns, which provided an opportunity to share experiences and to build a network of support. At the organizational level, CSWA rejected the conventional categories, such as race, gender, trade, and employed/unemployed, categories that had divided and marginalized working people. Instead of fighting for the rights of a specific

group, such as Chinese workers or immigrant workers, CSWA fought for the shared interests of all working people. In addition to organizing in the Chinatown community, CSWA also worked to build coalitions with other groups from different low-income communities that were confronted with similar issues.

The Workplace Health & Safety Campaign provides an example of how a broad-based movement can be built on a common issue. The campaign was launched in 1996 by a group of injured garment women workers who suffered unjust treatments by the Worker's Compensation Board (WCB). While the Campaign seemed to address a specific issue facing injured workers, over the years it has developed to become a multi-trade, multi-racial and multi-generational movement involving both injured and not-yet injured workers in and beyond Chinatown. The common concern that brought all these people together was health. First, from the experience of injured workers, the campaign called attention to the excessively long hours that have caused the growing rate of occupation health problems and repetitive stress disorder in the Chinatown community. This enabled the campaign to mobilize not-yet injured workers because they were concerned that if they continued to work long hours they would be facing the same issue. Through workers' organizing and outreach efforts, the campaign also found that thousands of injured workers from other ethnic communities and trades experienced the same abusive treatments and delays from the WCB. In addition, since work related injuries had the most direct impacts on the families, the campaign also involved the families of injured workers to participate in the struggle.

Breaking through “isolation” – CSWA’s four phases of development

Having laid out some of the key elements of CSWA’s strategies, I will now consider some of CSWA’s success in breaking through “isolation.” My analysis will focus on four distinct phases of the organization’s development. While each phase was a response to new challenges facing workers in the Chinatown community, each of them presented a special set of openings to change the ways in which workers were dehumanized and destroyed by “disciplinary isolation.”

The **first phase** of CSWA’s development was characterized by its focus on economic justice through workplace organizing. During this period, CSWA supported and organized workers to fight against unfair and abusive labor practices in Chinatown’s fast growing restaurant industry. The main strategy was to help individual shops unionize. The goal was two fold: to improve the working conditions for restaurant workers and to create independent unions as an alternative organizing model without traditional unions’ bureaucracy and hierarchy. Despite its limited resources and capacity at the time (no full-time staff organizer), and constant threat from the employers (in 1981 CSWA’s East Broadway office was burned down), CSWA successfully helped form the first and only independent union in Chinatown and played an important role in several other restaurants’ unionizing process.

CSWA’s first campaign deserves more attention here because workers’ militancy and their subsequent victory were revolutionary in the Chinatown community and created lasting impacts. The Campaign supported workers at Silver Palace, the largest restaurant in Chinatown, who were fired because they protested management’s demands for additional shares of waiters’ tips. Fired workers, CSWA members, and supporters

organized a daily picket outside the restaurant. The picket line severely damaged the restaurant's business and the management finally capitulated. Strikers got their jobs back, management's demands for more shares of tips were withdrawn, and, more importantly, workers established Chinatown's first and only independent union - the 318 Restaurant Workers' Union, winning basic terms and benefits that were common to others, but never happened in the Chinatown community, such as a minimum wage, 40-hour workweek, overtime pay, health benefits and the rights to collective bargaining. The impact of this success cannot be overestimated. It inspired and mobilized workers to take action against management's abuse, and triggered a wave of unionizing in Chinatown's restaurant industry. It also helped improve the overall working condition for restaurants because employers were pressured to do so in order to avoid strikes and unionization (Kwong, 1987).

In the mid-1980s, the CSWA's efforts in restaurant unionizing experienced setbacks. The main cause was the rising real estate market, which drove many small businesses, including those newly unionized restaurants, out of business because they could not afford the soaring rent. As a result, low-income workers, who lost their jobs and could not afford to live in Chinatown, were forced to leave the community in which they worked and lived. In response to this new challenge, CSWA shifted its focus from economic justice to environmental justice issues. This marked the **second phase** of CSWA's development, in which fighting for the control over living space was the main focus.

The main objective during this period was to stop the trend of displacement which uprooted low-income workers from their community as landlords, private developers and

city planning officials worked together to “upgrade” Chinatown by constructing high-rise, high-priced apartments and office buildings to accommodate the wealthy. CSWA mobilized low-income workers and joined other organized resistance in the Lower East Side not only to address the more immediate problems such as tenet harassment, illegal evictions, housing shortage, but also to develop preventive strategies to ensure working people’s voice to be included in the local planning issues. For instance, in 1985, CSWA led a coalition called the Concerned Committee of the Chung Park Project to protest against the exclusive domination of Chinese elite and business leaders in the planning board of a federal-funded community project (on Walker Street).¹⁴ As a result of CSWA’s effort, the planning board of the Project was forced to include a workers’ representative and to designate certain amount of the space for community use, including a daycare center, health clinics, and spaces for small businesses. In addition to using traditional forms of resistance such as demonstration to defend the community from threatened development (such as luxury apartments and OTB), CSWA has also successfully organized low in-come workers in homesteading and land trust in the Lower East Side.

This kind of struggle over how space should be used and by whom in the community required the resistance groups not only to organize defensive actions, but also to develop a resistance discourse that could counteract the threatened development and legitimize their right to control the uses of space. For CSWA, the strategy was to redefine

¹⁴ The planning board of Chung Park Project was controlled by the elite and business leaders representing the Chinatown Planning Council and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association who had planned to have large banks and corporations to occupy the ground floor and using the practice of “key money” which demanded cash down payment from prospective commercial tenants to exclude small businesses from the site (Lin, 1998).

Chinatown as working class community, rather than a homogenous ethnic community. This enabled CSWA to challenge the rosy picture of “community growth” (business expansion and the development of luxury buildings) and to connect the displacement of working class people in Chinatown to the displacement issues facing other low-income residents in the adjacent Lower East Side neighborhoods.

CSWA took a step further, introducing an environmentalist framework to reframe displacement. In 1984, CSWA filed a lawsuit against the City of New York for granting the construction of a luxury condominium (the Henry Street Tower) and other possible developments in Chinatown. It argued that people, like natural elements such as water, land and air, were part of the environment, thus displacement of people was a form of environmental damage. CSWA won the case in 1986. The victory set a new precedent in advancing the notion of displacement and has wide-ranging legal implications for community groups which sought to preserve neighborhoods from threatened development (Lin, 1998). The innovative concept that people are part of the environment introduced a new possibility to challenge the ways in which the working bodies were manipulated and destroyed in the process of accumulation of capital.

During the late 1980s, work conditions deteriorated, as employers’ discipline power were further enhanced by the passage of the Employers’ Sanction Act (see 6.1), which allowed them to use undocumented immigrant workers as a tool to increase the rate of exploitation. In response, CSWA expanded its organizing activities from single to multiple industries, including restaurant, garment, construction and other industries. This was the **third phase** of CSWA’s development, which focused on organizing workers from all trades to fight for economic justice.

In the garment industry, CSWA launched the Campaign Against Nonpayment of Wages in the early 1990s to hold both contractors and manufacturers accountable for the wage violations of the contractors. The Campaign was a success. Workers' actions not only helped them recover the owed wages (over the years, CSWA has helped workers recover more than two million dollars of backwages), put the unlawful bosses in jail, but also inspired other exploited workers to come forward. Their organizing also brought national attention to U.S. domestic sweatshop conditions, leading to the first congressional hearing on the situations. In addition, the Campaign helped introduce a set of bills at the State Assembly that would make nonpayment of wages a felony and garment manufacturers liable for their contractors' violations.¹⁵

During the same period, the Campaign Against Nonpayment of Wages also reached to workers in the restaurant industry. CSWA organized workers and supporters to fight against illegal labor practices in several large-scale restaurants, including the Silver Palace Restaurant (1993) and Jing Fong (1995). The Campaign successfully helped workers recover back wages and improve their working conditions in individual restaurants. In addition, workers' victorious organizing effort set an example in the community and beyond and led to the creation of a special task force by the U.S. Labor Department. As a result, many Chinatown employers began to comply with the law.

In the construction industry, which has been traditionally dominated by white male workers, CSWA organized Chinese construction workers to fight against the discriminatory practices on various major construction sites in the community. It helped form the Chinese Construction Workers' Association (1991) and has won employment

¹⁵ Manufacturers' accountability is an important protection for the workers because, oftentimes, the unlawful contractors closed down the factories and ran off

opportunities for women and people of color at many worksites, including the construction of the \$500 million federally-funded project at Foley Square (1992).

In 1996, CSWA launched the Workplace Health and Safety Campaign, which marked the beginning of the **forth phase** of the organization's development. Focusing on the devastating impacts of working long hours on workers' health, families and lives, the Campaign represented a new approach to fight for the control of the working bodies because it moved beyond fighting for economic justice in the workplace to fighting for the control of time.

The transition was a combined result of two important developments, both of which helped reshape the organization's direction and approaches. The first development was the emergence of women's leadership through garment workers' organizing in the previous years. The Campaign Against Nonpayment of Wages in the garment industry gave rise to a group of strong women organizers and leaders who became part of the core leadership body in the organization. From their experiences working as wagedworkers, mothers, and caregivers, women workers brought attention to the extreme violence imposed upon women's bodies by the sweatshop system. The brutal long hours in the factories (10-12 hours a day, 6-7 days a week is common) plus the unrecognized and unpaid labor at home have destroyed not only their health, but also their family relations and their overall quality of life. Long-term exhaustion and stress left many women injured; yet many of them continued working until they were completely disabled. Women's experiences brought attention to the limitations of the traditional workplace organizing model that failed to address the devastating impacts of long hour work, including work that was done inside and outside the workplace.

The second development was the involvement of youth and students in the organization. The young generation not only brought in energy and passion to CSWA but also became an important source of support for worker's struggles (for instance, the young people have played an important role in supporting New Silver Palace workers' struggles in the past five years). The involvement of this group who did not fit into the traditional category of workers presented new challenges to CSWA. It raised questions on how to organize people from diverse backgrounds into a collective struggle. What role did students and youth play in the worker's movement? While fighting for better wages and working conditions was important, it only served immediate interests of a particular group (i.e. garment and restaurant workers) and did not provide a long-term goal that could be identified by different groups of people (i.e. students, office workers, unemployed).

Through continuous learning and discussion with workers, CSWA began to formulate its new direction – to fight for the control of time. Launched in 1996, the Workplace Health and Safety Campaign sought to address the increasing incidents of work-related injuries, deteriorating health of workers and the impacts on their families and their lives. The campaign focused on two main objectives: (a) to demand a complete overhaul of New York State's Workers' Compensation system whose failure to compensate injured workers with immediate medical care and livable benefits¹⁶ was responsible for destroying workers' health and lives; and (b) to take preventive measures against work-related injuries and health problems by demanding strong legislation that

¹⁶ It is common for injured workers to wait for six to ten years for the Workers' Compensation Board to decide whether or not they will receive benefits and emergency medical treatments. When they are compensated, they often receive as little as \$40 a week. Many injured workers are forced to go back to work; many disabled workers lost their means of livelihood, their apartments, or even their families.

would give workers the right to refuse working beyond 40 hours per week. without the threat of being fired.

To achieve these objectives, CSWA not only organized workers within the Chinese community but also built coalitions with workers in other communities since the Chinese were not the only group facing these debilitating conditions. Two New York based workers' centers, Workers' Awaaz and National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS), joined CSWA to launch a Campaign – *It's About TIME! A Campaign for Worker's Health*. The three groups have brought together both injured and not-yet injured workers from various racial backgrounds who were now leading a state-wide movement to expose and change the inhumane conditions of the Workers Compensation System and the sweatshop conditions that were slowly stripping of their health and lives.

In addition to organizing at the community level, the Campaign has pushed elected officials to introduce a set of bills that would ensure injured workers to receive immediate medical care and compensations consistent with federal or state minimum wage standard, and give workers the right to refuse overtime without employers' retaliation (the bill, A09270, is currently awaiting Assembly vote). To further draw national and international attention to the deplorable conditions workers in New York State endured, the Campaign reframed the traditionally defined domestic labor issues as international human rights issues. In collaboration with the NYU Immigrant Rights Clinic, injured workers and the organizations filed a petition through the Mexico government against the State of New York, the New York Workers' Compensation Board and the U.S. government for violating the labor-side agreement to the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)¹⁷, which mandates each signatory nation to provide timely and adequate compensation for occupational injuries and illnesses and to implement labor standards to minimize the causes of occupational injuries and illnesses.¹⁸

The Campaign has built a solid base in the Chinese community, bringing together injured workers and their families, who otherwise had no one to turn to. Since its inception, the campaign has made considerable achievements. It has forced the Workers' Compensation Board to provide translators in the hearings for injured workers who did not speak English and to speed up some of the cases. In February 2002, injured workers from the Campaign were invited to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Safety, and Training¹⁹ on the lack of accountability of the U.S. government on workers' health and safety. Workers' Compensation Board has also made some token changes, speeding up the cases for those who participated in the petition against the Board.

While fighting for the reform of the Workers' Compensation system and the legislation that would stop mandatory overtime, CSWA recognized that these improvements were only the first steps towards a true liberation of the working people. In addition to the Campaign for Workers' Health and Safety, the organization has developed a series of campaigns, such as the right to 40-hour workweek campaign, and Ain't I a woman Campaign (the Campaign against sweatshops), not only to liberate workers from employers' control, but also to fight for the control of their time, health and lives.

¹⁷ The North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC).

¹⁸ Petition on Labor Law Matters Arising in the United States, submitted to the National Administrative Office (NAO) of Mexico under the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC).

¹⁹ Hearing on "Workplace Safety and Health for Immigrant and Low Wage Workers" before Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Subcommittee on Employment, Safety, and Training.

The concept of time reconsidered

From fighting for economic justice, to environmental justice, to workers' health and safety, CSWA has provided special sets of openings to fight for control of the working bodies. First, the organization has helped transform the docile bodies into political subjects, by opening up potential leadership roles for Chinese workers, including male, female, employed, unemployed, and injured, to alter bodily practices and to claim basic economic rights, social rights and human rights. Secondly, CSWA has made considerable achievement in changing the social relations and practices that dehumanized and destroyed the working bodies. Moreover, by focusing on the common concern of health and the control of time, CSWA has presented a possibility for a broad-based movement for social change.

I will further argue that the focus on the control over time and health provided a holistic approach that integrates economic justice and environmental justice in an alternative temporal and spatial frame. Here, I borrow two concepts of time distinguished by Manuel Castells (1997): clock time and cosmological time. Clock time refers to the chronological sequencing of events, and a predetermined schedule that disciplines human behavior according to institutionalized measurements. The fact that we work eight hours a day (or more) from nine to five (or some erratic hours), and eat and rest (or not) is regulated by the clock time under capitalist mode of production. There is another form of temporality, one that adopts a macro perspective, looking at human and environment in a long-term, evolutionary perspective. Castells uses cosmological time, or glacial time, to characterize the environmental movement that applies a holistic notion of integration between humans and nature. He argues, "to emerge ourselves with our cosmological self

we need first to change the notion of time, to feel “glacial time” running through our lives, to sense the energy of stars flowing in our blood, and to assume the rives of our thoughts endlessly merging in the boundless oceans of multiformed living matter” (Castells, p125-126). This does not mean fetishizing nature, rather its is a consideration that human experience is grounded in the historically existing communities. Castell continues, “in very direct, personal terms, glacial time means to measure our life by the life of our children, and of the children of the children of our children” (Castells, p126).

I propose to use the two concepts of time to consider CSWA’s work in the struggle against “Chinatown as a commodity.” The search for controlling *clock time* could be seen an individualistic approach operating in a short-term time frame. The struggle for economic justice, including improvement in wage, hour and safety conditions, falls in to this temporal form. From the glacial time perspective, the search for control of time means to address the overall well-being of the workers in a collective and long-term time frame. In this sense, CSWA has introduced a glacial time perspective in the struggle against “isolation.” The struggle to control the working bodies is not simply to change bodily practices for immediate individual gains, but for a long-term improvement in terms of health, quality of life, and the welfare of our future generations because all of these are part of the historically existing community where they live and work.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this dissertation, I indicated that there were two main objectives of this study. One was to use historical materials to construct a theoretical framework for the “isolation” of Chinatown in order to understand the present reality. The other was to use this understanding to inform and to engage in the struggles for social change in the present. In the Conclusion, I would like to reflect on this study in reference to these two objectives. First, I will summarize what I have learned from the historical study of “isolation.” From that, I will begin to layout what I think a critical response to “isolation” would be. Finally, I will discuss some of the theoretical implications of the study in Psychology.

Contemporary “isolation” is a form of discipline domination, which is different from the old “colonial domination.”

In the old form, “colonial isolation,” domination was marked by explicit repression, conquest and exclusion, by which Chinatown was organized in such a way as to benefit the socio-political and economic interests of American elites. “Colonial isolation” was exercised in the form of indirect control. It relied on and supported the dominance of the fraternal organizations (Chapter 2) and the dominance of the KMT (Chapter 3) in Chinatown to control the Chinese community.

In contrast, in the contemporary form of “isolation,” explicit exclusions and discrimination against the Chinese were eliminated. Discipline power did not function like an external force that dictated individuals’ practices, or depended on a local authority to control the community. Rather, the new form of control was realized through cultural reproduction. By celebrating cultural differences and promoting Chinese culture as a

good culture, discipline power encouraged conformity within the Chinese community and continued to maintain its isolation. In this process, discipline power functioned like an inner drive and became part of individual's desires and will. Individuals were compelled to conform, to enact the practices and to discipline themselves. "Model minority" was an example (Chapter 5). By establishing individual success of Asian Americans as the norm, discipline power urged every Chinese, and other minority groups, to follow this norm. This way, discipline power effectively assured conformity within the Chinese community, and continued to maintain the division and hierarchy between minority groups.

"Chinatown as a commodity" represented the latest form of "disciplinary isolation" (Chapter 6). Incorporated into the network of production and consumption, Chinese workers were shaped, reshaped and disciplined into docile bodies to meet capital's needs. Here discipline power took two forms. Firstly, both local administrations and Chinatown business leaders worked together to discipline the Chinese labor force with the aim to develop Chinatown into a commodity which would benefit New York City's political economy. Secondly, using "hardworking" as the norm and material consumption as rewards, discipline power became an inner compulsion and compelled the workers to work harder and to endure deteriorating work conditions so that they would receive better rewards. "Discipline isolation" created devastating impacts on the working class people in Chinatown. It imposed extreme violence on the working bodies, stripping off their health, life chances, and human dignity.

"Disciplinary isolation" also produced different subjectivities. The subjectivities produced by "colonial isolation" were based on the colonial binary, in which the Chinese

were regarded as foreign, undesirable, thus needed to be excluded. In contrast, “disciplinary isolation” included the Chinese, and further differentiated and marginalized them in cultural terms. The Chinese were regarded as a model minority, whose culture made them different from other minority groups. It follows that the differences were to be celebrated and preserved.

“Isolation” created different impacts on different classes

Although “isolation” is a form of American racial domination on the Chinese people, it is important to note that “isolation” has created different impacts on different classes in the Chinatown community. Over the course of time, different forms of “isolation” has facilitated a polarized development in the Chinatown community, intensifying the elite control of the community and increasing the vulnerability of the working class people. I also conclude that the more oppressive American domination was, the more powerful the Chinese elite class became, and the more vulnerable, silenced and isolated the working class people became.

The class dimension is important with regard to the construction of Chinatown’s borders. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, while Chinatown’s borders were defined in racial terms, they had different meanings and impacts on different classes. During the period of “colonial isolation,” the racially defined borders were enforced and maintained through the dominance of the elite and the KMT in Chinatown, which kept the Chinese workers in their place: geographically and socially confined within Chinatown and remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy. During the period of “disciplinary isolation,” Chinatown’s borders became more open and flexible and were

no longer defined by the colonial racial binaries or by the discriminatory laws. Instead, the borders were now maintained by “voluntary” conformity of individuals in the name of cultural preservation. Although the transformation of Chinatown’s borders created a new set of openings, they only applied to the elite and middle class Chinese. For them, Chinatown’s borders became less limiting as they moved to the suburbs, sent their children to elite colleges and participated in American labor market. Chinatown business leaders and elite further promoted the opening of Chinatown’s borders as a means to attract American tourists and to facilitate capital investment and business activities. However, for working class people in Chinatown, Chinatown’s borders remained closed. The powerful alliance between local administrations and Chinatown business leaders continued to exclude them from the political economy of American society. At the same time, the inequalities they were still facing were masked by the discourse of “model minority.”

New racism

“Disciplinary isolation” entails a different racial ideology, in which “Chineseness” was transformed from a racial to a cultural category. This transformation does not mean the end of racial hierarchy, but that the hierarchy was reconstituted in a cultural form. The prominence of “race,” along with the binary divisions and hierarchy it implied, gave way to “culture,” which became an important organizing idea in explaining human differences. Although biological accounts of racial hierarchy was dismissed, the idea of division and hierarchy remained and were only reconstituted. Instead of insoluble biological heredity, there were insurmountable cultural differences. There was no

superiority in terms of peoples, but only superiority in terms of culture. A good culture is one that appreciates and promotes individual achievement, work ethics and traditional family values, qualities that are essential to capitalist development. In this sense, Chinese culture was regarded as a good culture and the Chinese became a model minority because they possessed a good cultural heritage.

A closer examination of the categories of race and ethnicity in Western thought reveals that both categories are products and promoters of the modern capitalist system. Both concepts rest on one of the basic structural features of the capitalist world-economy (Wallerstein, 1991). The concept of race emerged primarily as a mode of expressing and sustaining the division of labor between the core (Western capitalist countries) and periphery (their colonies). From its inception, race implies and imposes European domination over other parts of the world (Chapter 1). The concept of ethnicity, that is, the minority group, is linked to the degree of social power within a given state's boundary, serving to organize the division of labor within a state economy. My analysis shows that the shift from "race" to "culture" was far from radical break from the colonial racial hierarchy. Rather it functioned to maintain the racial inequalities created by colonialism, only under a different guise. This was a new form of racism – racism without races.

The politics of identity is no longer an effective defense weapon against "disciplinary isolation"

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown that, in different historical periods, the Chinese had used the concepts of Chinese race, nation and ethnicity as a defense weapon in the struggle against "isolation" (i.e. Chinese racial nationalism and Asian American ethnic identity). Although these concepts provided a powerful tool to form a unified line

of defense against American domination, the “isolation” we are facing today requires a new strategy of defense. The subaltern nationalism and ethnic identities are powerful weapons only in a context where domination is realized through conquest, exclusion and the construction of racial binaries. The structure and logics of contemporary “disciplinary isolation” are immune to the weapons of the politics of racial and cultural identities. In fact, “disciplinary isolation” celebrates cultural differences. It relies on the affirmation of cultural identities to promote voluntary conformity within an ethnic group and, at the same time, to perpetuate and legitimize the existing social hierarchy. “Model minority” and “Chinatown as a commodity” are clear examples. The politics of identity, that is, the political struggles which use racial or ethnic identities as the foundation (i.e. The Asian American movement), once a powerful weapon of liberation for the subordinated groups, has gradually lost its effectiveness in the face of the new enemy. For the working class people in Chinatown, the kind of politics that emphasizes racial and ethnic differences was not liberating at all. Instead, it fitted well into the logic of discipline power, helping reinforce the “isolation” of Chinatown.

Then, what does a critical response to contemporary “isolation” look like? How do we challenge contemporary “disciplinary isolation,” when discipline power rejects racial binaries and celebrates cultural differences, when it includes the Chinese and regards them as the model minority, when it functions as an inner drive and becomes part of our desire and will? How to be critical of the concepts of race and ethnicity while engaging in the struggles for racial equality? Do we have to assert a racial (or ethnic) identity in order to achieve racial equality? Since “isolation” has different meanings and

created different impacts on different classes of Chinese, what are the implications to the struggles against “isolation”?

To answer these questions, I will begin with what I think is not a solution to contemporary “isolation.” “De-isolation” or integration is not the solution to contemporary “isolation.” For the working people in Chinatown, “de-isolation” means being forced out of the community where they live and work. “De-isolation” will not eliminate “isolation,” but only re-isolates the Chinese working people in other places and subjects them to the same kind of exploitative conditions (the growth of sweatshops in Sunset Park, Brooklyn is an example). In addition, in recent years, “de-isolation” has been used by various groups as a disguise for gentrification – a plan to transform Chinatown from a working class community to a financial, high-tech district. For instance, a group which I called “Silicon Alley supporters” saw the economic potential of making Chinatown the next stop of New York’s fertile Silicon Alley and actively sought to make it happen. Among them was a group of real estate companies, lead by Bill Lam of Longines Realty Inc., which formed a coalition called SoHo East to lobby with the city to designate part of Chinatown as a high-tech center. Another big Silicon Alley supporter was the Asian American Business Development Center, a non-profit organization dedicated to provide technical assistance to improve the management skills of Asian American business owners and to help them access potential markets outside the confines of their ethnic communities. Concerned about the plight of Chinatown in the midst of the city’s biggest economic boom during the late 1990s, AABDC believed that modernizing Chinatown business through Internet technology will help restore the community’s economic prosperity. “Bridging the digital divide” was the program designed to advance

the use of technology in Chinatown business in order to close the digital gap between Chinatown and the rest of the Asian American communities (AABDC website, 2001).

The support for Silicon Alley does not only come from “evil” business groups and real estate corporate. David Chen, executive director of the Chinese American Planning Council, a non-profit organization in Chinatown providing social services (e.g. health care, senior care and housing) for low-income population in the Chinatown community, was also a vocal supporter. Seeing development as a good thing for poor communities like Chinatown, Chen welcomed the change. He articulated his support, “we see an opportunity for Chinatown to attract a new industry, to diversify itself, I don’t see why this community has to be sweatshops and low-skilled workers all the time” (). In the name of promoting Chinese American businesses and facilitating community growth, such plan was celebrated as the realization of the American dream and met with little criticism from mainstream society.

This does not suggest that I think “isolation” is more desirable. We should not be forced to choose between “isolation” and “de-isolation.” To take Hardt & Negri’s argument to the context of Chinatown, I argue that “de-isolation” is not liberatory in itself, nor is “isolation”; rather, taking control over the production of “isolation” or “de-isolation” will be a true liberation for the working people who are “isolated.” The first step towards this kind of liberation is to confront the various forms of violence imposed upon the working bodies in the process of making Chinatown a commodity. In this regard, Chinese Staff & Workers’ Association represents a radical force that has been leading the struggle to change the ways in which working bodies are treated in the workplace and in the community. CSWA has helped transform the exhausted, injured,

deformed and docile bodies into political subjects, who are now fighting to gain more control of their own bodies and to claim the basic economic rights and human dignity.

The struggle for more control of the working bodies calls for a broad-based workers' movement located in production and reproduction simultaneously. This means to include all kinds of labor that were exploited by capital, that is, labor which produces and reproduces social life, including labor outside the wage system. Clearly, the politics of liberation for the working people cannot rely on the assertion of a racial or an ethnic identity. Rather, it calls for a politics that moves beyond racial and ethnic categories. Conceptually, it means to re-define Chinatown as a working class community, rather than a homogeneous racial or ethnic community. This would mean to consider Chinatown as part of the low-income communities of the Lower East Side. In practice, this means to form a broad-based movement that moves beyond Chinatown's boundaries. This movement would be based on shared concerns and interests among the working people in the Lower East Side.

There has been a long history of multi-racial activism in the area in which Asians, Latinos, African Americans and other low-income groups have worked together on issues of shared concern. In the past, multi-racial coalitions have been formed to demand decent and affordable housing, to resist displacement, and to fight for economic justice, health care, and other issues in the Lower East Side. For instance, during the New York City redistricting process (1990-1991), residents in the Lower East Side formed a coalition called Lower East Side for a Multi-racial District, which proposed to create a majority Latino, Asian American, and African American district based on the needs and interests of the working class residents (Saito, 2001). The Lower Manhattan Anti-Displacement

Coalition is a current example. Low-income residents and grassroots organizations in the Lower East Side worked together to stop gentrification and to promote sustainable development. To return to the question, do we have to assert a racial identity in order to achieve racial equality? My answer to that is not necessarily. A multi-racial collective activism based on shared interests of the low-income communities in the Lower East Side presents a more powerful politics of liberation.

To take control over the production of “isolation” (or “de-isolation”) also entails a reformation of the system. The political demands put out by CSWA, such as 40 hour/week at a livable wage, recognition of and compensation for labor outside wage system, present a concrete proposal. This means that we have to transform some fundamental aspects of social rights in this country, to establish health care, unemployment, retirement benefits and workers’ compensation as guaranteed social rights for all, rather than benefits derived from employment. As Kessler-Harris has indicated, when these social rights vital for survival are guaranteed as basic rights for all, workers will be less dependent on the employers (Kessler-Harris, 2002). It would empower workers to turn down the most underpaid and exploitative jobs, to refuse to work long hours. Most importantly, workers will be willing to take the risk of speaking out and organizing, because they know that even if they were fired, they and their families could survive with some level of safety and dignity.

Some would argue such proposal that does not assert a racial identity would eventually dissolve the historic Chinatown community. I suggest the contrary. But we need to rethink the notion of preservation. The preservation of Chinatown should not be about preserving “Chineseness” per se, which, as I have shown, has become a disguise to

prioritize business interests over the welfare of the people. Rather, preservation should be a genuine concern for the people and their relation to the historically existing community. In this regard, to preserve the historic Chinatown community means to commit to a long-term improvement in terms of health, quality of life, and the welfare of the future generations for the people who live and work in this community.

Theoretical implications

Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to show that the “isolation” of Chinatown is a dynamic mechanism constituted differently across time. Using Lefebvre’s spatial framework, I conceptualize “isolation” as constructed through three spatial elements – material spatial practices, dominant groups’ conceptions of Chinatown, and the experiences of the dominated groups in Chinatown. By conceptualizing “isolation” this way, I have demonstrated that “isolation” is a socially and historically produced process through which social relations of power and individual psychology were mutually constituted. This approach also provides a different method to study identity and subjectivity, one that moves away from an individualistic and cultural determinist perspective toward understanding them as socially and historically produced phenomenon. As I have shown, the subjectivities of the Chinese were constituted through the interplay of a variety of socio-political and economic forces and they changed historically. Yet subjectivities and identities are not simply conditioned by the socio-political and historical structures. My study of the local struggles shows that each group has actively challenged the dominant conceptions imposed on them. Through their

struggles, they have redefined what “Chineseness” was and created new Chinese identities.

The attempt to move away from individualistic perspective to a social-historical one has a long tradition in Psychology. Socio-historical theories have argued that human subjectivities are embedded in social-cultural contexts and are dialectically constituted through collective social forms. I consider this study as a social historical study. First, it uses a social historical method to study “isolation.” It focuses on how social relations change over time and how individuals participated in and transformed the social forms that shaped them. I argue that social historical method is a requirement for studying psychology and human development. However, social historical theories are too general, especially when it comes to how to study the “social” and “historical”. I suggest that a study of the political economy is important because it provides a tool to study the social and historical domains.

Finally, “isolation” also happened to other minority communities, marked by their political and economic exclusion from American society. Yet the particular historical circumstances generated significant differences in each community. The theoretical framework and historical method I present here could provide a model to study the “isolation” of other communities.

Epilogue

“Chinatown as a commodity,” the latest form of “isolation,” was marked by the violent destruction on the working bodies. Under the powerful alliance of the local administration and Chinatown business elites, the development of Chinatown was geared toward promoting business interests at the expense of the welfare of the working people. As a result, workers were forced to endure deteriorating working and living conditions, suffering the loss of health, live chances and dignity. After the tragic event of September 11th, the violent destruction on the working bodies became even more brutal. Workers and residents in Chinatown, like other low-income people in the Lower Manhattan, were now confronted with widespread job loss¹, economic pressures, and overwhelming health crisis caused by the heavy cloud of toxic dust that lingered over the area.

Despite the urgent needs of the low-income people, government’s relief policies and practices continued its tradition that prioritized business interests over the lives of the working people. While billions of dollars were channeled to big corporations to rebuild their infrastructure, no attention or resources were given to rebuild workers’ health and lives. For months after September 11th, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), without actually testing the air in the East Side of Lower Manhattan, told the residents that the air was safe. Even after the EPA’s claim was challenged by independent studies, which showed that the air quality was unsafe, the government did not take any action to address this problem. Low-income people in Chinatown and the Lower East Side who

¹ According to the study conducted by the Asian American Federation (2002), *Chinatown After September 11th: An Economic Impact Study*, in the two weeks following September 11th, more than 75% of the workers (24,500) in Chinatown were temporarily out of work. In the three months after September 11th, over 25% (7,000) of the workers were laid-off.

were already struggling to make ends meet could not afford to move to somewhere else to escape the toxic air. Many of them lost their jobs, along with their health insurance, and now had to struggle to pay for disaster-related health expenses.

The government's disaster assistance implemented by FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) further excluded and discriminated against low-income people in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. For instance, FEMA's Disaster Housing program relocated hundreds of wealthy residents in the West Side of lower Manhattan and paid for their hotel expenses because their apartments were declared unlivable. Yet it ignored the needs of the people in low-income neighborhoods in the East Side who were exposed to the toxic air everyday. FEMA's Mortgage and Rental Assistance (MRA) was another example of the government's discriminative relief practices. The application procedures required the verification of employers and landlords. This effectively denied aid to low-income people because employers of low-wage labor who constantly violated labor laws were not likely willing to contact the Federal government. Relief efforts led by private charities, such as the Red Cross, Safe Horizon, were equally discriminatory against working class people. It drew an arbitrary line that designated the area south of Canal Street as the eligible zone. This arbitrary line divided Chinatown in half, denying aid to people working or living north of Canal Street, which included the majority of Chinese garment workers and the low-income people in the Lower East Side.

In addition, government's discriminative disaster relief practices created an opportunity for large-scale displacement in Chinatown and speeded up the process of "re-isolation." Without much needed assistance, low-income residents who suffered job loss

and health problems were also facing eviction. In the mean time, one of the main job sources they relied on, the garment factories had a hard time to survive in Chinatown due to the slow down of businesses. As a result, low-income workers and residents in Chinatown were pushed out and re-isolated in other areas in the outer boroughs. For landlords and real-estate developers, this presented a golden opportunity. By pushing the poor and the factory tenants out of the buildings, landlords would have their space available for office use, which means a huge rental increase. In addition, it would also helped them realize the plan to develop Chinatown to become an elite district, a district filled with modern offices and luxury apartments without the mess of garment factories and poor immigrant workers.

Building a broad-based movement against “isolation”

A broad-based anti-isolation movement organized by low-income people in the Lower East Side was growing. The foundation of this movement was not race, ethnicity or trade, but the common concern about people’s health and lives that have been violently destroyed.

In the wake of September 11th, CSWA and five other organizations² formed the Beyond Ground Zero Network and began organizing the low-income people working or living in the Lower Manhattan who were confronted with tremendous health and economic problems.³ The common concern about health had brought together people

² They include the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, National Mobilization Against SweatShops, Urban Justice Center, Workers Awaaz, Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund.

³ Through extensive investigation, using surveys and talking to workers, CSWA found out that the most pressing need for the workers was not simply getting another job, or one-time monetary assistance. Rather they needed a long-term assistance to address the health issues they and their families were facing after September 11th– the health problem caused by the toxic air and the lack of access to affordable health care.

from Chinatown and the low-income communities in the Lower East Side, including garment workers, service workers, public housing residents, senior citizens and injured workers, to expose government's discriminatory relief practices and to demand the government to prioritize rebuilding the health and lives of working people. In June 2002, near four thousands of workers affected by September 11th marched in New York City to protest the undemocratic and discriminatory practices of FEMA and the Red Cross. Infuriated by the lack of response of these agencies to their needs, a month later, thousands of low-income workers marched in Washington D.C. to demand the Bush administration be accountable to working people hurt by September 11th. The workers demanded the government to prioritize people over business interests: to protect low-income housing and garment manufacturing in the community, to provide medical care to address the long term health impacts of September 11th, and to expand relief efforts to provide assistance to all working people hurt by the disaster.

The movement clearly shows that it is possible to build a struggle against "isolation" that moves beyond the boundaries of race and of Chinatown. While it focused on addressing workers' immediate needs after September 11th, it also provided a vehicle to build a broader foundation to confront the "isolation" of Chinatown. By building upon a common concern on health, it has mobilized working people in Chinatown and other low-income communities in the Lower East Side to fight against the violence imposed on the working bodies and to preserve their communities. I would like to conclude by returning to the notion of "preservation". I argue that only the kind of preservation that preserves the health and lives of people in Chinatown, rather than the Chinese features or Chinese culture, is a genuine preservation of this historically existing community.

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