



IMMIGRANT SIGNATURES ON THE LANDSCAPE: ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IN LOS ANGELES

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In recent decades, major cities in the United States have undergone rapid and dramatic shifts in their ethnic compositions (Roseman 1991). These shifts have largely resulted from changes in international migration policies since the second World War and have been augmented by global economic restructuring. In microcosm, Los Angeles reflects these structural changes in the reorganization of capital and labor (Soja, Morales, and Wolff 1983; Sassen 1988); tied directly into this process has been an enormous influx of immigrants into Los Angeles, primarily from countries along the Pacific Rim (Soja, Morales, and Wolff 1983, 219).

Considerable research has addressed the history and spatial distribution of ethnic groups (Bouvier and Gardner 1986; Turner and Allen 1991). Studies employing various indexes of segregation and dissimilarity have provided insights into the distribution and concentration of ethnic groups in relation to one another (Harries 1971; Van Arsdol and Schuerman 1971; Garcia 1985; Langberg and Farley 1985; White 1986; Turner and Allen 1991) while other studies have examined neighborhood change or ethnic shifts in general (Van Arsdol and Schuerman 1971; Garcia 1985; Warf 1990; Denton and Massey 1991). However, very little research has addressed the physical appearance—the “visibility” of ethnic communities (Arreola 1984, 1988) particularly Asian American communities.

This paper compares and contrasts the visibility of selected Asian American communities¹ in the Los Angeles area (Figure 1) through the use of photographs. Whereas the visibility of an ethnic community may

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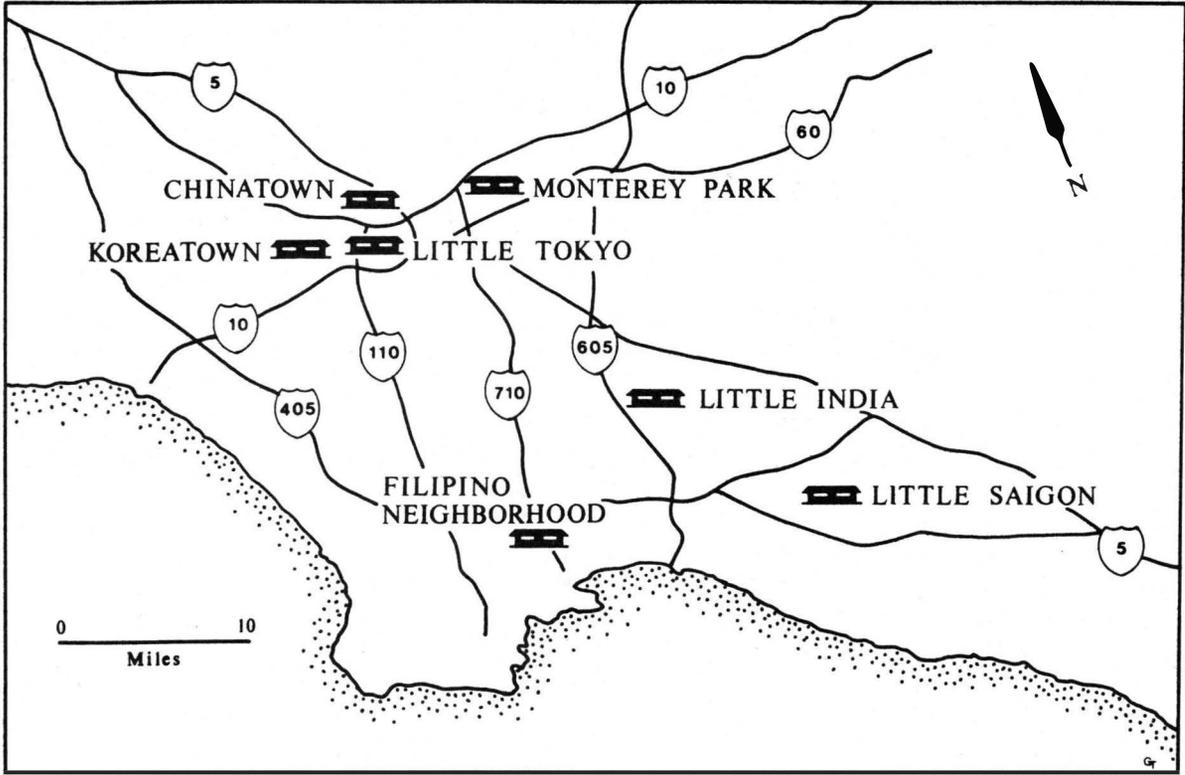


Figure 1. Selected Asian American communities in the Los Angeles metropolitan region

be revealed in a variety of ways, I specifically focus on the spatial form of business concentration, signage, and building style.

Spatial Form

The spatial form of a community is partially a reflection of historical developments, and partially a matter of initial location—either in an urban core or suburban area. In particular, some ethnic communities, as reflected by business activities, tend to either (1) develop in a linear fashion, (2) or remain fairly dispersed. This distinction is, in fact, a continuum. Linear patterns take many subforms, depending on whether stores are side-by-side, at every major intersection, or are so far apart that they are dispersed. Furthermore, business activities may con-



Figure 2. Little Tokyo has maintained a well-defined core around 1st and San Pedro Street in Los Angeles

¹ The scope and purpose of this study preclude an in-depth discussion on the history of Asian American community formation in Los Angeles, or the history of Asian immigration. However, the reader is encouraged to consult the following sources: Mason and McKinstry 1969; Allen 1977; Desbarats and Holland 1983; Desbarats 1985; Holley 1985; Bouvier and Gardner 1986; Peters and Chen 1987; Light and Bonacich 1988; Hata and Hata 1990; Pearlstone 1990; Chan 1991; Allen and Turner 1992; Hing 1993.

centrate on one or two major thoroughfares with little activity away from these main avenues—a strong linear development—or concentrate in a nodal fashion.

Some communities, such as *Chinatown* and *Little Tokyo* are highly concentrated. These older communities have evolved near the urban core of downtown Los Angeles; thus growth has been constrained and both *Chinatown* and *Little Tokyo* have maintained well-defined cores around their pre-World War II locations. Businesses in *Chinatown* and *Little Tokyo* are side-by-side, thus intensifying the visual appearance of concentration (Figure 2). *Koreatown*, on the other hand, is also highly concentrated in southwest Los Angeles, but exhibits strong linear development along Olympic Boulevard. Businesses are scattered along the thoroughfares, interspersed with other ethnic businesses (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Shopping malls in Koreatown are often integrated with other ethnic businesses. Note the Salvadorian bank

Filipinos represent the second largest Asian American population in the Los Angeles area, yet their communities are relatively invisible owing to a dispersal of both population and businesses (Allen 1977; Peterson 1989). The West Los Angeles concentration of Filipinos has no distinctive core, and businesses are scattered throughout the area, mostly as isolated buildings or as mini-malls on corner lots (Figure 4). The Filipino community in West Long Beach, however, reveals the be-



Figure 4. Filipino businesses in West Los Angeles are dispersed. They are most common as mini-malls on corner lots



Figure 5. Filipino businesses in West Long Beach have developed predominantly in a linear fashion along Santa Fe Boulevard. Note the dominance of English-language signs

ginnings of a strong linear development. Filipino businesses are seen along Santa Fe Boulevard at most of the major intersections, as well as side-by-side (Figure 5).

By contrast, the Vietnamese, with a population 65 percent less than that of Filipinos, are heavily concentrated in *Little Saigon*, and thus are more visible. *Little Saigon* is perhaps most known for two dominant malls, Asian Village and the Asian Garden Mall, on either side of Bolsa Avenue in Orange County (Figure 6). Additionally, other Vietnamese businesses are scattered throughout the area, providing evidence of a growing, dynamic community.



Figure 6. Little Saigon is characterized by many large shopping malls, such as the Asian Garden Mall

Asian Indians, likewise, have a considerably smaller population than Filipinos, yet are more densely concentrated in Artesia, thus more visible. The spatial form of *Little India* is similar to the Philippine community in West Long Beach in that the former is also a strip development, with the majority of Asian Indian businesses concentrating along Pioneer Boulevard (Figure 7). Other communities that are not confined to more urban cores have been able to expand more readily, appearing as massive, sprawling communities on the landscape. The Chinese community of Monterey Park, for example, has rapidly spread throughout the San Gabriel Valley.



Figure 7. Asian Indian businesses in Artesia have developed in a linear fashion along Pioneer Boulevard. Signage is generally English

Signage

Signs on businesses may be used as an indicator of ethnic identity. However, from the ethnic community's perspective, this practice is not necessarily to draw attention to the community, but rather as a practical consideration.

Signs in some Asian American communities, such as Monterey Park, Koreatown, and Little Saigon, are bilingual (Figure 8). Those in other communities—such as Little India and the two Filipino communities—tend to be predominantly English (Figure 5 and 7). In these latter communities, signs often proclaim ethnic identities in their names (e.g. Philippine Cuisine or Indian Foods). Bilingualism tends to be greatest for peoples who have migrated most recently and/or who use English in their homelands less extensively.

Other signs in ethnic communities are in fact used explicitly to draw attention to the community. Some Asian American communities in Los Angeles have district signs posted on freeways and streets proclaiming their identities, such as *Little Saigon*, *Little Tokyo*, and *Chinatown* (Figure 9). The designation of ethnic communities is seen as a confirmation of an ethnic group's identity, and often the process of defining an area is a



Figure 8. Signage on businesses in Koreatown, Little Saigon, and Monterey Park (pictured here) are often bi-lingual



Figure 9. Many ethnic groups have officially defined their communities through signage



Figure 10. Often the architecture of restaurants, shopping malls, and gas stations represent stereotypes of the ethnic group



Figure 11. When rebuilt in the 1930s, Chinatown was modelled after the best cities in China

long and arduous task. In response to repeated requests from the Koreatown Development Association, the City of Los Angeles proclaimed the Olympic Boulevard neighborhood "Koreatown" in 1980, posting signs on major streets and freeways (Light 1985). Filipinos, on the other hand, have tried unsuccessfully to designate their communities in both Los Angeles and Long Beach. The bid in Los Angeles, tentatively named *Filipino Town*, was hampered by internal divisions among Filipino community leaders. In the case of Long Beach, district signs are not allowed; unofficially, however, the area has been designated as *Filipino Neighborhood* (see Hillburg 1992).

Building Styles

The architecture of restaurants and shopping malls often represent stereotypes of ethnic groups, such as Nipa Huts for Filipino establishments and pagoda-styled gas stations and buildings in *Chinatown* and Monterey Park (Figure 10).

However, this practice appears to be atypical; most Asian American communities are not built as stereotypes, nor are they built as tourist centers. According to Lui (1948), when *Chinatown* was rebuilt in the late

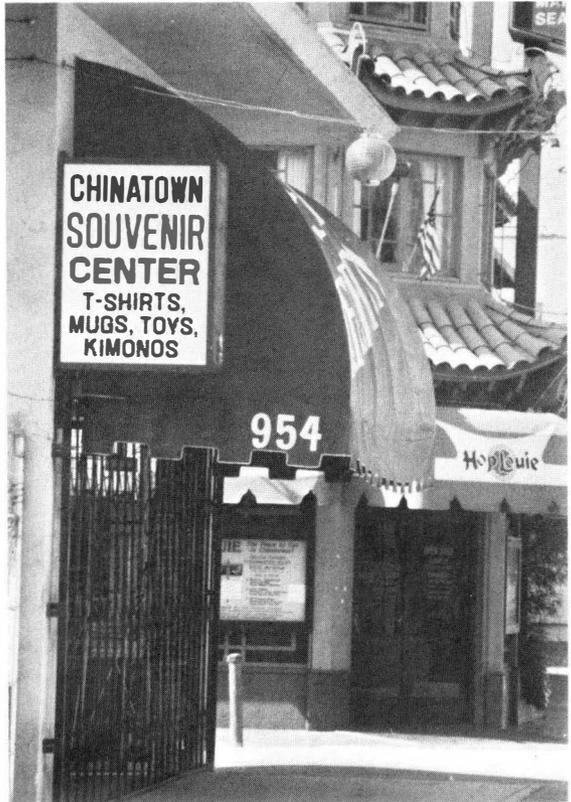


Figure 12. Both Little Tokyo and Chinatown (pictured here) reflect shifts toward tourism

1930s, the community was patterned after the style prevailing in the best cities of China (Figure 11). Most buildings were, and are, two-stories in height, and many are topped with ornate, pagoda-style roofs. However, *Chinatown*, as well as *Little Tokyo*, have recognized the growing importance of tourism and gradually, these communities have cultivated the expected image of tourists; the visible appearance of these communities reflects this shift to tourism (Figure 12). As yet, no other Asian American communities in the Los Angeles area have catered so heavily to tourism.

Some communities have introduced new building structures to meet their needs, while others have occupied existing structures. Filipinos and Asian Indians, for example, have only minimally altered the physical infrastructure of the landscape (Figure 13). In *Little India*, the appearance of many buildings have changed little, despite the fact that by 1988, some two dozen businesses were owned or managed by Asian Indians (Hata and Hata 1990). Indeed, along Pioneer Boulevard, with the exception of new signs, the one- and two-story buildings look much they way they did when they were rebuilt after the 1933 Long Beach earthquake (Churm 1986).

Communities in Monterey Park, *Little Saigon*, and *Koreatown*, on the



Figure 13. Businesses in Little India have generally occupied existing structures. As a result, the outer appearance of the area has changed little, with the exception of signage

other hand, reflect newer structures [Figure 14]. Many of these are multi-storied shopping centers in contrast to the much smaller corner-lot shopping malls of other ethnic communities. These malls often have



Figure 14. Businesses in Monterey Park, Little Saigon, and Koreatown (pictured here) often reflect newer structures. These tend to be large shopping malls

elaborate entryways, particularly in Little Saigon (Figure 15). This latter practice is noticeably absent from Philippine and Asian Indian shopping centers.

Conclusions

Ethnic communities are signatures on the city, a script of the socio-spatial evolution of urban areas. And with continued immigration, as well as spatial and social mobility, this script is constantly being written and rewritten.

The intent of this paper is to highlight a few of the similarities and differences between Asian American communities in the Los Angeles metropolitan area—to combat the tendency of viewing Asians as a homogenous group. This study has examined three aspects of community visibility—spatial form, signage, and building style—and compared and contrasted these for selected Asian American communities throughout



Figure 15. Shopping centers in Little Saigon often have elaborate entryways. This practice is noticeably absent in Philippine and Asian Indian shopping centers

the Los Angeles region. The purpose is not to provide a history of these communities; rather, the purpose is to identify some heretofore overlooked aspects of ethnic geography. In short, the visual appearance of ethnic communities is equally as important as understanding the spatial distribution of ethnic populations, for it is the observable landscape that forms peoples' impressions of urban areas and their inhabitants.



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