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Chinese Chain Migration

A Book Review by Robert Birrell

CHINATOWN: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC
POTENTIAL OF AN URBAN ENCLAVE

By Min Zhou

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992
300 pages, \$44.95

This book provides some important insights into the process of chain migration from the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) to the United States. The Australian interest in this arises from concerns about the likely scale of chain migration resulting from the Australian government's November 1993 decisions regarding Chinese asylum claimants. The government decided to grant permanent residence to the 28,000 who were in Australia at the time of Tiananmen in June 1989 plus their spouses and dependents who had moved to Australia by November 1993, and to grant a selective amnesty to an anticipated 10,000 who had arrived in Australia after June 1989 and who have since applied for asylum (and in most cases were turned down by our refugee tribunals). There is no Australian experience with Chinese chain migration, because prior to the current amnesties there were very few persons from China holding permanent residence status in Australia.

The USA is different. There is a substantial pioneer Chinese community in the USA. It is also growing rapidly. According to the 1992 Statistical Yearbook of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the number of migrants granted green cards whose last country of permanent residence was China increased from 22,604 in 1990 to 29,554 in 1992. The dynamics of this growth and its settlement consequences in the U.S. is, to say the least, of some moment given the huge Chinese population base.

Zhou's book is illuminating on these issues. She concludes that there is widespread desire to leave China. This is not just a consequence of the vast per capita income differentials between China and the United States, but also, Zhou argues, to a pervasive dissatisfaction with the way the Chinese regime constrains occupational opportunity and political freedom. But aside from illegal movements (on which Zhou is silent) those anxious to leave need to find a way through both the Chinese exit procedures and U.S. migration regulations.

At the Chinese end, Zhou reports that restrictions on exit permits withered during the 1980s, so much so that almost all those currently applying to leave are being approved. However those with undergraduate

degrees need to complete five years service or pay back some of the cost of their education before being allowed to depart, and some among the professional elite are simply banned from leaving on "brain drain" grounds.

The real barrier for most would-be migrants is the U.S. entry regulations. Most Chinese enter via the family categories, with the largest single group being female spouses. Zhou indicated that there is an ample supply of Chinese women anxious to migrate. Indeed she notes that many are prepared to marry a virtual stranger as long as he possesses a green card. These marriage links now reach deep into rural China, thus moving essentially peasant folk with no English and little formal education into the heart of the developed world.

Spouse migration is the key to further extensions of the migrant chain because it opens up new links to parents and siblings. In the case of the Chinese women Zhou interviewed, once they become naturalized (after just 3 years if they have married a citizen or 5-6 years if they have not) they regard it as their duty to immediately petition for their parents (who are exempt from any restrictions) and their siblings (restricted by "fourth preference" quota limits). The INS statistics confirm Zhou's account. By the early 1990s about 13,000 persons whose former country of allegiance was China were being naturalized annually. In 1992 there were 3,774 successful parent petitions for persons whose country of last permanent residence was China — suggesting a very high rate of about one successful petition for every four naturalized persons.

Zhou notes that most Chinese migrants (particularly among the low skilled) located with kin in established Chinese communities like Chinatown in New York, which was the focus of her field work. Most find employment within the enclave, notably as restaurant workers in the case of men and garment workers in the case of women. Some of the better educated contribute health, finance and other services to co-ethnics. To Zhou, Chinatown is a success story. She sees it as a bustling, entrepreneurial enclave providing employment opportunities which do not threaten other New Yorkers' positions, and which also allows budding Chinese entrepreneurs to accumulate business skills and savings prior to launching their own business. Zhou does not assert that they move into the wider community as in the classic migrant success story. Rather the pattern she describes is of further expansion of the enclave into Chinese satellite

communities elsewhere in New York, as at Flushing in Queens and Sunset Park in Brooklyn.

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However, Chinatown's economic vibrancy and its relatively self-reliant community derives from the fact that its residents have recreated an essentially Third World set of institutions in New York. It has been built around low skilled industries offering poor wages and working conditions. Garment workers receive wages varying from \$5 per hour for experienced workers to \$2 per hour for new hands, for example. According to Zhou, both government and union regulations are regularly violated by Chinatown garment employers, for example, by rotating workers off the employment roster to avoid any accumulation of seniority rights.

There appears to be no obvious constraint against further expansion of the enclave, since as long as it receives a continual flow of disciplined workers willing to accept Third World employment conditions, it can export goods and services at competitive prices outside the enclave. This, plus the virtual monopoly the enclave has over the provision of culturally specific services ensures its continued growth. These circumstances will facilitate further chain migration flows. From the prospective migrant's point of view the existence of the enclave reduces the social pain of relocation and promises job opportunities for non-English speakers who would otherwise have little to offer in the U.S. It is likely therefore, that the migration chain from China will expand further, soon to rival in scale the other major source of migration to the United States, including the Philippines.

It is hard to reconcile Zhou's picture of healthy enterprise, in which drug usage, crime and criminal gangs barely feature, with Gwen Kinkead's account *Chinatown: A Portrait of a Closed Society*, (Harper Collins) [reviewed in *The Social Contract*, Vol.IV, No.2, Winter 1992-93], also published in 1992. Kinkead argues that most of the current flow of low skilled Chinese migrants to Chinatown are trapped in a vicious circle of low wages, long working hours and poor English. Movement out of the enclave into well-paid positions is just a dream. Worse, many are in effect hostages to a community in which U.S. civil institutions barely penetrate. The very self-sufficiency of Chinatown and the lack of any heritage of active citizenship or trust in the state allows the criminal element to dominate the enclave. In this setting many

younger people are tempted to take the short cut to "success" by joining criminal gangs. As a result, Kinkead argues that criminal activities, especially drug dealing and illegal migration, have flourished.

So, while I found much of value in Zhou's portrait of Chinatown, it needs to be read alongside the more hard-headed picture painted by Kinkead. ■