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BOOK REVIEW

Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America
By Wei Li
University of Hawaii Press, 2009, Honolulu. 214 pages.

Reviewed by Willow Lung Amam

Wei Li's recent book, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* proves beyond a doubt that the American suburbs are not what they used to be. This account of the new geography of immigrants and minorities over the latter half of the 20th century argues that a new type of ethnic community has emerged, which is not simply an urban ethnic enclave in suburban dress. Rather, Li argues that this new community differs socially, economically, and politically from its urban counterpart and has evolved from separate factors, including a series of international, national and local changes favoring the suburban migration of wealthy, highly educated and skilled new immigrants.

Resulting "ethnoburbs", as Li terms and defines them, are suburban multiethnic clusters of residential and business districts in large metropolitan areas, where one group has a significant concentration, but does not necessarily hold the majority. Using evidence from Monterrey Park, a "Chinese ethnoburb" outside L.A., Li provides a detailed portrait of life in an environment filled with "monster homes", "parachute kids", "spacemen" and "astronauts", who are "as comfortable crossing oceans and countries as . . . crossing Main Street, U.S.A."[1] *Ethnoburb* helps to decipher this new lexicon and the increasing variety of lived experiences within ethnically diverse, new immigrant suburbs.

While the history and politics of Monterrey Park has been documented in other literatures, *Ethnoburb* provides far greater insights into how and why this suburban typology arose than previous work.[2] Its analysis of the emergence of the ethnoburb as a result of shifting geopolitics,

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1. Li, Wei. 2009. Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. p. 39
2. See for instance Fong, Timothy. 1994. *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Horton, John. 1995. *The Politics of Diversity: Immigration, Resistance, and Change in Monterey Park, California.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Saito, L.T. 1998. *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

global economic restructuring, national immigration and trade policies; and local demographics, economics, and politics, provides the most comprehensive analysis of the making of new immigrant suburbs to date.

However, *Ethnoburb* would have been more successful, had Li applied the same broad-based perspective to the book's theoretical basis. Li positions the ethnoburb model as a challenge to classical theories of ethnic urban geography on immigrant acculturation and assimilation. While successfully complicating these models, she simultaneously neglects the more contemporary work of suburban and urban scholars in other fields. For instance, while much of the literature challenging the dominance of the white elite and middle-class suburbs in suburban studies make reference to Li's work, Li largely ignores her own contributions to the development of this body of literature. Her failure to connect the interdisciplinary literature on race and metropolitan space was a missed opportunity that limits the analytical reach of this work in areas such as metropolitan urban policy and design.

Ethnoburb also makes rather grand claims about the application of its model to suburbs outside of Monterrey Park. While it is clear that the suburbs have undergone extensive racial and ethnic changes over the past half-century and that *Ethnoburb* makes significant contributions to the exploration of the changing metropolitan landscape, the book's claim for the broad application of the term ethnoburb is unconvincing. Since the publication of Li's first article on the ethnoburb in 1998, the term has become a popular descriptor for a host of new immigrant and minority suburban communities nationwide.[3] *Ethnoburb* adds fuel to this fire. It argues, for instance, that Silicon Valley suburbs like Cupertino and Fremont are ethnoburbs in a "transitional" state that Li terms "techno/ethnoburbs". However, it provides little evidence to link the Silicon Valley and Monterrey Park beyond their large new immigrant, suburban, Chinese populations. From my own studies in Fremont, I would argue the differences between the two regions are as significant as their similarities, and that the term ethnoburb, as Li defines it, does not begin to capture the cultural complexity and heterogeneity that exist within and between contemporary new immigrant and minority suburbs. Other models and perhaps even more terminology are needed to make sense of the diversity of emerging suburbs. Applying the ethnoburb label to the extensive variety of Asian and new immigrant suburbs is no more appropriate than applying it to African-American suburbs, which have clearly evolved from different circumstances.

3. Li, Wei. 1998. Anatomy of a New Ethnic Settlement: The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles. *Urban Studies* 35, (3): 479.

Nonetheless, Li's work provides a unique geopolitical, socioeconomic and spatial lens that sheds light on processes occurring in today's diverse and dynamic suburbs, not only in L.A., but in many other parts of the U.S. and the world. *Ethnoburb* shows some of the many ways that American suburbs have grown and changed in the age of globalization. Its vivid descriptions of everyday life within new immigrant suburbs challenges many of the dominant suburban social and spatial paradigms and exposes the limited reach of current scholarship to make sense of the radical shifts afoot on America's globalizing suburban frontier.