



## **Immigrant Growth Machines: Metropolitan Reinvention in Los Angeles**

**Jan Lin and Melody Chiong**

*Building on Logan and Molotch's highly influential concept of the urban "growth machine," Jan Lin and Melody Chiong propose the idea of the "immigrant growth machine" to describe the variegated forms of investment and development in Los Angeles. Fueled by transnational capital flows and tourism, these new conglomerations reveal the role of immigration and foreign investment in the growth of today's metropolis.*

Korean and Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs, investors and political leaders are increasingly active players in the Los Angeles metropolitan area in mid-city Koreatown, the suburban Chinese San Gabriel Valley (SGV) and downtown LA.<sup>1</sup> They have built shopping malls, hotels, condominiums and mixed-use projects servicing Asian immigrants and transnationals, tourists and local residents. These "immigrant growth machines" first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, when the traditional Los Angeles growth machine comprised of native-born entrepreneurs and leaders was confronting white flight, slow-growth movements and a declining regional political consensus for growth (Fulton 1997; Purcell 2000; Light 2002). Immigrant growth machines have had to negotiate more cultural barriers, racial prejudice, and inter-ethnic conflicts than traditional growth machines. Yet both Chinese and Korean coalitions persevered and are more established players now that slow growth has given way to new growth driven by transnational capital investment, the tourism and entertainment sectors, and a wave of commercial and residential gentrification bringing jobs and people back to downtown LA, mid-city and the SGV suburbs. While immigrant growth machines primarily forge new spatial clusters of urban growth and new political arenas of public-private partnership in mid-city and the suburbs, immigrant entrepreneurs also participate in the redevelopment and transformation of the traditional downtown LA growth machine. Immigrant growth machines are thus integral players in the metropolitan reinvention of 21<sup>st</sup>-century LA. The different urban forms they have produced, from downtown to the suburbs, illustrate the adaptability of these new immigrant growth machines to different social and political environments.

### **The Traditional Growth Machine and Immigrant Growth Machines**

The "growth machine" was conceived (Logan and Molotch 1987) to describe the coalition of interlocking private- and public-sector interests that promote urban development and generate tangible economic benefits but also social and environmental costs. In early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Los Angeles, the traditional Anglo growth machine emerged out of a coalition of interests including the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Department of Water and Power (McWilliams 1973). Urban development along the "Miracle Mile" Wilshire corridor to the Westside resulted in a polarization between downtown and Westside growth coalitions by the end of World War II (Davis 1990). The construction of the freeway system in the postwar period and the

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subsequent out-movement of jobs and people promoted urban sprawl, metropolitan fragmentation in governance, disinvestment and declining power of the urban center. White flight after the Watts riots of 1965 further aggravated the city–suburbs divide. However, disinvestment from areas like the mid-city Wilshire district and the middle-ring SGV suburbs also opened up opportunities for incoming Korean and Chinese immigrants to establish new settlement and investment areas. In the view of Ivan Light (2002, p. 218), the “death of the growth machine” thesis promoted by Robert Fulton in his 1997 book *Reluctant Metropolis* emphasizes the loss of political consensus for growth in the native-born population, but ignores the rise of the immigrant component of the growth machine.

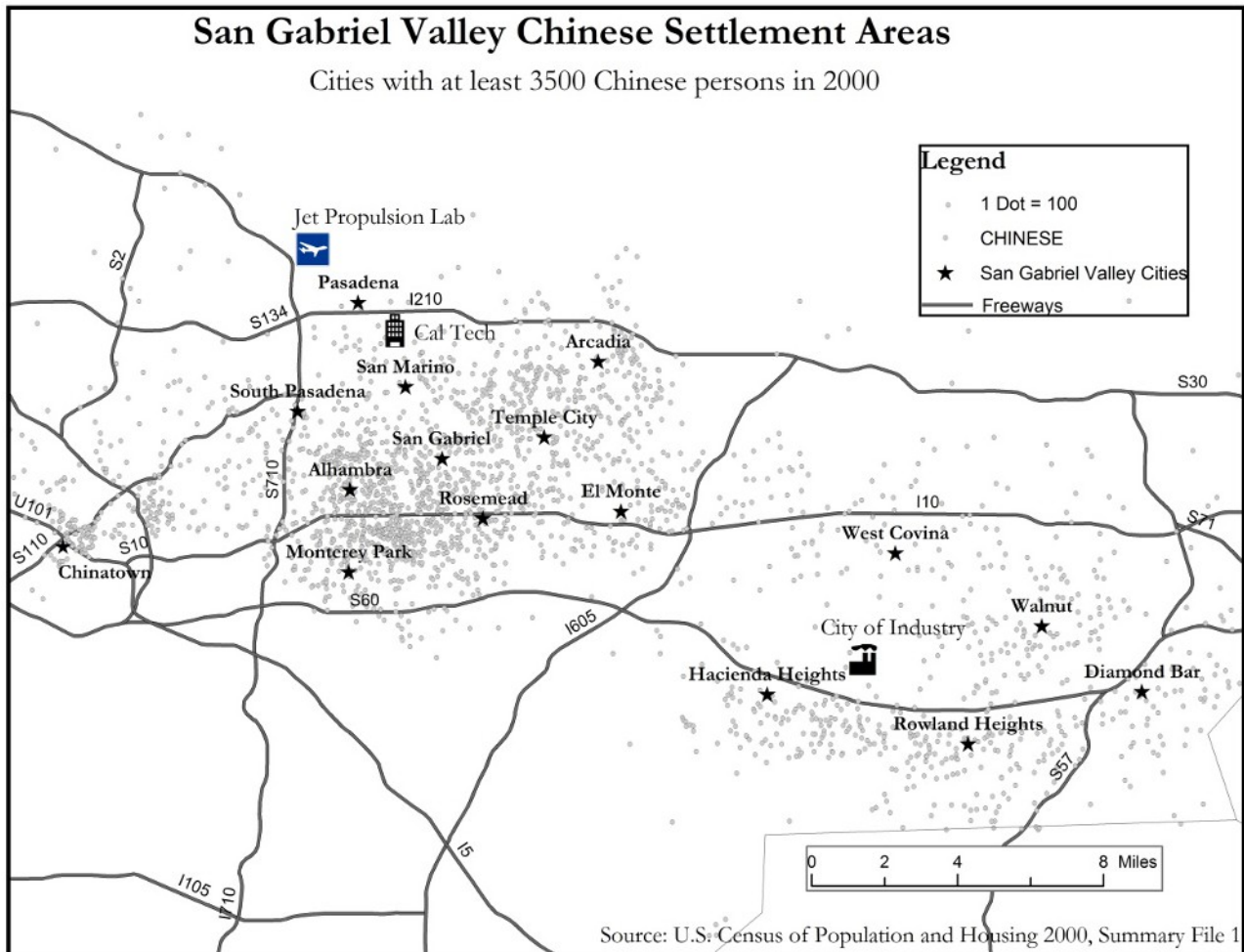
By the 1980s, a new growth coalition around African-American Mayor Tom Bradley had engineered redevelopment of downtown with office and residential towers, hotels, and a new civic center (the Music Center), building upon urban renewal at Bunker Hill that originated in the 1950s. When Los Angeles hosted the 1984 Olympics, boosting its “global city” ambitions, Koreatown and the Chinese SGV were already known urban destinations and Japanese corporations were active investors downtown. Yet slow-growth movements became active in the 1980s throughout the region as suburban homeowners and hillside and coastal interests fought high-density development and rising property taxes while defending open space (Baldassare 1986; Sassen 1988; Davis 1990). San Fernando Valley and Hollywood secession measures, however, were defeated at the polls in 2002. Meanwhile, sports and entertainment interests opened up another front in downtown redevelopment at South Park with Staples Center (1999) and LA Live (2007). Suburban slow-growth movements have now subsided and been superseded by livable city movements advocating green space, public transit and New Urbanist planning featuring higher density with enlivened public spaces (Gottlieb 2007). Slow growth gives way to new growth as livable neighborhoods become new touchstones for gentrification and urban tourism. The Los Angeles growth machine has apparently moved from imminent death to new life in the new millennium, with immigrant agglomerations like Koreatown and the Chinese San Gabriel Valley among the key foci of urban development.

The Chinese and Korean growth machines contrast insofar as the Chinese engage in “autonomous” forms of public–private partnership in the small suburban cities of the SGV, while Korean immigrants in mid-city Koreatown operate as “auxiliary” players in the larger arena of Los Angeles city politics (Oh and Chung 2014). But while the Chinese have gained political clout in the suburban city halls of the SGV cities, they also deal with homeowner and slow-growth interests. We describe below the different forms of the Chinese “ethnoburbs”. (We also lead broader comparative work with Koreatown with Angie Chung, Sookhee Oh, and Carolyn Choi.)

### **The Chinese Growth Machine(s) of the San Gabriel Valley**

Chinese immigrants were largely restricted to a Chinatown in downtown LA, but in the 1960s the liberalization of immigration law expanded the inflow, and civil-rights laws affirmed their rights to fair housing. In the 1970s, a Taiwanese-Chinese realtor and developer named Frederic Hsieh began promoting housing in the hills of Monterey Park to immigrants, dubbing the area the “Chinese Beverly Hills” (Horton *et al.* 1995). The Taiwanese were followed by Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese and the immigration spread into adjacent San Gabriel Valley cities such as Alhambra, San Gabriel and Arcadia, and by the 1990s a sprawling Chinese “ethnoburb” was established across 22 SGV cities (Li 1998; Lin and Robinson 2005).

**Map 1. The Chinese “ethnoburb” of the San Gabriel Valley**



GIS map by Paul Robinson, permission granted.

The Chinese immigrant growth machine(s) involves partnership of transnational Chinese and local Chinese-American entrepreneurs and politicians with native-born developers and public officials. Rather than being a spatially and politically unified immigrant growth machine, Chinese entrepreneurs are decentralized across the SGV in a “constellation” of independent growth machines that compete but also collaborate. The constellation of Chinese-influenced SGV cities is linked by Chinese culture and there is municipal cooperation in supporting public booster events like the Lunar New Year and regional growth proposals like the Interstate-710 freeway expansion. But there has also been a lively spirit of free-market competition over the years as the SGV cities have sought to attract Chinese investors, consumers, residents and tourists. The variations among the SGV Chinese growth machines reflect discrete differences in population and political-opportunity structure, including the presence or absence of slow-growth movements.

**Monterey Park and “managed growth”**

Chinese immigrants to Monterey Park encountered social conflict in the 1980s when a nativist slow-growth movement, the Residents’ Association of Monterey Park (RAMP), mobilized local political sentiments and propelled a slate of slow-growth city councilors into office. RAMP perceived the influx of new Chinese immigrant businesses and shopping malls on commercial boulevards and condominium complexes on their quiet residential streets of single-family homes as having eroded the quality of life in their traditional suburban commuter town.

Barry Hatch was elected to the city council and became mayor during RAMP's ascendance and galvanized native-born Anglo sentiments against the growing incidence of Chinese signage on the business corridors of Monterey Park with a campaign to make English the official language of the city. The measure was defeated, and succeeding RAMP's brief regime was a slate called Citizens for Harmony in Monterey Park (CHAMP), which joined candidates around a multicultural coalition of newcomer Chinese and established whites and Latinos. CHAMP launched Judy Chu to the roles of city councilor and mayor. This new coalition resisted the outright building moratoriums originated by RAMP and installed a more "managed growth" (Horton *et al.* 1995) policy including growth ordinances (passed in 1982) that required any development projects of more than an acre to be subject to voter referendum for a zoning change (Prop. L), and also limited new residential units to no more than 100 per year (Prop. K). The passage of Prop. S in 1990 extended the life of, and strengthened, Prop. K.

### San Gabriel and Chinese Disneyland

The slow-growth regime and its legacy in Monterey Park put a damper on large-scale urban development for nearly two decades as Chinese investment shifted eastward to other SGV cities. In the 1990s, San Gabriel became a new focus of development with the building of the upscale San Gabriel Square shopping mall anchored by the Ranch 99 Asian supermarket and the Focus department store. The site is dubbed the "Chinese Disneyland" and the "Great Mall of China". When the high-end San Gabriel Hilton was built across the street by Chinese developer Sonny Chen in 2005, a strong synergy between the shopping mall and the four-star hotel began attracting more international Chinese tourists seeking high-end jewelers, clothing and accessory merchandise at lower prices than back home. Virtually every city in the SGV Chinese ethnoburb is involved with shopping malls, hotels and mixed-use commercial and residential projects aimed at local Chinese consumers and transnational tourists. Entrepreneurs and officials across the SGV cities tout business development, job creation and increased revenues from sales, property and hotel-occupancy taxes.

Figure 1. San Gabriel Square Mall



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**Figure 2. The San Gabriel Hilton hotel**



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### **Arcadia and mansionization**

In Arcadia, a liberal policy towards the demolition of single-family homes led to a phenomenon of “mansionization”, with giant homes targeted at Chinese buyers. Beginning in the 1990s in lower Arcadia, mansionization reached the more exclusive Highlands neighborhood in the San Gabriel foothills by the 2010s, with mansions priced up to \$6–8 million that are squeezed in like “big boxes” on modest-sized lots, dwarfing their neighbors. Chinese-American architects design many homes with *feng shui* considerations and wok-friendly kitchens aimed at wealthy transnational Chinese searching for American real-estate investments (Hawthorne 2014). Irate homeowners opposed to mansionization recently started the Saving the Arcadia Highlands movement, which promotes housing-code revision and launches lawsuits, and has waged a recall campaign against city councilors John Chandler, Sho Tay and John Wuo.

**Figure 3. An Arcadia mansion next to a modest home**



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**Figure 4. Save the Arcadia Highlands sign**



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**Alhambra and multicultural New Urbanism**

In Alhambra, there was a boom in mixed-use commercial/residential projects in the 1990s, but a constituency of preservation-minded activists pressed to implement design guidelines and keep

development low-rise. The managed-growth regime in Alhambra has mixed cineplex and shopping-mall developments with four- to six-story housing projects along Main Street, enlivening public and pedestrian life. A diversity branding campaign, “Mosaic on Main Street”, boosted the image of multicultural New Urbanism with street banners (Cheng 2013). Slow-growth activists are diverse in their political leanings, but many often point to the costs of growth and the need for responsible growth that takes into consideration sustainability, traffic and environmental costs, the lack of affordable housing, the displacement of low-income families, and the lack of long-term planning. Activists claim pro-growth factions focus on the shortsighted prioritization of quick growth and revenue that often leads to the literal bulldozing of existing buildings, as well as the figurative bulldozing of citizens’ concerns. There are also environmental concerns about air pollution from the Interstate-10 freeway documented by students and parents at Mark Keppel High School in a campaign organized by Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

**Figure 5. New housing on Alhambra’s Main Street**



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### **Immigrant Growth Machines and Metropolitan Reinvention**

Notwithstanding slow-growth concerns, there has been a veritable rush in new Chinese investment, with over a dozen SGV hotel projects in the 2010s coming out of the Great Recession. Gradual relaxations on outward investment from China and the incentive of the American EB-5 visa program (offering a US green card for job-creating investments of \$1 million or more) have attracted more Chinese investors. Slow growth has turned to New Urbanist growth in Monterey Park, with developer Ronnie Lam’s upscale Atlantic Times Square condominium and shopping mall and plans for three new four-star hotels. Chinese investment has increasingly moved beyond the SGV and into downtown LA/South Park with the Greenland and Oceanwide mixed-use condominium towers. The Korean immigrant growth machine has encountered less slow-growth resistance, as evidenced by high-rise office and condominium towers in Koreatown, where new

subway stations boost pedestrian life versus automobiles, and a denser, more vertical New Urbanism.

**Figure 6. Monterey Park Atlantic Times Square project**



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**Figure 7. Chinese Greenland Company “Metropolis” project in downtown LA**



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## Downtown LA and Vancouverism

The Chinese Metropolis and Oceanwide towers and Hanjin/Korean Airlines investment at the Wilshire Grand Hotel and office project are amplifying higher-density in downtown Los Angeles. Asian public culture animates the global city of Los Angeles from Koreatown's Korean Festival to Arcadia's 626 Night Market. East Asian investment contributes to counteract metropolitan sprawl in Los Angeles with the vertical city urban model of Vancouverism that elevates high-rise living along with vibrant public life.<sup>2</sup> In the new millennium, immigrant growth machines are part and parcel of LA's urban and suburban reinvention.

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<sup>2</sup> See Nicolas Douay's 12 June 2015 article in *Metropolitiques*: "Vancouverism: hybridisation and spread of an urban model", URL: [www.metropolitiques.eu/Vancouverism-hybridisation-and.html](http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Vancouverism-hybridisation-and.html).

**Melody Chiong** earned her PhD in sociology at the University of California, San Diego in 2014. Her dissertation, *Conscientious Capitalism: Race, Culture and the Logic of Reinvestment at the Oldest African American Bank in Los Angeles*, is based on ethnographic and archival research at Broadway Federal Bank in South Los Angeles. She is the Director of Research at Paul C. Hudson Consulting in Los Angeles.

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