

Message from the Editors

Asian Americans in Global Cities: Los Angeles - New York Connections and Comparisons

Paul M. Ong and Tarry Hum

This special *AAPI Nexus* issue examines Asian American experiences in global cities through comparative studies of Los Angeles and New York. The demographic facts are astonishing—more than a quarter of the sixteen million Asian Americans reside in either of the two greater metropolises where they comprise more than a tenth of the total population in each region. Consequently, it is difficult to fully understand and appreciate Asian American experiences without studying these two global cities.

The comparative approach offers great analytical potential because it can generate insights into what phenomena transcend regions and patterns that are produced by factors and forces common to Asian Americans regardless of location and fundamental global-city processes. The comparative approach can also identify phenomena that are unique to each region, such as the outcomes of specific local and regional structures and dynamics. In developing this special issue, the original call included the following potential topics:

Asian-specific place-based social, political, and economic institutions and practices that sustain and build community. What distinguishes Asian places and neighborhoods in Los Angeles and New York? Are there internal and external structures and dynamics that transcend location? How do similarities and differences in community formations relate to the Asian diaspora and racial or ethnic group dynamics?

Cultural productions and collective actions as a means to inform, mobilize, and build community and expose socioeconomic inequities for efforts to achieve parity. How are Asian Americans working to build broader multiracial coalitions?

How does global economic restructuring influence Asian American neighborhoods?

Our goal was to cover as many arenas as possible to offer a broad understanding through comparative analysis.

We get a sense of the similarities and differences in the resource paper by Howard Shih and Melany De La Cruz-Viesca, which provides demographic, economic, political, and spatial overviews using data from the American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The quantitative evidence reveals that immigration and immigrants have played a fundamental and profound role in shaping the characteristics of Asian Americans in both regions, and that both populations face a number of structural barriers to full incorporation. These commonalities are the product of larger national historical and contemporary forces such as the elimination of racially biased immigration quotas in 1965. At the same time, there are noticeable differences in detailed composition by ethnicity, nativity, and economic class and in the geographic patterns of communities. The variations are rooted in differences in the timing of Asian American community formations and differences in metropolitan context.

Similarities and differences are also apparent below the metropolitan level. Immigrant enclaves (Chinatowns and new Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and South and Southeast Asian neighborhoods) exemplify transregional ethnic-based effects. In New York and Los Angeles, with their huge foreign-born populations, Asian Americans cluster because of shared languages, cultures, institutions, and social networks. Lena Sze's article on New York's Chinatown and Susan Nakaoka's article on Los Angeles's Little Tokyo examine the politics of place and neighborhood change in two historic enclaves. In both of these metro areas, global capital and market conditions are advancing the gentrification of these two historic sites. Both authors describe current economic development strategies and argue for a conceptual framing of these enclave neighborhoods as a cultural home space in an effort to preserve and sustain ethnic places.

Ethnic economies, spatial and aspatial, are another example of within-group agglomeration that facilitates capital and labor interaction, transmission of information and knowledge, and trust-based interactions. C. N. Le's paper reviews the extensive

literature on immigrant small business ownership and compares the self-employment outcomes of four entrepreneurial Asian ethnic groups—Chinese, Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese. Based on a comparative analysis across ethnicity and region, he finds important differences in the Asian ethnic economies of the two global cities. In Los Angeles, Asians who are self-employed are more likely to be in high-skill, professional services while their counterparts in New York tend to concentrate in low-skill traditional “enclave-associated” niches.

A fundamental quality of global cities is their reliance on international migration for elite and menial labor; therefore, it is not surprising that New York and Los Angeles have received such a disproportionately high share of Asian immigrants. Robert Chao Romero and Kevin Escudero Lam’s article expands on Asian American ethnic diversity by mining census data to profile the small and often-overlooked “mixed” population of Asian and Latino ancestry. In addition to racial diversity, global cities are further distinguished by high levels of socioeconomic inequality. Ariella Rotramel’s article on Filipina domestic workers in Los Angeles and New York examines the concentration of transnational women workers in low-wage employment. Through ethnographic methods, she describes immigrant women’s organizing tactics, and their successful strategies to pass legislation in New York State that advances basic worker rights and protections for domestic workers.

Educational access and equity continue to be a central aspect of the Asian American experience in global cities. Although Yale Law School Professor Amy Chua’s book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom* (2011), generated much recent debate on culturally based parenting practices, Benji Chang and Juhyung Harold Lee’s practitioner essay focuses on the role of public education in Los Angeles’s and New York’s Chinatown and on how community-based public schools can promote a holistic vision and approach for student achievement, especially among Asian immigrant youth. Chang and Lee’s essay illustrates how public schools continue to provide critical resources and venues for immigrant civic and community engagement.

Although this special issue is a major step in promoting comparative regional analysis within Asian American studies, it is only an initial effort. Because of space limitation, it is impossible

to cover the diversity of topics that should be included. For example, there is no detailed comparison of Asian American politics, a potentially rich arena for study by building upon what is already known. History has produced two disparate political geographies: New York as a single city comprised of five counties, and Los Angeles as a single county comprised of eighty-one cities and large unincorporated areas under the county's control. The details of these two governance structures have had profound implications on Asian American politics. This can be seen with Asian Americans on city councils. There has been no Asian American city council person in Los Angeles since Mike Woo (1985-93), who had only a tiny Asian American constituency within his district. This is due to the fact that Asian Americans have not been able to consolidate their populations into a single district and because the large population size of each city council (about 255,000) dilutes the influence of Asian American voters. City council districts in New York City are smaller (about 165,000) and more likely to keep Asian Americans concentrated. The result is that there have been more elected Asian Americans at the city council level, and this has provided a pipeline to higher city offices. Los Angeles, however, offers a different trajectory because of its highly fragmented governance structure. The smaller cities in the San Gabriel Valley have enabled local Asian American politicians to move up the ranks into the mayor's office, state legislative houses, and Congress.

Our hope is that this issue will be a stimulus to further theorizing and empirical analyses of Asian Americans in global cities including those beyond Los Angeles and New York. In addition to politics, other areas for comparative study include an analysis of traditional and emerging cultural forms and practices, community institutions and organizations, and social movements such as student and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activism. One element not included in this special issue of *AAPI Nexus* is the ways that Asian Americans in the two regions are connected. Anecdotal evidence indicates that interregional interactions are common and potentially profound. There are individuals who have lived in both cities, firms that have operations in both locations, and organizations in both locations that collaborate on local and national issues. Rather than viewing each global city as a distinct and separate entity, it may be useful to also understand the networks that bridge geographic divides. Finally, expanding beyond Los Angeles and

New York is critical to testing whether the commonalities and differences are repeated in other regions within the United States and in other parts of the world.

Scholarly research, however, is not sufficient. Our goal was to compile a set of articles that contributes to engaged practices, which was partially accomplished. We believe that this principle should be integral to future comparative work, which is consistent with *AAPI Nexus's* commitment to promoting applied research focusing on policies, practices, and community research to benefit the nation's burgeoning Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. The journal's mission is to facilitate an exchange of ideas and research findings that strengthens the efforts through policy and practice in order to tackle the pressing societal problems facing AAPI communities. Since the inception of ethnic studies, the goal of "serving the community" has been at the heart of Asian American studies and Pacific Islander studies.

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