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# Guest studies the diversity of New York's Chinatown

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Chinatowns are common sights in almost every major city in the U.S. To westerners, they appear to be homogeneous places where one goes to find good Chinese food and a little more. However, researchers have found that there is much more to them than that. It turns out that these Chinese communities can tell us a lot about not only the Chinese immigrants but also the cities where they are located.

One of those researchers is Dr. Ken Guest. He comes from a very religious family from New Jersey. "My mother is the fourth generation of United Methodist ministers in our family. Thus, religion has been something of deep interest to me on both a personal and a professional level. When I started in Chinatown, I quickly began to see that the religious scene was very complicated and also very central to new immigrants' experience," says Guest.

Guest prepared well to become one of the foremost experts in Chinese matters in the U.S. He not only obtained a bachelor's degree in East Asian Studies at Columbia University and a master's and doctorate in anthropology from the City University of New York, but he also spent eight months of his junior year in China learning Chinese.

"I found it very strange, having lived in Beijing and visited churches and temples, even in the 1980's after the Cultural Revolution, there was still a very vibrant religious scene. So I started walking around Chinatown and mapping the blocks. I found over sixty religious Chinese communities within Lower Manhattan's Chinatown. Many of them were Christian, but there were also Buddhists and Taoists," says Guest, who today is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York."

Those experiences led him to break with old notions about Chinatowns. "One of the first obstacles I overcame was the stereotype that Chinese people aren't religious. I went out and read all the books I could find on New York's Chinatown and other Chinatowns, and there was only one paragraph in the couple dozen books about New York's Chinatown that talked about religion," Guest explains.

He later developed an explanation for what he



Dr. Guest in his office.

found. "I think there are a number of factors. One is certainly all the stories that have been told about China since the late 1940's with the Communist government takeover and an assumption people have that religion has been wiped out. There's some assumption that Chinese people coming here are not going to be religious. Yet, for many Chinese people, religious expression and experience is very complicated and doesn't fit a lot of Western cultural categories."

When he teaches anthropology, he transmits to students what anthropologists like him actually do. "Anthropology in general is the study of humans; we're interested in humans throughout time and across all spaces, so it does include the archeology of human settlements and also the physical anthropology of our evolutionary development. We also study language, and cultural anthropologists are interested in seeing how humans live together in communities," he says.

Guest explains not only what anthropology is all about but also why it is so important to study it. "I explain to my students my belief that anthropology may be the most important class they take in college because it's about learning how to navigate groups of people, how to understand new groups that you've never been in before, and how to engage in a much deeper and more compelling way with those groups."

For him, part of the excitement of being an anthropologist is the hands-on approach of the discipline. "The set of tools an anthropologist develops in terms of listening, understanding power structures, seeing how cultural patterns get formed, those are the kinds of skills that can be employed in any group setting to take you beyond the surface to something deeper and more meaningful. Field work is the essential training ground for anthropologists. It's where we develop our basic skill sets, and it's one of those things that, when

you get together with other anthropologists, you talk about—your fieldwork—because it's our connection to one another, even if we've done it in different parts of the world."

"The key to field work" he continues, "is that it's about learning, it's about crossing cultural barriers and boundaries, going someplace you've never been before, and even if it's some place you've been before, seeing it in a way you've never seen it before. That fieldwork process of taking your body and moving it into a new and uncomfortable environment is a dramatic new framework for learning, so I try to offer my students here at Baruch fieldwork opportunities in every class because I think it's that embodied experience of fieldwork that is transformative for anthropologists. It reshapes who we are, the way we see the world."

He asserts that it was field work that allowed him to understand Chinatown. "As an anthropologist, we're always looking for ways of entering a community, and my experience of doing my mapping and my fieldwork was that I encountered a number of religious communities that were very vibrant, that were starting from scratch, and that were also very open to talking to me about what their lives were."

He found that the first wave of Chinese immigration to New York City happened in the late 1700's. "Chinatown emerged here in New York City as a safe haven, as an ethnic enclave where people could live and work, could open small business, could mobilize the financial and social capital they needed to survive and take care of each other, and it was a very small community really until the 1960's," Guest says.

"Chinese are not all the same. They come from different parts of China, they're parts of different immigrant waves, they're different generations, they have different primary, secondary, and tertiary languages that they use at home. We've seen over the last twenty-five or thirty years a dramatic transformation of Manhattan's Chinatown and New York's Chinese population."

*Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/201850336>*

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