INTRODUCTION

Chinatowns around the World

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Authors of this volume on Chinatowns survey the changing nature and functions of Chinatown in different countries around the world. The authors seek to examine the changing aspects of Chinatowns in contemporary Vancouver, New York City, Chicago, Lima, Havana, Paris, Lisbon, Sydney and Tokyo. These nine papers written respectively by Peter S. Li and Eva Xiaoling Li, Kenneth J. Guest, Huping Ling, Isabelle Lausent-Herrera, Adrian Hearn, Ya-Han Chuang and Anne-Christine Trémon, Paula Mota Santos, Christine Inglis and Kiyomi Yamashita represent an effort to empirically answer these questions: What is the nature of Chinatown? To what extent Chinatowns have changed and to what extent Chinatowns have remained the same. Tan Chee-Beng concludes with a theoretical reflection and comparative remarks on Chinatowns discussed in this volume with those in East and Southeast Asia.

The phenomenon of “Chinatown” has been of great interest to the general public as well as scholars. Movies have made Chinatown to be exotic, mysterious, gangsters filled, and sometimes, a gilded ghetto, an ethnopolis, a cultural diaspora as well as a model community. Some community activists have viewed Chinatowns to be a place to be exploited by insider-labor bosses and a “zoo” for voyeurism and greedy tourism operators. Other community organizers have found Chinatowns to be important sites for voluntary activities and community mobilization efforts. Scholars’ treatments of Chinatowns have similarly varied, ranging from treating Chinatowns as monuments of racism, repertory of ethnic resources, destinations of transnational and circular migration, step-stones to the larger society, heritage centers, to powerhouses of talents and leaders. Some hypothesize that Chinatowns are on “on their way out” in that they are in a process of assimilating into the larger society or into the suburbs. Contrary to the contentions of many, the authors of this volume found that established Chinatowns continue to thrive and in certain countries, Chinatowns proliferate. Thus, it is simply premature to suggest the demise of Chinatowns. The authors in this volume have convinced us, with their painful
documents and research, that Chinatowns still exist and that the study of Chinatown is a worth-while academic enterprise. To debunk any stereotypes or answer any serious academic questions, one may need more social analyses and research data. From these authors one sees the phenomenon of satellite of Chinatown in Lima-Peru, Sydney-Australia, Vancouver-Canada, New York, Chicago and Paris. In these cities, there was a traditional or older Chinatown. From the original Chinatown, many Chinese neighborhoods or Chinese districts expanded. My personal research in San Francisco also shows the satellite process of Chinatown. Starting from the Chinatown, one now can find other satellite communities in the Clement Street area (called the New Chinatown or Xin Huabu 新华埠), the Irving Street, Noriega and Visitation Areas. All these satellite communities have commercial and residential sections but do not have the interlocking community associations.

Definition, Types and Functions of Chinatown

What is Chinatown? Before we theorize the existence or demise of Chinatowns, we need to establish a definition of Chinatown. Although a simple question, it is difficult to obtain a consensus on its definition. North American specialists tend to emphasize the existence of a segregated community with residential and commercial areas and are governed by interlocking associational social networks with an overall community organization such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association or the Chinese Six Company. Others speak of Chinatowns as if they are just places of Chinese populations and Chinese shops. Still others define Chinatown as a tourist center with Chinese cultural symbols. Some use the term, Chinese Quarters (Chuan and Trémon in this volume) to refer to Chinatowns. Some used the term ethnopolis to refer to Chinatown as an urban ethnic enclave with social and economic resources. Yamashita (in this volume) sees different types of Chinatowns and their evolution in Japan from historical Chinatown, tourist Chinatown to just concentration of Chinese stores. The newest of them is the area filled with Chinese shops in Ikebukuro district in Tokyo. Among local Chinese residents, the term, huabu (华埠) or tangren jie (唐人街), are used to refer to areas with Chinese residents and shops. Overall, umbrella-like Chinese community organizations may or may not be present in them. In fact, many European Chinese communities do not have an overall umbrella organization coordinating the various local, kinship, regional or hometown associations. Consistent with the current emphasis on the emic or insider approach in social science theory, personally, I