Configuring and Reconfiguring Chinatown: The Production of Desire in an Ethnic Enclave

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

_Acknowledgements_  iii

Figures  iv

Introduction  1

**Chapter One**  13  
Representations of Race & Space in Early Chinese America

**Chapter Two**  37  
Closing the Rent Gap: Revitalization & Development After 1965

**Chapter Three**  74  
Beyond Housing: Gentrifying Ethnicity & Culture

Conclusion  95

References  102
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FIGURES

Figure 1. Yi Fa Hair Salon, Doyers Street (2017) 1

Figure 2. Restaurant Worker, Mott Street (2017) 13

Figure 3. 83-85 Bowery Protest (2017) 37

Figure 4. Construction of One Manhattan Square (2018) 64

Figure 5. Cooks and Customers, Doyers Street (2018) 74

Figure 6. Chinese Tuxedo Exterior (2018) 88

Figure 7. Chinatown, Aerial View (2018) 95
INTRODUCTION

Figure 1 Photo by Author. Yi Fa Hair Salon, Doyers Street. 2017.
In a city now known for its shiny skyscrapers and one of the largest public transportation networks in the world, Manhattan’s Chinatown exists as one of the last remnants of old New York. Walking through the streets of Chinatown’s historic core, one can still recognize the architectural landscape portrayed in old photographs, which show what the neighborhood looked like nearly half a century before. On Bayard, Mott, Pell, and Doyers Streets, tenement style buildings still line the blocks, comprising small businesses on the ground floors and residential units on the upper levels. Vibrantly adorned awnings, with English and Chinese text, make for signage that caters to Chinese immigrants and tourists alike, and there are still plenty of places to get a hearty wonton soup for under $6. In spite of what has been seemingly fixed in time, however, Chinatown is changing. In a way it always has been, but today, these changes are resulting in heightened development, the loss of affordable housing, and cultural displacement, among many other things that threaten the distinct quality of life that Chinatown residents have enjoyed for over a century. Since its establishment, the enclave has been operated by and for Chinese Americans, and whether that remains true today is left uncertain.

The heterogeneous and hybrid identity of Chinatowns nationwide mirror that of Chinese American culture, a point that Lisa Lowe makes in her book, *Immigrant Acts*. According to Lowe, “Chinatown is itself the very emblem of shifting demographics, languages, and populations,” given its transformation from the urban “bachelor society” settlements born of Chinese exclusion to more integrated suburban Chinese communities today, such as the one in Monterey Park, California.¹

Chinatown’s multidimensionality also arises from it being a site for the dismemberment, re-memberment, and reconstruction of Chinese culture, where Eastern customs are adopted, reconfigured, and repackaged as Chinese American. This particularly applies to food, such as chop suey, an American rendition of traditional Chinese cuisine that many Americans view to be innately Chinese. It can also be applied to Chinatown as a geographic space, comprised of businesses, restaurants, and a compilation of distinctive Chinese and Chinese American cultures.

Chinatown is at once a transplant of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—by way of importing their food, products, and people—but also generates Chinese culture in its own right, by fusing what was brought over westward with what has been and continues to be invented here.² In Lowe’s words, “The making of Asian American culture includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented; Asian American culture also includes the practices that emerge in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian American cultures as ‘other.’”³ Lowe maintains that many cultural elements that are regarded as Chinese often have little connection to China or Chinese culture. In spite of this, the Otherization of Asian Americans can be superficially remedied by way of assimilation through the rhetoric of American multiculturalism, which often aestheticizes and commodifies Asian American difference.⁴ In this process, Asian American culture is only adopted as American through the exaggeration of its exotic.

² It’s worth noting that though Chinatown has been a predominantly Chinese ethnic enclave, there are also ethnic residents and storefronts that are not connected to the Chinese diaspora. Many of these residents come from Vietnam or other parts of South Asia and though their histories merit attention in the Chinatown gentrification story, for the purposes of this project, I will predominantly focus on Chinese Americans in Chinatown.
³ Lowe.
⁴ Ibid., 9.
foreignness—approaching assimilation only through a fixation on its novelty, as if it could be divorced from a history characterized by exclusion. This commodification of culture is particularly salient to the type of gentrification that’s taking place in Chinatown, which is emptying the enclave of its embedded histories and meaning.

Due to exclusionary immigration and labor legislation, Chinatown was a predominantly male and closed-off society until the mid-twentieth century, when immigration laws loosened to allow family members to join male laborers in the U.S. For this reason, the neighborhood was forced into relative self-sufficiency that made assimilation difficult, and garnered apprehensive curiosity from the world outside. This isolation invited non-Chinese to chronicle Chinatown and Chinese America from afar, through news stories, ethnographies, and images that painted the community as a site of amorality and vice, contrasting the inassimilable Chinese alien and immigrant with the American citizen. One historical example of these narratives is the story of Elsie Sigel’s 1909 murder, which Mary Ting Yi Lui reexamines in her 2005 book, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*. In 1909, news of Sigel’s death became the subject of national fixation, when it was found that Sigel, a young white woman, had been romantically involved with several Chinese men whom she had met as a Christian missionary working downtown. Her body was discovered in a trunk that belonged to Leon Ling, a man who lived in Chinatown. During a time period when unsolved murders were fairly commonplace, it’s obvious that the fascination with Sigel’s death was heavily intertwined with a fear of miscegenation and confusion over
why a young woman from an upstanding white family would involve herself with men
down in Chinatown.5

The murder set off a spike in hysteria over crime and safety in Chinatown,
which resulted in the increased surveillance and investigation of spaces occupied by
Chinese immigrants. These included homes, places of worship, businesses, and the
neighborhood of Chinatown as a whole.6 Furthermore, many of the city’s writers and
cartoonists began to portray Chinese men as hypersexualized, inhuman creatures who
preyed on vulnerable white women. Sigel’s death, thus, reignited yet another flame of
public scorn against Chinese Americans, launching a witch-hunt for Ling that had
civilians nationwide turning in random Asian men to the authorities.7 These
narratives of strangeness, poverty, and amorality contrived from the outside have
allowed Chinatown’s identity to be shaped by those who merely have a superficial
level of contact with the community, if any at all. This conflict over questions of
representation, and who speaks for Chinatown, continues today, not only within
media or literary depictions of Chinese Americans, but in the very debate over which
individuals and groups get to determine the future of Chinatown’s land use,
development, and architectural and cultural landscape.

Bordered by SoHo to the north, TriBeCa to the west, and the Lower East
Side and Financial District to the east and south respectively, Chinatown is situated
on one of the most expensive and desirable plots of land in the city, yet rent costs
remain relatively low—that is, when set beside the exorbitant rates of apartment units

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 13.
just blocks away. According to StreetEasy, a real estate listing site and database, the median rent cost for a two-bedroom apartment in Chinatown is $2,800, compared to $6,060 in TriBeCa and $7,995 in SoHo. And though that relatively low figure might seem like cause for celebration, it’s undeniable that Chinatown is becoming more and more unaffordable to the average neighborhood resident. According to a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) devised study cited in the Chinatown Working Group’s 2014 zoning proposal, Chinatown’s average median income (AMI) for a family of four is $37,362 compared to $85,900 at the city level. For an average four-person family in Chinatown, $934 of monthly rent would be considered affordable, but the costs have soared far beyond that figure.

Many neighborhood activists have blamed the increasing development pressures in recent years on a 2008 zoning plan that put height caps on new buildings on nearby blocks in the East Village and Lower East Side, but left Chinatown unprotected. On wider streets like Allen and the Bowery, high-rise hotels and tall buildings have cropped up like weeds, but when the Chinatown Working Group, a coalition of over 50 Chinatown organizations and businesses, proposed a similar zoning to the Department of City Planning in 2014, the city rejected it, calling it “too ambitious.” Critics called the decision neglectful and racially discriminatory, warning that leaving Chinatown unprotected would prompt an onslaught of development from the relatively wealthier and whiter parts of the Lower East Side into a poorer

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community of color, resulting in rapid gentrification, as well as accompanying physical and cultural displacement.  

A buzzword that’s often thrown around without much of a clear definition, gentrification broadly refers to a process in which higher income people move into a lower income neighborhood, changing its physical and cultural landscape. In urban studies and political science literature, gentrification has myriad definitions that are site specific: namely, gentrification in New York’s Chinatown looks very different than it does in the South Bronx, Williamsburg, or Los Angeles’ Echo Park. In Chinatown, the gentrification process is distinctive because it is, in part, brought on to the neighborhood from outside forces like the real estate industry, as well as self-inflicted by members of the Chinatown community themselves, who might reap benefits from increased tourism and contact with outsiders.

We can examine just one example of this in the recent construction of the Hotel 50 Bowery, a swanky spot for tourists that would look more appropriate in the trendy and upscale Meatpacking District. Owned by a Chinese family, the hotel also boasts a rooftop bar, with a cocktail menu comprised of drinks with self-exoticizing names. There’s the “East India” and the “Black Dragon Tea,” which each cost $16—doubtlessly unaffordable to most of Chinatown’s residents. But to outsiders, not only is Chinatown now worth visiting, it’s a neighborhood worth residing in for amenities one could find in any other New York tourist neighborhood but with an added exotic twist. This hearkens back to Lowe’s point about the assimilation of Chinese culture.

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through a caricatured, aestheticized, and strategically assembled narrative:

Chinatown is now “cool” by virtue of its gritty, sequestered past. We can witness this by way of the photo shoots that take place on Pell Street on any given day, with band members and models captured in front of a backdrop of vibrant neon signs and rustic tenement buildings. Somehow, Chinese characters and aging storefronts have become hip rather than threatening, and so has Chinatown.

Gentrification in Chinatown doesn’t occur simply by way of wealthier newcomers pricing poor immigrants out of their homes. Rather, it’s by jacking up the cultural capital of new condominiums, restaurants, and art galleries on the backs of Chinese immigrants and the culture they formed out of isolation and exclusion. In just one example today, the developer Extell is in the process of building a luxury condominium on the edge of Chinatown, in the Two Bridges area, where a two-bedroom apartment costs upwards of $2 million. The 800-foot glass tower on 252 South Street, which Extell described as a “vertical village,” replaced a Pathmark supermarket and has made it difficult for older residents in the neighborhood and nearby New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) project, Rutgers House, to access affordable groceries.13

Chinatown activists and residents vehemently opposed the tower’s construction, but on the building’s website, Extell touts the neighborhood’s ethnic surroundings: “In classic form and with a contemporary flourish, glamour and grandeur meet graffiti and grit in this proud home to avant-garde galleries, cutting-

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edge boutiques, and trailblazing bars.” 14 Again, the notion of “grit” fused with luxury arises, calling to mind Lowe’s point, which preconditions the acceptance of Chinese culture and urban spaces into the mainstream by way of an accentuation of its differences—the slight discomfort the streets evoke, the well-worn buildings that recall a New York otherwise a thing of the past.

Through this project, I aim to examine the construction and self-construction of Asian immigrant culture to center on New York’s Chinatown as an ethnic urban space. Just as Asian American culture is a product of what is inherited, collected, and re-collected, Chinatown, as a site of Asian American cultural production and consumption, is a spatial equivalent—deriving its business, cultural, and physical landscape from what was brought over, what was generated within the community, as well as what was constructed by outsiders and their conceptions of Chinese America. As Chinatown undergoes development and a distinctive type of gentrification that is changing its physical landscape, I became interested in further exploring what effects this had on the community’s cultural one. If Asian American culture and spaces are a re-membering of Asian American history—fragmented by immigration, exclusion, war, and forced assimilation—what happens when a close-knit ethnic enclave ceases to be the insular and reliable community it was for an excluded ethnic minority? Furthermore, who is it that charts its future, when the dichotomy between upwardly mobile Chinese Americans and poor Chinese immigrants grows ever larger?

I will tackle these questions first by contextualizing the history of Chinese representations in the United States and looking into the formation of Chinatowns

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nationwide before 1943 as direct reactions to widespread legal and cultural Chinese exclusion. This first chapter will frame early representations of Chinese Americans to identify the roots of stereotypes of Chinese people and their spaces, whose legacies still persist today. The second chapter will delve into the transition of Chinatown from a closed-off society of male laborers to its evolution into a heterogeneous community of immigrants, families, and businesses. This section will center on the affordable housing crisis and also discuss the recent rezoning proposals and the reactions they garnered from Chinatown residents and activists. Lastly, the final chapter will draw attention to new businesses entering the neighborhood that cater to a new middle and upper class demographic, which are altering the physical and cultural character of the enclave economy. I will also discuss the increased socioeconomic inequality of New York’s Chinese population: not only is Chinatown changing to adapt to tourists and outsiders, but also to wealthier second generation Chinese Americans and immigrants, which complicates the study of the neighborhood’s development, in that it doesn’t cleanly pit an ethnic minority group against outsiders.

My objective in undertaking this project is to chronicle Chinatown’s changing landscape in the present, while utilizing its complex history to consider the best visions of its future. This will be explored through the lenses of Chinese American legal history and city zoning ordinances, but also by way of examining Chinatown’s current social structures and reading the neighborhood as a cultural text. The intersection of these sources shed light on how diverse demographics derive meaning from space, and how spaces, in turn, impart meaning on to ethnic bodies. Oftentimes, culture can provide channels into American assimilation when politics fail to recognize the immigrant as citizen. But usually, the culture of ethnic minorities is only absorbed into
the status quo through an emphasis on its exotic un-American characteristics. Just as Asian American customs, literature, arts, and cuisine comprise Asian American culture, Asian American enclaves like Chinatown do just as much. As we enter an era today where Chinatown is beginning to physically look and feel different, it is a tremendously compelling time to look back through its history in order to conceptualize the neighborhood’s future.

The findings, observations, and experiences that I will discuss in the following pages will be a fusion of those belonging to scholars in the humanities and social sciences, Chinatown community members, and my own. In sharing these experiences, I have no intention of universalizing my own interactions with Chinatown or claiming they are true for others as well, which is why I’ve elected to pursue this project through a more journalistic and historical approach rather than a strictly scholarly one. Because we tend to hear about cities from the perspectives of sociologists, urban planners, local politicians, and promoters of tourism, there often isn’t enough space for everyday residents to share their stories. I sought to keep this imbalance in mind, making the conscious decision to examine gentrification in Chinatown from the bottom up and doing so in accessible language. In writing this thesis, I hope to rouse any ideas readers may have related to determining the future of Chinatown—in balancing the economic stimulation it has undergone in recent years, while preserving affordability, culture, and a sense of community. This type of planning necessitates knowledge gathered by urban planners and policymakers, city politicians, historians and artists, community organizers, and far most importantly—Chinatown residents themselves. I hope to integrate parcels of research and thought from each of these

15 Lowe, 9.
groups of individuals and know that in doing so, I will still only be contributing to a
conversation about Chinatown’s future that is only beginning.

As a first generation Chinese American growing up on the Lower East Side,
Chinatown was just a short walk away from home for me, and though my family
didn’t rely on it for shelter and employment the way older generations of Chinese
immigrants did, it still felt—and continues to feel—like home. It was where I first
attended school on Grand Street, and would each day afterwards go next door to the
Chinese bakery with my mom to treat ourselves to a dan tat each.\footnote{A \textit{dan tat} is a sweet egg custard pastry popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Portugal, Brazil, Britain, and various Asian countries.} It was where she
did her grocery shopping most days, at the vegetable stand on Elizabeth—as the street
vendor weighed the half-pound handful of baby bok choy, she would ask him about
his children and family. The street was always bustling at most hours of the day, and
mid-conversation with my mother, the vendor would yell out to greet a familiar face
across the street.

It is these moments of neighborly recognition within a large impersonal city
that make Chinatown such a special place within Lower Manhattan. In New York,
we move swiftly and with purpose, maintaining a sense of anonymity even among
people we see on the train every day. But Chinatown still feels like a small city within
a city, and for older immigrant residents who feel that language and novel
surroundings betray them elsewhere, it’s the only home they can conceive of in the
buzzing borough. Chinatown needs to continue serving these residents first, and given
how the enclave has transformed out of recent globalization and gentrification
pressures, it is neglecting to do that.
REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND SPACE IN EARLY CHINESE AMERICA

Figure 2. Photo by Author. Restaurant Worker, Mott Street. 2017.
If New York City was the immigration capital of the United States in the early twentieth century, we can think of Chinatown as an additional gateway into America, whose existence simultaneously facilitated the marginalization of Chinese from mainstream society as well as their assimilation into it. At the turn of the century, Chinatown was a community of newcomers—predominantly male sojourners with dollar-sign dreams following the 1849 California Gold Rush. They were intent on striking it rich before returning to China with newly minted wealth, and though these men were able to find work or start businesses that earned them more than they would’ve made in China, life in New York was far from their original idyllic visions of America.

Anti-Chinese discrimination in the workforce and exclusionary immigration laws after 1882 made it impossible for early settlers to become naturalized citizens, bring over family members, or join labor unions, resulting in a sequestered community where “family” assumed a broadened definition beyond bloodlines. During Chinatown’s earliest years, the Chinese zeroed in on surviving in a country that looked upon them with contempt, constructing contradictory narratives of strangeness, subservience, hyper-masculinity, effeminacy, backwardness, and economic threat that marked the Chinese like a contagious disease. These depictions resulted in stigma that encouraged a closed-off community like Chinatown to form and also contributed to the air of mystery that inspired fear and fascination of the Chinese across America—stereotypes that led to the expulsion of entire Chinese
settlements in the West, but somehow gives Chinatown its no-frills cool appeal today.\textsuperscript{17}

In classical times, Europeans were struck by China’s technological advancements and infrastructural achievements, but this view toward the East grew dim during the nineteenth century missionary period when the Chinese came to be seen as stagnant, despotic, and unprincipled.\textsuperscript{18} To Western missionaries in China, the Chinese represented the antithesis of Christianity: they gambled, engaged in polygamy, and smoked opium.\textsuperscript{19} The Chinese in America were received similarly when they arrived during the Gold Rush—first welcomed with open arms before being perceived as an economic threat and forcibly removed. Upon their arrival, California governor John McDougal greeted the Chinese graciously, calling them “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens.”\textsuperscript{20} Any hospitality, however, was short lived, with anti-Chinese sentiment reaching a particularly virulent climax in the 1880s. Across the West—in California, Wyoming, Washington, and Oregon—there were around 300 anti-Chinese riots and purges in total, most of which were caused by perceived economic competition between whites and Chinese.\textsuperscript{21}

Most Chinese laborers came to the U.S. to work in mining, railroad construction, domestic service, and agriculture—jobs that were popular among working-class white people.\textsuperscript{22} The Central Pacific Railroad Company, which

\textsuperscript{17} Ric Burns and Li-Shin Yu, "The Chinese Exclusion Act," (PBS, 2017).
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Burns and Yu.
constructed the western link of the Transcontinental Railroad, initially employed white workers, but eventually the dangerous working conditions in the Sierras deterred them and the Chinese took their place. At one point, Central Pacific had 13,000 Chinese workers employed, comprising 80 percent of the company’s total railroad laborers. As a result, unskilled white workers came to view the Chinese as unfair competitors because they accepted some of the most hazardous jobs for startlingly low wages. The Chinese were also blamed for rising unemployment and the ensuing economic woes of the 1950s. In the face of these hardships and an increased Chinese presence in the West, white workers concluded that the only solution was to get rid of these foreigners through the most extreme of measures. They chased the Chinese off of farmland, subjected them to forceful violence, and burned their homes to the ground.

The severity of anti-Chinese sentiment in the west was a far cry from the romanticized visions of American prosperity that Chinese migrants had in mind prior to leaving their homes. Given the food shortages and widespread poverty in China following the Tai Ping rebellion, Chinese in Guangdong and Fujian were easily sold into tall tales of American streets paved with gold, heaps of which they could keep for themselves and bring home to their families. Most early migrants were from areas in Guangdong’s Pearl River Delta, which were already hubs for American and European trade in southern China. This region existed at a crossroads of communication where locals rubbed shoulders with businessmen, foreign merchants,

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24 Wong, 3.
26 Burns and Yu.
and labor recruiters.\textsuperscript{27} Already characterized by cross-cultural and economic exchange, this area made for the perfect location to disseminate the idea of America and promote a hyperbolic image of the American Dream. Vessel masters, many of whom were employed by American companies, marketed an America on placards and pamphlets that promised large houses, abundant food, and the finest clothing.\textsuperscript{28} Soon enough, \textit{gum san}—which was used to refer to California and translates to “gold mountain”—became a common expression synonymous with American opportunity. It tinted conversations about the future with traces of optimism and made its way into Cantonese folk songs, glorifying sojourner men for the riches they bore upon returning home.\textsuperscript{29}

Though some men ran toward the American Dream to chase what lay before them, others sought out immigration as a desperate means of running \textit{from} hardship. For the latter group, the journey to the United States usually required separating from homes and families, as Confucian moral code barred women from leaving their homes.\textsuperscript{30} America thus often represented not a destination but an intermediary pit stop dedicated solely to accumulating capital, making men the heroic breadwinners that pulled their families from poverty. Persuaded into viewing America as a country of racial tolerance and infinitely untapped resources, the Chinese likely viewed the U.S. in an optimistic light. Advertisements told them that in America, “All alike; big man no larger than little man. There are a great many Chinamen there now, and it

\textsuperscript{29} Lee.
will not be a strange country.” But those convinced of an American utopia free of poverty, inequality, or intolerance would be quickly proven wrong, as the Chinese became one of the most detested ethnic groups in America.

Anti-Chinese sentiment, or Sinophobia, reared its head ubiquitously—from government-enforced immigration policies to civilian violence. In 1885, a group of white workers in Rock Springs, Wyoming fired guns at Chinese miners as they worked, an incident that arose from a dispute over who should work which parts of the mine. A year later, vigilantes in Tacoma, Washington planned a raid on the Chinese community there. They descended on stores, damaged furniture, and, finally, forced the Chinese to walk nine miles across the railroad crossing they’d built, before giving them the choice between expulsion from Tacoma or death. As these acts of violence escalated in the 1880s, many Chinese moved throughout the United States, with a significant number settling in New York. The wave of anti-Chinese discrimination hadn’t seemed to take root on the East Coast, and as an international city with a large immigrant population, New York didn’t seem like a bad place for business either.

In 1880, 83 percent of Chinese in America lived on the West Coast. By 1900, the figure had dropped to 66 percent, with Chinese dispersing to Chinese communities in major Midwest and East Coast cities, and continued falling to 55 percent in 1920. By 1880, New York’s Chinatown had a population of 800 on Mott, Pell, and Bayard Streets, which still comprise the heart of the neighborhood today.

31 Yin, 14.  
32 Wang, 4.  
34 Kwong, 38.
Though some of these residents migrated from the West, there were already 100 Chinese in New York as early as the 1860s, who worked as cigar makers, vendors, and sailors. These early New York Chinese, as opposed to their West Coast counterparts, sought to make roots in America—often marrying Irish or German women. They also had a strong tendency to adopt Anglo American names—a testament to their commitment to making homes in New York. According to Asian American Studies scholar Xinyang Wang, this commitment was brought on by the relative economic stability that the New York Chinese experienced in Chinatown’s early years. Despite the stereotype that Chinese usually undercut white men’s wages, Chinese cigar rollers on Maiden Lane were able to make $15 to $16 per thousand cigars while their German counterparts made $8 to $9. Life became more difficult for the Chinese in New York following the 1880s, when Chinese exclusion policies played a role in disseminating anti-Chinese sentiment, making economic opportunities sparse and permanent settlement in America far less appealing.

It’s widely believed that New York’s Chinatown began with Wo Kee, a general store on Mott Street. Formerly a part of the slums of Five Points, Mott Street became the site of initial Chinese settlement in New York, when its European inhabitants moved out. Wo Kee, and the businesses that cropped up following provided newcomers with everything they needed for survival, in relative proximity. For instance, Polong Congsee, a mutual aid association, occupied the same storefront as Wo Kee, so shoppers could easily purchase housewares and then inquire about

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35 Wang, 26.
36 Ibid., 25.
how to find employment or start their own businesses.\textsuperscript{38} By 1880, Chinese had leased nearly all of the 16 buildings on lower Mott Street. Though more space was needed, it was clear that the public opposed any expansion to the Chinese community, a sentiment demonstrated, for instance, when a \textit{New York Herald} article called the Chinese an “army of almond-eyed exiles.”\textsuperscript{39}

There was no doubt that the Chinese stood out visually, even in a city known for its immigrant population. Many early arrivals donned traditional dress—robes, flowing pants, and wooden-soled slippers that existed at odds with the muddy New York streets. Most of them also didn’t speak English, making a close-knit community with other Chinese speakers a necessity.\textsuperscript{40} The poor reputation of the Chinese on the national scale, however, cannot be merely attributed to their manners of dress or the ways in which they comported themselves. Initially the Chinese were criticized for their sojourner mentality—for capitalizing off of labor performed in the United States without intentions to give back to the society that bestowed them with wealth. Journalist Louis J. Beck called them “mere birds of passage… whose business relations here are at best but temporary,” when he wrote about the Chinese community in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{41} But what Beck and other critics of the Chinese failed to acknowledge was that it was public opinion that rendered them birds of passage, when stereotypes that deemed the Chinese inassimilable on the cultural level actually made it so that people rallied behind laws that would make them legally inassimilable.

\textsuperscript{38} Scott D. Seligman, \textit{Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown}, 3.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{41} Wang, 39.
The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act placed a 10-year moratorium on Chinese immigration, requiring non-laborers who sought entry during this period to be pre-approved by the Chinese government and confirmed to be non-laborers.\textsuperscript{42} This was difficult to prove, and is telling of how economic threat was the focal point that this legislation set out to address. Merchants, teachers, and travelers were among the types of people who could bypass the exclusion law, which makes sense, given that it was the working class that struggled the most and felt the most threatened by the Chinese. This legislation—the first American immigration ban on an entire ethnic group—marked the beginning of 83 years of shape shifting Chinese immigration regulation, which not only aligned Asians with illegal alien status but also established the notion that Asians could never culturally assimilate.\textsuperscript{43}

When the initial exclusion act expired, Congress extended its reach through the Geary Act, which remained in place until the 1920s, and required that Chinese already in America carry a photo identity card at all times or face deportation.\textsuperscript{44} Many Chinese refused to register, but it wasn’t until 1943 that Congress repealed all exclusion acts, putting in place a yearly quota that granted entry to a measly 105 Chinese immigrants annually and naturalization rights to Chinese already living in the states.\textsuperscript{45} In 1965, immigration regulations loosened beyond the quota system through the passage of the Hart-Celler Immigration Act. The groundbreaking legislation allowed 170,000 immigrants from outside of the Western Hemisphere to

\textsuperscript{43} Burns and Yu.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Yuning Wu, "Chinese Exclusion Act", Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (accessed January 18 2018). The 1943 repeal of Chinese exclusion was done out of political consideration for China, a U.S. ally during World War II.
enter the United States, granting preferential access to candidates that were college educated or skilled workers.\textsuperscript{46}

The exclusion period simultaneously produced, and was produced by, highly prejudiced views of the Chinese that not only deemed Chinese bodies strange, but the spaces they occupied as well. Five Points, the European immigrant neighborhood in Lower Manhattan that preceded Chinatown, was already known for its vice, crime, and poverty, and with anti-Chinese sentiment moving in from the West, the Chinese were further derided in the press for being inferior, dishonest, indecent, and unclean.\textsuperscript{47} It was these prejudices that resulted in Chinese exclusion, but exclusion from naturalization, the workforce, and mainstream society caused Chinatown to breed the insular and enigmatic reputation that it became known for.

As mentioned earlier, most of the Chinese in America were men who came with the intention of making money, which branded Chinese communities as either hyper-masculine or almost feminine, because it was seen that the Chinese somehow didn’t “need” women. Needless to say, exclusion kept wives and children in China, making Chinatowns across America bachelor societies. Men slept in boarding houses that were akin to dormitories, rather than in homes tended to by doting wives.\textsuperscript{48} Most men were between the ages of 40 and 49 and left for China before they were elderly. Because most of the wives remained in China, there were also very few children in the neighborhood before World War II and the repeal of exclusion. This made prostitution, opium, and gambling popular pastimes for the Chinese, activities that

\textsuperscript{46} Burns and Yu.
\textsuperscript{47} Seligman, 2.
\textsuperscript{48} Wang, 45.
were simultaneously lucrative and panaceas for loneliness, that, to this day, are associated with Chinese culture and Chinese American urban space.\(^\text{49}\)

Some scholars have argued that the lack of families in Chinatown made it difficult for its residents to assimilate and necessitated a reliance on neighborhood based family name and district organizations, which kept the community divided along regional lines.\(^\text{50}\) These institutions took on a number of roles—from providing a social network, to housing, to protection. Because most Chinese in the United States prior to World War II came from one of seven districts in Guangdong, there was already a hierarchy of kinship established when people arrived. Those who belonged to the same *tsu*, or lineage, were considered closest, followed by those from the same village. Tsu and village members joined together in Chinatown to form mutual aid groups called *fongs*, which had 20 to 100 members. Members met in rented apartments, where they’d discuss everything from social activities to financial support, which were funded by membership dues. In addition to using pooled funds to build their lives in the states, fongs also got together to raise money for political and social causes back home.\(^\text{51}\)

Fongs existed at the lowest level of social organization in Chinatown, in a multi-tiered system adopted from that of rural Guangdong. This social structure was not a carbon copy of its counterpart in China, but, rather, was adapted to fit the needs of Chinese in New York.\(^\text{52}\) In addition to fongs, there were 59 associations that brought people together through trade, recreational activities, Chinese language

\(^\text{49}\) Seligman, 26.
\(^\text{50}\) Wong, 9.
\(^\text{51}\) Kwong, 39.
\(^\text{52}\) Wong, 15.
dialects, politics, and family names. Each of these groups fell under the watchful eye of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), which intervened when any inter and intragroup issues fell into uncharted jurisdiction.53 Throughout its history, the CCBA took on a variety of roles, from peacekeeping within the Chinese community, to acting as an ambassador of Chinatown to city politicians. To this day, there are still 16 chapters of the CCBA in North America, each with its own share of smaller member associations, but the organization’s oversight is not nearly as powerful as it once had been.54

Outside of the legitimate social structure in Chinatown were the tongs, the sworn brotherhood organizations associated with underground activities and violence. These groups had the fewest members, and those who joined underwent initiation rites to become a part of the group. Cloaked in a veil of secrecy, tongs were usually aligned with merchant groups and were better known as mafia-esque gangs, which garnered fascination nationwide. In spite of their illicit activities, many tong members also held more legitimate positions within other institutional groups, with some even sitting on the CCBA board.55

Chinese American scholars often study the role of exclusion in promoting tong activity. Rose Lee argues that tongs arose as a result of predominantly male Chinese communities that needed a means to achieve rapid social advancement.56 Because exclusion restricted chain migration as well as entry into the mainstream labor force, the Chinese weren’t able to attain social mobility like many do today, through savings

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53 Seligman, 9.
56 Wong, 22-23.
from steady employment and ensuing intergenerational upward mobility. The tongs, thus, flourished under the exclusion era, drawing profits from illegal businesses that were eventually invested into starting legitimate enterprises.\textsuperscript{57} Tongs, and their illicit behavior, colored the Chinese community for outsiders, but these underground societies were, at least partially, cultivated from outside of Chinatown’s borders. Without the discriminatory sentiment that barred the Chinese from making a living through regular economic channels, partaking in tong activity would have been unnecessary. In turn, the popularized imaginations of Chinese people and Chinatowns in America might have been less oriented around illegality and violence as a result.

These layers of community organizational structure took on a familial role for newcomers in Chinatown who didn’t have actual family around them. They extended the meaning of family when blood-related relatives were forced out of reach, and though the effectiveness of these structures was a testament to the will of settlers to help one another, Chinatown’s many groups and associations certainly made the community seem like its own secluded city within a city. The community’s self-sufficiency and isolation were a fallacy, however, as plenty of white men ate in Chinatown restaurants, or patronized the opium and gambling dens; some Chinatown industries relied on support from non-Chinese too. However, the stories of Chinatown that were told outside of the community were those of the murderous tong wars, fought by strange men who didn’t have their own women—a threat to any white women who dared enter the boundaries of Chinatown. These narratives were

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
omnipresent and painted the Chinese as a people who chose to live in isolation, refusing to give way to the famed “melting pot” of New York.

There’s no denying that Chinatown’s social structures arose from a desire of community members to receive mutual support from one another. They depended on these networks for linguistic and cultural reasons as well as for safety—but this reliance wasn’t developed by choice. Chinatown’s relative insularity was a direct response to exclusion era regulations that prevented the Chinese from participating in the mainstream economy and cultivating the types of families that fit into the sphere of American normativity at the time. These barriers perpetuated representations of the Chinese that they first needed to overcome and then overhaul.

After experiencing the violence in the West brought on by economic competition, in addition to legal restrictions, the Chinese sought to carve out monopolies in their own industries that would be free from competition with white working class men. Overwhelming numbers of Chinese chose to open laundries, but because washing clothes is generally considered “women’s work,” the prevalence of Chinese laundrymen were responsible for the gendering of Chinese men as inherently more female than their white counterparts. The laundry business was appealing for a variety of reasons and, as a result, Chinese throughout the United States strategically chose to get involved in the trade. The “women’s work” label deterred white men from opening their own laundries, which allowed the Chinese to avoid any rivalries with working class whites. Furthermore, laundry services were in high demand: in California’s Chinese community, there weren’t enough women to wash clothing, resulting in a near-unfathomable arrangement that had people shipping their laundry
to Honolulu for cleaning, which often took months to return.\textsuperscript{38} Lastly, hand laundries were relatively cheap to open and provided workers with a living wage of about $10 to $14 a week—what an average white grocer or letter carrier could earn.\textsuperscript{59} Though the nature of the work in laundries prior to the advent of machinery was extraordinarily laborious, laundrmen could slowly build capital without fear of retribution from white men.

The conflation of the effeminate laundryman and Chinese men at large was not without its representational repercussions, even if it meant working in the laundry business provided some barriers from economically charged acts of violence. Given the lack of women in Chinese communities across the country, Chinatowns became gendered spaces that emphasized the degree to which Chinese society deviated from normative American society, especially with regards to traditional gender norms. This effectually positioned anything “Chinese”—particularly urban space—to be at odds with normalcy, citizenship, and even humanness.

We can examine this expressed deviation from humanness further by looking at depictions of New York’s Chinatown and its people in twentieth century visual culture. During this time, cats became a symbol for Chinese people and spaces, with both Chinese people and cats being associated with feminized sexuality, mischief, and duplicity.\textsuperscript{60} But it was Chinese men who were associated with cats, once again, projecting a notion of skewed gender identity on to Chinese male bodies. In paintings of Chinatown rendered by Ashcan School artists like Stuart Davis and John Sloan,\textsuperscript{58} Lee, 76.\textsuperscript{59} Seligman, 4.\textsuperscript{60} John X. Christ, ”A Short Guide to the Art of Dining, Slumming, Touring, Wildlife, and Women for Hire in New York’s Chinatown and Chinese Restaurants,” Oxford Art Journal 26, no. 2 (2003): 90.
cats stood in as curious motifs, which John Christ sought to decipher in “A Short Guide to the Art of Dining, Slumming, Touring, Wildlife, and Women for Hire in New York’s Chinatown and Chinese Restaurants.” In Sloan’s *Chinese Restaurant* and Davis’ *Chinatown*, cats are cast in scenes where prostitution and other Chinatown vices are being presented. Both paintings feature female prostitutes engaging with cats, suggesting either that these cats are their parallels, or that they represent the men they are about to service. The association between cats and the Chinese was not limited to the fine arts world, however. In 1890, an ad for rat poisoning depicted a Chinese man eating a rat.61 Jacob Riis also likened Chinese to cats in *How the Other Half Lives*, when he zoologically wrote about their neat disposition, commenting on traits of “cruel cunning and savage fury when aroused.”62

Such narratives of the animal-like behavior of the Chinese did not serve them well when stories of violent crime and homicide in Chinatown captured the attention of the public. They only helped to confirm the stereotype of the Chinese as a violent, ruthless people. After Elsie Sigel’s murder, Chinatown merchant leader Tom Lee claimed business in the Chinese quarter decreased by 70 percent. According to him, vigilantes posed as police officers and then proceeded to attack the Chinese and raid their stores.63 Following the murder, many of New York’s writers and cartoonists began to portray Chinese men as hypersexualized creatures, so much that Chinatown’s reputation declined to the point where missionaries were sometimes prohibited from working in the area.64

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 92.
63 Seligman, 197.
64 Lui, 9.
Like the hyper-feminine laundryman, Leon Ling, Sigel’s former love interest and suspected killer, became the archetype of all Chinese men, who after 1909 were seen as more subhuman than ever before. Chinese merchants, fearing their own safety amidst the reignited anti-Chinese hysteria, sent a delegation to Washington in an attempt to receive special protection from the federal government.\(^{65}\) The Oriental Club, an association of New York’s leading Chinese, offered a $500 reward for the capture of Sigel’s killer, hoping to restore the flow of business in Chinatown.\(^{66}\) Officers of the Chee Kung Tong, the Chinese equivalent of a Freemasons group, sent a letter to the \textit{New York Times}, affirming that though Ling had once applied to join, he was denied membership.\(^{67}\) Every Chinese male sought to separate himself from Leon Ling, to prove that he wasn’t a murderous villain like he was.

Interestingly enough, Ling garnered criticism from the public not only for being the prime suspect in the Sigel murder, but also for not looking sufficiently “Chinese.” He was often described in the press as possessing “Americanized” good looks that allowed him to navigate spaces in and out of Chinatown.\(^{68}\) This ability to exist liminally between American and Chinese actually made Ling appear as more of a threat to civilians and law enforcement alike, even though the Chinese were generally derided for being inassimilable. Exploring why Ling’s liminal identity felt threatening is something that requires more complex unpacking: one would think that the public would have been in favor of a Chinese man who had a firm grasp of the English language and donned American dress. But rather than being praised for his

\(^{65}\) Seligman, 197.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 157.
\(^{67}\) Ibid.
\(^{68}\) Lui, 13.
efforts to assimilate into American culture, Ling may have been feared because although he spoke and dressed like an American, he was still a “heathen Chinee”—a slur that people used to describe the Chinese.\textsuperscript{69} Perhaps his dual identity inspired panic because being able to move between Chineseness and Americanness equipped him with spy-like abilities. He could work his American charms to entice a white woman like Elsie Sigel, but because of his inherently monstrous Chinese side, of course she would end up dead. Or perhaps this fear of Chinese assimilation, once again, has roots in economic competition. If a Chinese man could be just as culturally American as a white man, couldn’t the “army of almond-eyed exiles” finally take over, once and for all? Either way, there existed a double standard for Chinese in America, where they were derided for not being American enough as well as for making active efforts to embrace American cultural norms.

This double standard with regards to Chinese assimilation affected the way that the public perceived Chinatown and Chinese American culture, bringing forth a new category of American Chinese culture that was invented more by Chinatown outsiders than insiders. As a distinctly Asian American community, Chinatown was viewed from the outside as the physical manifestation of Chinese ethnic cultural difference, retention, and nonassimilation.\textsuperscript{70} However, this assumption is only convincing if Chinatown existed as a community that merely replicated traditions and culture from China, without any influence from American ones, which we know is far from the truth. Chop suey, for example, was the culinary product most associated with Chinese identity in early twentieth century America, but in reality the dish is an

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 224.
American invention that was branded as Chinese, representative of a “negotiation between cultures.”

For those unfamiliar, chop suey is a dish that involves a mixture of eggs and meat and vegetable scraps quickly cooked together in a starch-thickened sauce. To Chinese people in China, it holds nearly no culinary significance or cultural weight—striking most as a jumble of food scraps thrown together in a skillet rather than an actual dish in its own right. Despite this measly reputation in the East, chop suey became a culinary craze in the United States, an “invented tradition” that transformed into an iconic symbol of authentic Chinese culture. Because of America’s dim view of the Chinese, the cuisine associated with Chinese people could not be something that wasn’t bargain ethnic food. Therefore, the farther chop suey and other “Chinese” dishes deviated from Chineseness in their culinary content, the more “authentic” they appeared to Americans. Chinese restaurant owners picked up on this and adjusted their menus to suit American taste preferences, even when it meant reconstructing what Chinese food and ethnic authenticity meant to them. In doing this, Chinese American restaurant owners reconfigured Chinese American—or American Chinese—cuisine, by way of cues imposed from non-Chinese Americans.

Like Chinese American cuisine, Chinatown has too been made ethnic by imaginations of Chinese authenticity. To paraphrase Kay Anderson, Chinatown then is not Chinatown by virtue of its inherent Chineseness. Rather, it’s a space that encapsulates constructions and reconstructions of ethnicity and cultural histories comprised of partial inventions and a pronounced distance from normativity that has

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72 Ibid.
made it a recognizable idea in and for the West. Anderson goes on to discuss Edward Said’s concept of “imaginative geographies,” such as Europe’s “Orient,” which posits “the East” as a monolithic territory defined only by its deviation from Europe’s normativity. Chinatowns in the early twentieth century can be likened to America’s Orient constructed on home turf; by painting Chinatown as a site of what was to be avoided, white Americans could define themselves based on what they did not want to be.

There were two ways the Chinese in New York confronted the ruinous reputation that Chinatown had in the early twentieth century: they could distance themselves from the vicious anti-Chinese stereotypes or choose to lean into them. Merchants, as well as those who made enough money to own property, were considered in an altogether different class than impoverished Chinese in New York. They tended to be more respected by those outside of the Chinese community, but often received criticism from poorer Chinese who felt encroached upon when the merchant elite purchased the buildings where they were renting out space. Merchants and propertied Chinese were also more likely to have a firmer grasp of the English language, allowing them to break into the same Chinese American liminal space that Leon Ling did.

Unbeknownst to most, the majority of New York’s Chinese didn’t reside in Chinatown until 1965. Though it was dangerous to do so, many working class Chinese lived in predominantly white neighborhoods in Manhattan, so that they could maximize profits in hand laundries and restaurants, avoiding competition with

74 Ibid.
other Chinese. In the 1930s and 1940s, many Chinese moved to live closer to their jobs, in other Manhattan neighborhoods outside of Chinatown, as well as in New York City’s outer boroughs. Because Chinese living outside of Chinatown were still subjected to racial discrimination and violence in white neighborhoods, most chose to live within close distances to work, to avoid making long commutes through the city at late hours.\textsuperscript{75} To these Chinese, economic survival took priority over living in a familiar community, where neighbors looked after one another. After World War II and the repeal of the Exclusion Act, higher earning Chinese voluntarily moved to the outer boroughs and nearby suburbs for better homes and schools, not necessarily for work.\textsuperscript{76} Thus, during this time period, Chinatown was considered a leisure destination for many New York Chinese, where friends and kinsmen congregated on their days off from work. Even though it served as a commercial rather than residential space for many of the city’s Chinese, Chinatown reminded the Chinese of home, even though the food, social structure, and experienced marginalization were not so similar to what Chinese immigrants had back home at all.

Later, in the 1950s, wealthy and working class Chinese would continue to differ in their motivations for staying in and leaving Chinatown, as well as in how they pictured the neighborhood’s future. The merchant class would happily collaborate with the CCBA and the State Commission on Housing on slum clearance projects, which, had they been approved, would have turned Chinatown into a sort of Chinese inspired theme park, comparable to the Chinese Pavilion at Disney World’s Epcot.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Wang, 77.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 74.
Dubbed the China Village, the 1950 proposal for a dismembered and redeveloped Chinatown featured a complex of pagoda-tiered restaurants and stores within a gated mini city. A second failed plan that emerged in 1975 encouraged storefronts to adopt signage in exaggerated Asian ornamentation and fonts, with the hopes of attracting tourists that sought an exoticized performance of an entire ethnicity. The relatively privileged Chinatown merchant class supported the sanitization and orientalization of Manhattan’s Chinese community that would’ve brought in more revenue from tourism, but also would’ve likely resulted in the displacement of poorer residents due to the construction of the China Village.

The efforts of the merchant class to market Chinatown as a more inviting, tourist friendly space exemplify a process of self-orientalism that capitalizes on popular caricaturized depictions of Chinese culture to satisfy notions of Asia as a faraway place characterized by difference. The merchant elite’s willingness to exploit their ethnic and cultural identities to fill tourists’ fixes for exotic adventure speak to an early example where performing and reinventing Chineseness in urban space was exchanged for economic gain and nominal cultural inclusion. This self-orientalism sets off a trend of appeasing outsiders for profit—one that is still very much alive in today’s Chinatown.

Other Chinatown residents who interacted with tourists knew that many visitors longed to experience a grittier and more precarious Chinatown rather than a manicured reinterpretation of Chinese culture. This resulted in the practice of “slumming,” which involved members of the neighborhood coming together to

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78 Ibid., 218.
79 Ibid., 217.
80 Ibid.
develop an image of itself for outsiders, based on the very stereotypes of Chinatown that they imposed on to the community.\textsuperscript{81} In Vancouver’s Chinese enclave, unemployed residents were sometimes paid to run through the streets in ketchup stained clothing to evoke the violence of the Tong Wars.\textsuperscript{82} Like the bearded ladies at Coney Island’s famed freak shows, slumming in Chinatown was about deliberately self-exoticizing a parcel of urban space, by embracing marginality and labels of strangeness for profit.\textsuperscript{83}

Recognizing the effects that exclusion era policies had on the representation of Chinese in America is instrumental to understanding some of the reasons why Chinatown is so sought after as a site of new development today, as these stereotypes are now leveraged to cast the neighborhood as “rustic” and “cool.” The same immigration regulation throughout the twentieth century helped to brand the Chinese as an unwanted and inherently anti-American group of newcomers, stunted their ability to assimilate into American society legally and culturally, warranting a need for Chinatowns to exist. Although many Chinese in New York prior to 1950 lived outside of the Chinatown community, they often kept a low profile in white neighborhoods and considered Chinatown their home. It was within Manhattan’s Chinese community where they mingled with other members of the Chinese diaspora, received funds to start new businesses, or found a bed to sleep on when they lacked one. Though Chinatown certainly arose out of exclusion—and can be viewed as a western imagination as Anderson contends—the community existed for the Chinese

\textsuperscript{82} Umbach and Wishnoff, "Strategic Self-Orientalism," 215.
\textsuperscript{83} Christ, 77.
and their economic survival. Since 1965 however, Chinatown’s reputation—as well as that of Chinese Americans—has shifted with regard to a growing professional class of Chinese in America and new conceptions of what Chinese American culture is from outside of the community.
CLOSING THE RENT GAP: REVITALIZATION & DEVELOPMENT AFTER 1965

Figure 3 Photo by Author. 83-85 Bowery Protest. 2017.
In July of 2017, tenants of 83 and 85 Bowery rallied against their landlord, Joseph Betesh, who had been neglecting their demands for important repairs in their apartments. The rally took place right outside of the two adjacent buildings, and was attended by community organizers, residents, and local politicians. The residents—ranging from children to the elderly—held placards in English and Chinese: “We demand rent-stabilization!” “We demand the landlord repair our buildings now!” “Stop the eviction, let the tenants have peace of mind.”

From the outside, the adjacent five-story tenement buildings showed no glaring signs of disrepair, but the inside told a different story: for over a year, the tenants had been complaining of faulty plumbing, leaky ceilings, and a crooked sagging staircase, but instead of tending to their requests, Betesh refused to acknowledge them, resulting in a lengthy court battle. Betesh’s lawyers agreed to a settlement, which required the landlord to make repairs, relocate the residents, and have them return to renovated apartments with 99-year leases. This settlement, at first indicative of a victory, had a catch though. Betesh refused to recognize the units as rent-stabilized, purporting that they underwent substantial rehabilitation nearly 35 years prior. Suspecting that if relocated, they might face dramatic rent increases upon return, the tenants chose to stay put, resulting in a standoff with the landlord. Betesh, meanwhile, continued to neglect their demands—even attempting to buy each of his tenants out of the building for $15,000.

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Like most real estate giants, Betesh is fully aware of the rising value of land in Chinatown, the last neighborhood in downtown Manhattan to be fully developed. He knows that if he can evict his current tenants, he can carry out large-scale repairs to attract a new demographic of renters, who’ll be willing to shell out much more than the $950 rent-stabilized figure each month. As *New York Times* reporter Jim Dwyer writes, properties in Chinatown are “real estate prairies,” uncharted swaths of land in Lower Manhattan where any significant development regulation has yet to exist.86 These lax regulations have brought upscale storefronts and new residents to Chinatown; there are fewer immigrant families in rent-regulated units and more young professionals and students taking their places.87 These shifts are symptomatic of recognizable gentrification effects, and long-time residents like the Bowery tenants are seeing clear traces of change inside and outside their apartments.

After 1965, New York Chinatown’s physical landscape, as well its business and cultural one, began to look like the one we see today. The sojourner mentality was largely abandoned in the 1950s, when the Communist Party in China took over Guangdong from the Kuomintang nationalist party, which resulted in dramatic land reform. Many of the Chinese in New York had purchased land at home, which put them at a disadvantage given the new redistribution policies put in place.88 They figured that if they could not own property in China, it made more sense to stay in America. Additionally, families flooded in after the abolishment of the quota system and the community became less oriented around small businesses, such as hand laundries and restaurants.

86 Ibid.
87 *Chinatown Then and Now* (Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), 2013).
88 Wang, 56.
Instead, New York’s Chinatown began to operate a little bit more like the Chinese community in San Francisco. Because there was a larger Chinese demographic in California than New York, and the California Chinese were more formally driven out of the mainstream economy, San Francisco’s Chinatown more readily assumed the role of an ethnic enclave economy, where most Chinese lived and worked in Chinatown, producing Chinese goods for the community and importing others from China. In New York, Chinese arrived comparably later than other European immigrants, many of whom already had a monopoly on major industries. The economy of New York’s Chinatown prior to 1965 was therefore characterized by small businesses rather than a comprehensive enclave economy that was perpetuated by a constant demand for Chinese goods.89

The end of the twentieth century marked Chinatown’s peak years as a traditional ethnic enclave. For many immigrants it was still the first stop on their move to America, and though the presence of village and kinship organizations had waned, there remained a plethora of resources for newcomers, so that they could get acclimated quickly. Chinatown’s employment agencies, many of which were located on Eldridge Street through the 1990s, connected immigrants to jobs in New York as well as throughout the eastern seaboard.90 The latter half of the century also marked a time when Chinatown residents began to vocalize their demands through means of political organization: activist efforts resulted in the establishment of the Charles B. Wang Community Health Center in 1971, a non-profit federally qualified medical

89 Ibid., 77.
facility, built in reaction to Chinatown’s underserved healthcare sector. In 1973, Asian Americans for Equal Employment (now Asian Americans for Equality), an up and coming community organization at the time, rallied for Chinese construction workers to be hired in the building of Confucius Plaza, a middle-income Mitchell-Lama housing project. In 1984, garment workers triumphed when members of the Local 23-25 International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) drew up a petition to fight for a state subsidized daycare center for the children of immigrant seamstresses. Prior to this victory, many mothers found it difficult to provide their families with a second income while also being parents.

These three sociopolitical efforts, among others, are evidence not only of some degree of community cohesiveness, but also a shared vision of what Chinatown’s role as an enclave should be. For these activists, it wasn’t enough to be able to immigrate to the United States legally—they knew that they deserved a community where everyone could access healthcare regardless of socioeconomic background, live in decent housing, and not have to choose between being a mother and making a living. It isn’t coincidental that healthcare, housing, and childcare were issues propelled to the forefront of community activists’ agendas. All three are, largely, family issues, which makes sense, given that Chinatown after 1965 assumed the role of an incubator that fostered social mobility through the growth of families.

This family-centric period wouldn’t have been possible without the rise of the garment industry, which solidified Chinatown’s status as an enclave economy. The garment industry freed portions of the neighborhoods economy from relying on tourism as its primary source of revenue, making way for businesses that catered to families and existed in conversation with partners in China. Because many Chinese immigrants at this time were poor, they chose to live closer to their jobs, and symbiotically, new factories opened to be closer to the growing community of employable people. The rise of the garment industry is also significant when discussing Chinatown’s history and development because it urged members of the Chinese community to interact beyond the scope of their regional ties. Though smaller businesses like hand laundries and restaurants typically employed people from the same village or those with whom they had kinship ties, the presence of larger restaurants and factories eroded the importance of these group loyalties. The abandonment of these networks coupled with the formation of an enclave economy facilitated more interactions between Chinatown community members that weren’t predicated on any notion of “family,” resulting in more of a separation between employer and employee in the workplace. Without familial ties in the work environment, the working class began to set itself apart from the business owning class, leading to a sense of class-consciousness that didn’t exist prior. Wang argues that this division across class lines prevented any sort of community unity to take root,

95 Wang, 78.
96 Ibid., 88.
something that will be important to note when discussing the rapid development and gentrification in Chinatown today.\textsuperscript{97}

Though a split between working class and business owning Chinese became more pronounced during this time, this division urged politically inclined, and often second generation, community members to address the underserved resources in the enclave and organize on behalf of immigrants with fewer means. This culture of collaboration and ethnic affinity permeated beyond the boundaries of New York’s Chinese community and became a convention characteristic of Chinese ethnic enclaves nationwide. Born of economic and social marginalization, Chinese American urban spaces took to relying on themselves to build the support networks that were formerly lacking. As a result, Chinatowns were, and continue to be, defined by their self-sufficiency, which Lowe would likely characterize as a “partly invented” aspect of Chinese American culture.\textsuperscript{98} Though cultural “inventions” like Chinatown’s early social organizational structure, as well as chop suey, emerged out of the subordination of Asian and Asian American cultures as Other, activism and politicization in Chinatown after 1965 can be distinguished from early conventions that were established out of necessity. By 1965, it was often second generation Asian Americans that were taking part in political organization efforts in the neighborhood. They were native English speakers, often well educated, and weren’t necessarily impoverished.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 101. Prior to 1965, the New York Chinese community was small enough where small business owners could hire kinsmen and townsmen. This changed when the quota allowed far more Chinese immigrants into the country and larger businesses could no longer afford to selectively hire employees from their own regions. Though class-consciousness certainly began to develop in the middle of the twentieth century, Chinese were often be wary about joining formal labor movements, as it was working class whites that had led to the mass Chinese exodus from the west coast. In the 1950s, the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) encouraged Chinese laundrymen to join their ranks and when they declined, unionists decided to boycott Chinese laundries.

\textsuperscript{98} Lowe, 65.
Still yet, they contributed to the continued invention and reinvention of Chinese American and distinctly Chinatown culture, through advancing resources that aided needy immigrants. During this time, facets of Chinatown’s self-reliance weren’t necessarily wrought out of exclusion from mainstream society, but out of Chinese Americans seeking to improve the ethnic enclave for other community members and their families.

Though crime, poverty, and unfair labor practices were rampant throughout the enclave, there was a focus on family building despite the hardships. Most women worked in the garment or restaurant industries, and though conditions, particularly in the former, warranted long hours and very little pay, mothers could bring their children to work so they could help out or play with other kids.\textsuperscript{99} Jean Kwok’s \textit{Girl in Translation}, a novel based on Kwok’s own upbringing, illustrates both the inhumane working conditions and the unlikely sense of community that the sweatshop provides for the protagonist, Kimberly, and her mother. In the unnamed Brooklyn neighborhood where they reside, they are the only Asian residents. Until Kimberly gets older and can help her mother navigate everyday tasks in English, even buying groceries feels like a vastly foreign undertaking. But this isn’t the case in Chinatown, where the people, the language, and the food aren’t so different from those in her native Hong Kong. Though there are certainly bleak factory scenes in Kwok’s novel—such as when the workers are forced to crowd tightly into bathroom stalls to evade labor inspections—brighter ones accompany them. At the factory, Kimberly and her mother work side by side with fellow Chinese immigrants, mothers that are

also new to New York who are working to set their children on paths of success.

Though in the sweatshops, employees’ lives become oriented around the everyday—reduced to the number of skirts they can sew in a single shift—there exists a linguistic and cultural camaraderie that dissipates markedly once outside the boundaries of Chinatown.¹⁰⁰

Journalist Bonnie Tsui also writes about the sense of belonging Chinatown provided for her and her family growing up, in American Chinatown: A People’s History of Five Neighborhoods. For Tsui, whose family eventually moved out to Long Island, Manhattan’s Chinatown was still the place where they’d go to “be Chinese” in the 1980s: “Something here is bigger than me, a history, other people’s stories that are somehow my stories, anchoring me in this city.”¹⁰¹ As a second generation Chinese American myself, Chinatown is too where I’ve reminded myself how to be Chinese. It’s where my parents celebrated my one-month birthday, as per Chinese tradition, and where my mother and I rented box sets of Cantonese drama series to watch on VHS at home. It’s where I discovered my love for Hong Kong style milk tea and begrudgingly sat behind the counter at my aunt’s jewelry as my mother ran errands. It’s also where I walked down the streets with my eyes cast upward. (The awnings with their Chinese characters lent no meaning to a jook sing like myself, but felt—and continue to feel—inexplicably comforting amidst their foreignness.)¹⁰² Instead, I often fixated on the architecture of the neighborhood: the contiguous rows of tenement

¹⁰² Jook-sing is a Cantonese term that refers to a Chinese person overseas, who typically identifies more with Western language and culture. The word translates to “bamboo pole,” suggesting that the pole is hollow on the inside—rendering the jook-sing in between or not belonging to either culture. Water within the bamboo pole cannot pass through, from one end to another.
buildings that stood even amidst the neighborhood’s widest thoroughfares. They looked as if they were copied and pasted from a past decade—and, in reality, they are. But for how much longer, and for what price to current residents, is what remains in question.

This chapter will examine the ways in which the Chinatown affordable housing stock has both withstood and is gradually succumbing to development pressures, a process that has roots in gentrification “spillover” effects from adjacent neighborhoods, as well as globalization and the transfer of capital from overseas. I’ll also continue discussing the commodification of culture, beyond the scope of orientalism, which has constructed a contemporaneous imagination of Chinatown that extends past the appeal of exotic tourism. Beginning in 1965, we begin to see increased socioeconomic diversity in the neighborhood, brought on both by wealthier immigrants from places like Hong Kong and Taipei, and the intergenerational social mobility that has been able to take root since the Hart-Celler Act. The 1965 policy was predicated on family reunification after an era of strict immigration quotas, and attracting skilled laborers to the United States. As a result, it had a considerable stake in skewing the depiction of Asian Americans from unassimilable foreigners to members of the Model Minority.

Today, Asians are the most represented group in the “creative class,” a term coined by urban theorist Richard Florida, which refers to people working jobs that earn more, tend to be more enjoyable, and are characterized by problem solving and

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knowledge-based tasks. According to Florida, 47 percent of Asians work in the creative sector, which include the sciences, the arts, and any knowledge-based jobs dependent on human creativity. These twin dualities—unassimilable foreigner versus Model Minority, and creative versus manufacturing and service sectors—represent two binaries that exist at odds with one another in the Chinatown gentrification narrative, perhaps more than the racial divide between white and Asian.

The emergence of second generation and wealthier Chinese, who can flit effortlessly in and out of the enclave’s boundaries, complicates the binary between Chinatown insiders and outsiders by threatening to fracture the cohesiveness of the community that was once established along ethnicity and class lines. Even in Chinatown’s early days, there existed tensions between the merchant and working class, but until the mid-twentieth century, all Chinese regardless of socioeconomic status found themselves viewed as second-rate Americans outside of Chinatown’s boundaries. Though racism and discrimination never faded altogether, many Chinese Americans following the 1950s and 1960s began to join the creative class and achieve socioeconomic mobility, resulting in lifestyle preferences and opportunities that differed drastically from those of poorer Chinese.

In some respects, there seem to be more differences than similarities between wealthy and working class Chinese Americans, as if the diasporic connection between new immigrants and second generation Chinese Americans has dwindled as time has

worn on. The preferences of the latter—with concern to housing, food, and other neighborhood amenities—may have ties to those of their poorer, more marginal counterparts; the two groups might share a penchant for dim sum over brunch, or prefer to see an herbal doctor over a Western one. But it’s likely that Chinese and Chinese Americans of a higher social class would be more willing to spend their money on luxury goods: an apartment close to Chinatown that isn’t a crowded walkup, dinner at a Chinese restaurant that’s chic and upscale rather than no-frills and affordable. These shifting forces regarding power, capital, and culture within New York’s Chinatown have reconfigured the relationship that members of the Chinese diaspora have with the neighborhood and each other. Being Chinese American was once almost always synonymous with poverty, and Chinatown served as a site of refuge for scarcity—providing aid for the needy and community for the solitary. But the association of penury with Chinese American identity and urban spaces has receded considerably in the last few decades, as more and more Chinese Americans don’t seek out Chinatown from a place of destitution or even a need for kinship.

The shifting role of Chinese urban spaces in Chinese America has resulted in physical changes in Chinatowns nationwide. This is certainly true in New York’s Chinatown, whose population surpassed that of San Francisco’s in 1970.106 During the decades of neighborhood revitalization following 1965, Chinatown’s business and social landscape became considerably reformed, but for longstanding residents who resided there, finding decent housing became increasingly difficult. Today, the

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affordable housing crisis is pervasive and with its accompanying gentrification effects at the neighborhood level, is one that can no longer be ignored.

As a concept, gentrification remains difficult to pinpoint, as it can have varying effects from neighborhood to neighborhood. Brooklyn’s Williamsburg, once home to abandoned warehouses along the East River, experienced a transformation in the early 2000s when an exodus of Manhattan’s artistic community sought cheaper rents outside of the borough. These warehouse spaces were converted into thrift stores, DIY music venues, and residential spaces. Today, the neighborhood is a top tourist destination, boasting gourmet food festivals, nightclubs, and luxury hotels whose visual aesthetics often draw on the neighborhood’s working class industrial past. Though Chinatown has not yet cemented its reputation as an Instagram-friendly cultural brand to the extent that Williamsburg has, developers are nonetheless building tall glass buildings and capitalizing off the neighborhood’s marginalized history in order to sell it.

Within the urban studies literature, various scholars have grappled with the definition of gentrification and its relationship to resident displacement. The term originated in Great Britain and can first be attributed to urban geographer Ruth Glass, who in 1964 described a slew of middle class people displacing lower working class residents. Generally, gentrification refers to the process that displaces low-income residents and systematically remakes the class composition and character of a neighborhood.\textsuperscript{107} Older buildings get renovated, new construction takes place, and

\textsuperscript{107} Rodney Green et al., “The Indirect Displacement Hypothesis: A Case Study in Washington, D.C,” \textit{Review of Black Political Economy} 44, no. 1-2 (2017): 5. There are scholars who believe that gentrification does not lead to displacement. In their research, Freeman and Braconi found that for low-income residents forcibly displaced from their neighborhoods, they were not more likely to settle in non-
stores catering to higher end consumers begin to crop up. Bethany Li argues, however, that gentrification is altogether different from revitalization, which enhances the physical characteristics of a neighborhood without resulting in displacement. She also writes that the racial makeup of a neighborhood can be an index for the likelihood of gentrification to occur, as the process tends to take place in neighborhoods that are more than 35 percent white and stops in areas that are more than 40 percent black. Chris Hamnett defined gentrification more broadly—as a process that encompasses physical, economic, social, and cultural phenomena as possible factors that can displace residents. Neil Smith suggests that gentrification is a development process by which poor and working class neighborhoods in inner city areas are refurbished by an influx of private capital and middle class homebuyers and renters, a dramatic reversal of what most twentieth century urban theorists had been predicting for the future of central and inner cities.

Though there are a plethora of opinions on how gentrification presents itself what causes it, most explanations can be divided into supply and production side theories of gentrification or demand and consumption side theories. Supply side theory orients itself around the idea of the rent gap, which suggests that when developers perceive an inequality between what’s currently being charged for rents versus what the potential price of land could be with redevelopment, they’re

Ibid., 1203.


incentivized to invest and build in these neighborhoods. Profits from such developments—whether it’s refurbishing a building or developing altogether new properties—close the rent gap, leading to higher rents, lease costs, and mortgages.\textsuperscript{112} Demand side theory suggests that there’s a “new middle class” whose cultural values and residential preferences are indispensable to making sense of the gentrification process.\textsuperscript{113} Hamnett maintains that this demographic is willing to choose commuting into the central city over living in more cramped quarters in comparatively accessible areas, resulting in a new social class where gentrification is a material and cultural expression.\textsuperscript{114} Factors contributing to the gentrification of Chinatown fall in line with both supply and demand theories and are advanced by real estate developers; foreign investors; locals; and governing bodies on the city, state, and national level. Through displacement, erasure, and development, these groups and individuals combine to restructure the neighborhood’s resident demographic as well as physical and cultural landscape through the commodification of Chinese American histories and experiences.

To make sense of today’s development pressures in Chinatown, it’s important to be familiar with the local and global forces at work that made the neighborhood susceptible to such pressures in the first place. Jan Li observes that Chinatown is, remarkably, a site where informal lower-circuit economic activity meets advanced sector transnational capitalism.\textsuperscript{115} This unlikely coexistence between the two types of

\textsuperscript{114} Hamnett, "Gentrification and Residential Location Theory: A Review and Assessment."
economies results from the existing ethnic local economy met with the outpour of financial and real estate investments from China and Southeast Asia in the 1970s. During this period, the image of Lower Manhattan was rebranded to attract global capital investments through a partnership of public authorities and private investors. Because of uncertain political conditions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries, many wealthy business people chose to transfer their capital to the United States. Chinatown began to be seen as a prominent cultural hub in the most established city for global finance, which opened up channels for businesspeople to invest in Chinatown real estate. Slowly, some of the small low-rise tenement buildings began to make way for newly constructed steel and glass skyscrapers. Additionally, Chinatown banks saw a surge in foreign and local investments: between 1973 and 1988, the number of banks in the neighborhood grew by 3,800 percent, with foreign deposits particularly skyrocketing through the 1980s and 1990s.\(^{116}\)

The growing presence of banks in Chinatown certainly changed the physical and economic landscape of the neighborhood—and though one might presume that the inflow of capital improved the everyday lives of Chinatown residents, this was actually not the case. Foreign investments boosted Chinatown’s economy and provided some residents with employment opportunities, but because the cost of living rose faster than the average wages, there were no discernable differences in the quality of life that residents enjoyed. Between 1970 and 1974, residents experienced a 14 percent increase in family income, but the cost of living had increased by 40 percent.

According to the 1980 Census, 24.7 percent of Chinese families in New York’s Chinatown lived in poverty, compared to the citywide figure at 17.2 percent, suggesting that a thriving neighborhood economy hasn’t freed Chinatown residents from precarity. Asian American Studies scholar Peter Kwong maintains that the discrepancy between increased neighborhood investment and sustained poverty can be attributed to cheap labor being the backbone of Chinatown’s economic development.\(^{117}\) And though it’s tempting to think that the neighborhood would be better off if this weren’t the case, new immigrants continue to rely on the availability of unskilled jobs and informal labor. Many small business owners can’t afford hire wages either.

Immigrants kept coming, and Chinatown began to expand past its former boundaries. In 1970, there were 26,324 Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants in New York, with 24,000 of them residing in the greater Chinatown area. Chinese began to move into Little Italy, East Broadway, the Bowery, and Chatham Square—areas that all constitute Chinatown today.\(^{118}\) Because of the continued flow of Chinese immigration to New York, there began to be a housing shortage in the neighborhood. Even with supposed rent control in place, the high demand for housing and low vacancy rates still resulted in significant rent increases. In addition to there not being enough housing, the stock was largely decaying and unfit for living.

Approximately 80 percent of the housing stock was composed of old tenement buildings constructed prior to 1901, and many buildings violated minimum housing

\(^{117}\) Ibid.  
\(^{118}\) Ibid.
standards and building codes. Even by 1990, 2.8 percent of Chinatown residents were still living in units without plumbing. Overcrowding was also a problem and demonstrates a lack of both affordability and available space in the enclave, where the person-per-unit ratio held at a median of 2.99 persons compared to 1.55 persons in Manhattan at large the same year. Forty-nine percent of residents lived in units with more than one person per room, compared to 10 percent at the borough level.

Chinatown and the Lower East Side faced similar issues with regards to housing quality and affordability. These living conditions helped to advance the notion that both neighborhoods were demonstrative of lesions in the otherwise healthy body that was Lower Manhattan. By the mid-1970s, artists in nearby SoHo had already aided in converting the abandoned industrial area into a bohemian and progressively upscale neighborhood. With the pathological view of the Lower East Side and Chinatown in mind, developers turned a blind eye to the plight of communities of color that resided in these areas. After all, it becomes much easier to justify renovated buildings, clean sidewalks, and safe streets, at the expense of displacement, when what currently exists is grinding poverty and disrepair.

Because of their association with blight, coupled with their proximity to more desirable neighborhoods, Chinatown and the Lower East Side have long been viewed as untapped development opportunities. One of the earliest visions that jeopardized both neighborhoods was the Lower Manhattan Expressway (LOMEX), a 1929 plan

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121 Lin, 33.
championed by planners like Robert Moses throughout the mid-twentieth century. If built, LOMEX would have been an elevated highway that carried 120,000 cars daily from the Holland Tunnel to the East River bridges. The project would have also cut through the heart of SoHo, the Lower East Side, and Chinatown, displacing poor people of color and changing the face of downtown Manhattan irreparably.

LOMEX faced tremendous opposition in the 1960s—most notably from journalist Jane Jacobs—and was never approved for construction. Despite this, the Lower East Side and Chinatown continued to be prime targets for development through the tail end of the twentieth century. Waves of speculative investment hit the Lower East Side first, reaching their height in the 1980s and 1990s, after a decade of abandonment prior. In the 1980s, New York emerged as a global city in finance, banking, insurance, and real estate, attracting young urbanites to Wall Street, which resulted in an increased demand for middle class housing downtown. During this time, the proliferation of corporate service jobs paled in comparison with the loss of semiskilled jobs that forced parts of the city’s poor and minority workers into an expanding formal and informal low-wage service economy. Such was especially the case on the Lower East Side. The 1980s also marked a period of construction for office towers and luxury condominiums, as well as the popularization of owner-occupied co-ops. As a result, there were fewer middle class renting options, which pushed people to move to less desirable neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, if they wanted to remain in Manhattan at all.  

123 Zoned Out! Race, Displacement, and City Planning in New York City (Terreform, 2016), 125.
124 Christopher Mele, Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 222-223.
Perceiving a shift in Lower East Side market forces, developers made what was then considered the riskiest of real estate investments in what is now the young-urban-professional-friendly East Village and Alphabet City. This speculative investment, as its name suggests, was fueled not by known need or demand for affordable housing, but anticipated consumption by a new middle class, falling in line with the demand theory of gentrification. Its objective was to turn a profit through the resale of properties, assuming that the neighborhood would continue to generate interest among young renters. Speculators often did not put in a lot of effort to convert or upgrade properties, due to the large share of rent controlled residents that would have to be evicted in order for extensive construction to take place. But when the speculative market rates skyrocketed in the 1980s, market values grew to the point where investing for resale no longer provided much of a payoff without large-scale renovations. Once the speculative market was saturated, speculators resorted to the massive displacement of their poorest tenants, in hopes of attracting new middle class consumers.125

In Chinatown, this market shift struck later, in part, because family associations have owned about 60 buildings in the neighborhood’s core since the 1960s and 1970s, making them inaccessible to eager developers. Most of these buildings exist primarily for residential use today with the ground floors rented out to restaurants and other retail businesses. They are also almost impossible to sell because dozens of people have shares invested in them. The efforts of community-based organizations also play a key role in maintaining affordability for housing and business purposes. Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), for example, has advanced

125 Ibid., 25.
more than $100 million in grants, donations, and loans to buy and restore tenement buildings in order to prevent developers from demolishing them. Other organizations like CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities (formerly the Committee Against Asian-American Violence), have focused on protecting rent-regulated residents through the justice system, filing lawsuits on their behalf when they’re threatened with eviction. According to City Council Representative Margaret Chin, advocacy groups have considerable power in Chinatown because the land area is fairly small, and many residents rarely need to leave because everything is there: “You can speak the language and organize,” she said.126

Most Chinatown buildings aren’t safe from development pressures though. Today, unprotected properties are being demolished and converted, due in part to its outdated zoning, which has been in place since 1961. Back then, the city imagined that the neighborhood would one day become an extension of the commercial downtown, so the area was zoned for large commercial buildings beyond the scale of the current buildings in Chinatown today. As a result, the neighborhood is distinctly susceptible to out of scale development.127 In June of 2013, Joseph Betesh acquired 11 Bowery properties in a portfolio deal worth $62 million. Though these properties, located between Canal and East Houston Streets, are non-contiguous, only two did not come paired with an adjacent property, providing Betesh with extra potential to carry out large-scale demolitions and developments.128 Prior to the 1970s, the buildings were skid row flophouses that were then converted for residential and

126 Quoted in Tabor.
127 Savitch-Lew.
commercial uses.\textsuperscript{129} The Bowery was a gritty crime-ridden corridor, emblematic of urban decay in Lower Manhattan, before landmarks of the countercultural movement, like CBGB and OMFUG, helped to reinvent its image. By 2013, the stretch of the Bowery included in the portfolio deal already comprised a Whole Foods Market, the New Museum, and an artisanal pizza restaurant, but 83-85 Bowery was still home to tenants who’d been living there since the nineties.\textsuperscript{130} With the direction that the Bowery is headed in mind, it’s in Betesh’s best interests to evict his tenants through whatever means possible, so he can recondition the buildings and charge higher rent fees. For this very reason, Betesh has calculatedly sought after this goal for two years: he’s vacillated from ignoring his tenants demands altogether, to asserting that the building is structurally unsound so that they vacate in order for “imperative” repairs to be made. Whether the repairs are actually imperative or necessitate the relocation of the tenants at all remains in question.

During the speculative investment period on the Lower East Side, there was a concerted effort to not only make the neighborhood look physical rehabilitated, but to also rebrand it in order to attract wealthier, whiter residents. This was a feat that required expertly crafted imaginations of the neighborhood that incorporated its history of urban struggle with a new countercultural identity that was encroaching on its periphery. The Lower East Side in the 1970s was well known for its street corners where passers-by could score crack cocaine, abandoned buildings occupied by squatters, but also for being a site where a central lower class Latinx community came into contact with a peripheral countercultural one. Developers capitalized on this

\textsuperscript{129} Dwyer.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid.
convergence but needed to figure out how to sell a sanitized narrative of poverty that would be at once intriguing to more adventurous middle class consumers, but not altogether deterring.

In retail, restaurant, and other commercial spaces, the Lower East Side’s grittiness was adopted through aesthetic details, making way for what would become recognized as an East Village look and style. The new “East Village” moniker was a public relations triumph in its own right, referring to the northern part of the neighborhood in an effort to align more with the bohemian association of the comparably palatable West Village rather than the dilapidated Lower East Side. The appearance of underground restaurants, bars, and stores along St. Mark’s Place advanced the East Village’s countercultural image, one that was built upon the previous abandonment of the neighborhood, its drug problems, and rampant homelessness. Ironically, these tropes, derived from the community’s very visible struggles, became harnessed as tools to displace its most vulnerable and longstanding residents, whose realities shaped these aestheticized imaginations in the first place.

This calls to mind the concept of imperialist nostalgia, which cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo coined to refer to individuals complicit in imperialist ventures who, at the same time, yearn for the uncolonized state of the land prior to their invasion. Though gentrification isn’t indistinguishable from colonialism, the process can be likened to a form of neoimperialism, where a hegemonic class of individuals leverages forces of capitalism and globalization to negatively impact a developing area where marginalized people have long settled. In describing imperialist nostalgia, Rosaldo writes, “At one more remove, people destroy their environment and then worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses
a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.”\textsuperscript{131} The inclusion of the East Village’s less-glamorous history in its current image is only a symbolic one, which makes a paltry attempt at celebrating its diverse demographic, as the displacement of poor residents of color has continued. Through the production of desire, peripheral countercultural identity became the central one of the neighborhood, which forced the poor Latinx community to assume one of marginality.\textsuperscript{132} As working class Chinatown residents continue to confront the waning affordability of the neighborhood while influxes of capital pour in, developers too are operating through a comparable lens of neo-imperialist nostalgia—wielding imaginations of Chinese culture in the production of desire and transfer of global capital.

The Lower East Side/East Village development narrative follows the storyline that comes to mind when most people think about gentrification: gritty, relatively accessible, lower class immigrant neighborhood (often of color) becomes a pawn in the speculative investment game. Lower middle class folks—often bohemian creative types—priced out of more central parts of cities due to increased development and rising rents seek out new frontiers in relatively less desirable areas deemed “up and coming.” Their consumption preferences bring more upscale restaurants, clothing boutiques, and Whole Foods-esque grocery stores to the area, which in turn, jack up rent prices and result in the displacement of the poor. Eventually, young urban professionals move into the neighborhood, prompting further development and the arrival of higher end retail establishments, until the artist crowd can no longer keep

\textsuperscript{132} Mele, 302.
up with the rent costs. In the final stage, the neighborhood becomes unaffordable to even young professionals, catering to an older moneyed, and, almost always, overwhelmingly white demographic.\textsuperscript{133} Most people interested in urban spaces are familiar with this narrative, and in terms of New York neighborhoods will immediately think of the transformations of Greenwich Village, Bushwick, Williamsburg, and SoHo. Especially given the two recent zoning decisions that have left development in Chinatown doubly uncurbed, anti-gentrification activists fear that the neighborhood could join these ranks.

In 2008, the City of New York rezoned 111 blocks of Community Board 3, in an effort to preserve the established neighborhood scale and character on the Lower East Side and East Village. The plan implemented contextual zoning districts with height limits that would curb out-of-scale developments from being built. Its coverage was spotty though, and ended up downzoning relatively wealthier and whiter blocks above Delancey and Houston Streets, putting height caps on new developments there, but leaving out Chinatown and blocks on the Lower East Side with relatively poorer residents. Neighborhood activists knew that after the East Village/LES rezoning, Chinatown would be extremely vulnerable to new development, due to unused floor area ratio (FAR) established by New York’s 1961 zoning resolution, which allows the neighborhood to be built up more densely than it currently is. They also maintained, citing 2000 Census data, that although CB3 is 28 percent white, almost three-quarters (73 percent) of that population exists within the confines of the rezoned areas. Comparatively, Asian Americans comprise a greater percentage of CB3, at 35 percent of the population, but fewer than a quarter of that population (23 percent) resides in

\textsuperscript{133} Shkuda, 3.
the rezoned area. In 2014, the Chinatown Working Group, a neighborhood coalition made up of over fifty organizations, proposed its own rezoning to the city, a nearly identical version of the East Village plan with the goal of preserving affordable housing and culture in Chinatown, while stimulating continued economic growth. The plan ultimately didn’t pass, was deemed “too ambitious” by the city, and high-rise condominiums and hotels have since begun to encroach on the existing buildings in the neighborhood.

A recent study conducted by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), compares land use and demographic statistics in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston’s Chinatowns, which bolster the claim that New York’s Chinatown is undergoing an affordability crisis. Between 1990 and 2010, the general population of Chinatown decreased by seven percent, but the white population grew from 22,229 to 23,314. The share of non-family households also increased from 14 to 24 percent during this time, signifying an increase in younger students and professionals renting in the neighborhood—a phenomenon common in gentrifying areas. Though Chinatown was once valued as a place where new immigrants could live cheaply, this is no longer the case. In 1990, the median rent in the neighborhood was $351 compared to the citywide figure of $448. Between 2006 and 2010, Chinatown rents were averaging $851 a month while the city’s figure rose to $1,022. Over the course of 20 years, Chinatown’s median rents climbed from 78 percent of the city’s median rent to 83 percent.  

135 Pratt Center for Community Development and The Collective for Community.
136 Chinatown Then and Now, 11.
Today, the affordability of Chinatown is a myth. As of January 2018, the average cost of rent in New York City held at $3,164, while Chinatown’s hovered above it at $3,176, but Chinatown residents are still, on average, poorer than most New York residents.137 These days, there are also more owner occupied luxury units in the area that cater to more upscale markets, threatening increased wealth disparity and polarization in the neighborhood. One example is the Extell tower, which sits right outside the eastern boundary of the neighborhood in the Two Bridges area, and boasts amenities like an in-house movie theater, cigar room, and spa. The tower, which Extell is marketing as “One Manhattan Square” follows the city’s Mandatory Inclusionary Housing Program (MIH), which offers tax abatements or FAR bonuses to developers that agree to make 20 percent of the residential units affordable. As a result, Extell has agreed to rent out 204 “affordable” units for households making 60 percent of the area median income, with “area” referring to the city as a whole.138 These will be housed in an adjacent tower beside One Manhattan Square, and though they’re being marketed as affordable, they’ll really cater to residents making closer to neighborhood’s median income, given the disparities between the average New Yorker’s income and that of most Chinatown residents.139 Of course, there is

138 Critics like Angotti argue that calculating the AMI based on citywide figures contrives a benchmark of affordability that is unequal among different neighborhoods. For instance, in Chinatown, a household making 60 percent of the city AMI is much more common than it is in wealthier neighborhoods, because Chinatown residents have lower incomes on average compared to most New Yorkers. However, many developers catering to inclusionary housing policies will consider rental stock catering to those making 60 percent of the city AMI, “affordable.” In reality, these units target middle-income people relative to Chinatown’s income distribution, while truly lower class residents are still struggling to find housing they can afford.
139 According to a HUD devised evaluative study cited in the Chinatown Working Group rezoning proposal, the average median income in Chinatown is $37,362 for a family of four, compared to the citywide figure at $85,000. In a data visualization piece published by WNYC, the average 2012 household income (among all household sizes) in Chinatown/LES was $41,635 +/- $2,187 with the
nothing inherently wrong with middle-income housing or even luxury developments, but the consequences of having a building like One Manhattan Square built next to an ethnic enclave has the potential to make for increased polarization and even animosity between existing and new residents. Longstanding and new residents will live within close proximity of one another but will likely frequent different grocery stores, restaurants, and other local businesses. They might live side by side but not really “see” each other, which could have devastating effects for the poor working class immigrant residents: if new residents don’t believe that existing ones should have just as much claim to the space as they have, the more vulnerable marginalized demographic faces a much tougher battle in their fight to stay put.

Figure 4 Photo by Author. Construction of One Manhattan Square. 2018


It’s worth noting that the affordable units will be separate from the luxury unit, which could very well inspire an “us” versus “them” mentality between the One Manhattan Square residents and their affordable housing counterparts. With development pressures already heightening polarization by exacerbating the affordable housing crisis, Extell pushed this further, in the past, implementing “poor doors”—different entryways for market rate and affordable unit residents. See Alexandra Schwartz, “The "Poor Door" and the Glossy Reconfiguration of City Life", The New Yorker https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-poor-door-and-the-glossy-reconfiguration-of-city-life (accessed March 11 2018).
Though it’s the building’s amenities that most set it apart from other Chinatown and Lower East Side residential spaces, One Manhattan Square’s facade is physically recognizable from many blocks away. Even amidst its construction, the tower looks at least three times the height of even the tallest apartment buildings in the vicinity, and looms over the Manhattan Bridge, as if someone photographed the Lower Manhattan skyline and toggled with the tower’s scale only. The building’s reflective glass exterior exhibits a concerted effort from Extell to market the tower’s physical distinctiveness in an unlikely neighborhood; it’s a sort of luxurious oasis in a still-developing area. The glass also invokes a sense of impermeability, as if the building emblematizes a refusal to integrate with its surroundings—physically, culturally, and, certainly socioeconomically.

The feeling of self-professed exclusivity is palpable just from the tower’s official title, One Manhattan Square, an address that doesn’t actually exist, but has been concocted to give the property an air of elite grandeur. This rebranding of addresses is within typical Extell fare, as the same developer responsible for One Riverside Park and One57, the 1,004-foot skyscraper near Carnegie Hall that boasts the most expensive apartment sold in New York City to date, at an astronomical $100.5 million. According to One Manhattan Square’s official brochure, the building is primed to be “80-stories clad in a shimmering façade that reflects the river and city it

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overlooks.” 142 Though Extell has attempted to market the development as the affordable sibling of its other pricier properties, it’s clear that One Manhattan Square will not “reflect” the budgets of most city residents—much less, Chinatown or Lower East Side residents—any time in the near future.

One obvious reason for this is because Chinatown residents, activists, and neighborhood organizations fought tirelessly to keep the tower from being built in the first place. They felt that the skyscraper would look out of place, that its presence would change the business landscape of the neighborhood, and that it would jack up the rents for poorer residents living near it. They feared that businesses would open up near the tower to cater to the new residents, people that seemed to have little in common with them. They feared that they would slowly be weaned off of the old storefronts they could afford to frequent—ones that bred a sense of neighborhood familiarity. Residents had a reason to harbor these apprehensions, as the Extell development required the razing of a Pathmark supermarket in order to be built. 143 The Pathmark’s closure was especially a gripe for elderly residents in the adjacent Rutgers Houses project, who must now walk over half a mile to the nearest comparable supermarket, C-Town, when the Pathmark sold fairly affordable groceries right across the street. Extell promised that it would build a supermarket on

the ground floor of one of its buildings to serve the community, but as of now, there’s no word on when such a store will be built.\footnote{Ed Litvak, "A New Supermarket for Two Bridges? Residents Press Extell for a Firm Answer", The Lo-Down NY http://www.thelodownny.com/leslog/2017/04/a-new-supermarket-for-two-bridges-residents-press-extell-for-a-firm-answer.html (accessed March 11 2018).}

The popular gentrification narrative would predict a wave of professional or upper class white residents moving into a building like One Manhattan Square, and though that will likely be partly true, Extell decided to open up sales exclusively to overseas markets first in 2015, in countries like China, Malaysia, and Singapore.\footnote{Carmiel.} This decision is important to note because it’s demonstrative of the close relationship between the rise of global capitalism and urbanization, but also reveals the key role that Asians play in both of these processes. The gentrification story in Chinatown is distinct from that of other Manhattan neighborhoods, where whites usually move into ethnic enclaves and change the community as outsiders. In Chinatown, it appears that it is also people of Asian or Asian American descent potentially displacing other Asians. This expands upon and complicates the notion of symbolic inclusion efforts, which were at work in the East Village; in Chinatown, attempts to make retail and residential spaces more Chinese is sometimes targeted at Chinese people.

Looking at One Manhattan Square’s brochure confirms this nod toward an Asian market. There appear to be renderings of Asian people throughout the pages—in the expansive playroom, the Cellar Bar, and running on the treadmill. Aside from Asians, one is hard-pressed to find many other overtly ethnic residents, making it clear that the brochure was designed with Asians in mind. The fifth page features a zoomed-in rendering of the building’s exterior that shows a woman standing in her
ornate but sparsely decorated apartment overlooking the city. Beneath the image reads “Manhattan Lives American Dreams.” If marketed toward a local audience, one might find the allusion to America or the American Dream in this type of pamphlet rather jarring, but with Extell’s overseas audience in mind, the copywriting becomes incisively pointed, as for many people in Asia, owning real estate in America—particularly in New York City—is a widely regarded American Dream.

Perhaps what most exemplifies One Manhattan Square’s symbolic inclusion of Asian or Asian American identity is its outdoor tea pavilion, an almost laughably symbolic effort to invoke some conception of Asian-ness to the building’s blueprints. The pages discussing the tea garden feature an image of a wooden pagoda shaped gazebo, described as one of the “peaceful enclaves for closeness and serenity”—language that hints at translations of Chinese Taoist aphorisms. One Manhattan Square’s amenities, and its brochure’s copywriting style, showcase the neo-imperialist nostalgia behind the development. The building’s presence threatens the quality of life for the existing Asian immigrant population surrounding it, yet it tries to emulate the very Asian-ness that it threatens to displace. This adds another layer of complexity to the ideas Rosaldo puts forth concerning imperialist nostalgia, which don’t touch on what happens when an ethnic group becomes complicit in neo-imperialist tendencies toward other members of the same ethnic group. The result of this with regards to gentrification in Chinatown is a fissure between creative class and working class Chinese, where the former latches on to symbolic inclusion efforts as if they were literal. For Asians who do buy into Extell’s Asian-specific marketing schemes, the line

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146 For more information, see the One Manhattan Square brochure published by Extell Development Company.
between symbolic and literal inclusion shrinks: an apartment in a luxury tower is illustrative of inclusion in the economic mainstream, but this inclusion is granted at the expense of harming the livelihoods of working class Chinese nearby. For most Chinatown residents, who are on average poorer than the mist New Yorkers, Extell’s development is not inclusive at all. Therefore, even if each of the apartment units become occupied by residents of Asian descent, the building still could not be considered inclusive because it remains inaccessible to the majority of Chinatown’s demographic.

Though there will likely be some overseas Chinese that decide One Manhattan Square is a good investment for them, the issue that remains is that most Chinatown Chinese will be negatively impacted by development. On the Lower East Side, profits from speculative investment rose as more revitalization took place, which slowly chipped away at the risk factor that was associated with the neighborhood until it was no longer risky or affordable to develop there at all. Property values rose, and landlords began to launch large-scale renovations that required massive evictions in order to close the rent gap. They resorted to harassing tenants, refusing to tend to necessary work orders, and cracked down on policies that had never been enforced prior. In a 2014 China Daily article, Amy He wrote about landlords that, out of nowhere, began to threaten evictions based on residents’ immigration status or because they’d divided up apartment units to accommodate multiple families—arrangements that had never been problems prior.147

The ongoing case with the Bowery tenants exists in direct conversation with these concerns. On a very chilly January 19th, the residents of 85 Bowery were evicted from their homes after the Department of Buildings (DOB) issued a mandatory vacate order. The evacuation took place in the middle of the night, with tenants given no word of where they were to go or when they could return. Whether the vacate order was truly necessary is still ambiguous: in statements to the press, Betesh maintained that a temporary relocation was necessary to ensure that the renovations be done in a thorough manner, although tenants were skeptical, suspecting that developers and the city would much rather see a hotel at 85 Bowery than a dingy walkup. The landlord countered this point by retorting that because the residents had illegally converted the 11 apartments into nearly 40 single resident occupancy units, the integrity of the building posed a higher risk to its occupants. Seth Miller, the attorney representing the 83-85 Bowery residents, claimed that Betesh’s allegations were false.

To his knowledge, there was only one family living in each apartment, and no one had come forward with any evidence to the contrary. According to Miller, Betesh had long held the goal of evicting his tenants, and that the necessary structural repairs could’ve been completed long ago without relocation. But by January, the city was—at least, publicly—siding with Betesh. An online Daily News video showed City Council representative Margaret Chin making comments to the press at the scene of the eviction. Her tone was reassuring and conciliatory amidst the chaos and concern:

“We’ve had so many other vacates in our community in the past, and it’s tough on
the families that they have to leave. But the city is doing everything—working
together with the Red Cross—to make sure that these families are taken care of, and
the city will continue to make sure that the landlord does his job and fixes the
building.”  

Still yet, on the night of the 19th, mothers carried bleary-eyed infants down the
slanted staircase as other tenants swiftly packed belongings into plastic bins.
According to one tenant, they were each only allowed to bring a very limited amount
of belongings with them before being barred from returning upstairs. Babies left
asleep in strollers. The elderly clung to their canes—and each other. For two weeks,
they stayed at a hotel in Brownsville that the city often utilizes as a temporary
shelter. Many miles from the Bowery, students and tenants with jobs in Chinatown
factored in extended commutes to school and work, in addition to being preoccupied
with their unstable housing situation. In February, a few residents went on hunger
strikes, in an effort to pressure Betesh into updating them on the progress of the
repairs. He eventually agreed to pay for 20 hotel rooms in the Chinatown based
Wyndham Gardens Hotel, but they weren’t nearly enough to accommodate the 75
evicted residents. Nearly two months since the vacate order, there is still no word
on when the Bowery residents can return home.

151 Burke et al.
152 Ibid.
153 Josmar Trujillo, ”The City Can Do More to Help These Chinatown Tenants”, AM New York
https://www.amny.com/opinion/why-can-city-do-more-to-help-these-chinatown-tenants-1.16769231
(accessed March 11 2018).
154 Ed Litvak, ”Owner of 85 Bowery Is Now Paying for Some Residents to Stay in Chinatown Hotel”,
The Lo-Down NY http://www.thelodownny.com/leslog/2018/02/owner-of-85-bowery-is-now-
The 85 Bowery eviction along with the failed Chinatown Working Group rezoning and the increase in luxury developments are indicative of a future Chinatown that’s planned less for working class immigrants and their families, and more for creative class Asians and white gentrifiers. The lesson we can take away from these three processes occurring in tandem is that providing decent and affordable housing is a policy issue that New York and cities everywhere need to direct more attention to. Though poverty and unequal income distribution are issues that often receive more national attention, having more accessible affordable housing serves as a precursor to economic and familial stability, as well as community engagement. Having a place to call home—one that isn’t teetering on the edge of precarity because of displacement or development pressures—allows families to invest in their surroundings. They can then focus on finding work and caring for their children, especially when earnings don’t all need to go to rent. According to Matthew Desmond, author of *Evicted*, “Losing a home sends families to shelters, abandoned houses, and the street. It invites depression and illness, compels families to move into degrading housing in dangerous neighborhoods, uproots communities, and harms children. Eviction reveals people’s vulnerability and desperation as well as their ingenuity and guts.”

In an ethnic enclave like Chinatown, preserving the affordable housing stock also means that community members can continue to have a stake in shaping what type of Chinese American culture it seeks to produce. Will the future New York Chinatown still have rent-regulated apartments within walking distance to jobs, groceries, and social services that are geared toward Chinese speakers? Will it still

serve as a gateway into American society and set up newcomers to move out of poverty? Or will it face the fate that some other American Chinatowns have, becoming Disney-fied tourist destinations and otherwise hollow historical preservations? The answers to these questions depend largely on individuals in Chinatown with enough cultural capital to direct attention to issues brought on by gentrification and overdevelopment in the enclave. Because many people view gentrification as an inevitable process that can only be dictated by market forces, they don’t see that small businesses and even individual people are influential in molding the character of a neighborhood; the reality is that anyone who interacts with a historically ethnic neighborhood can make better choices that contribute more positively to the lives of existing ethnic residents.

Gentrification and development in ethnic neighborhoods are often considered forces associated with wealth and whiteness coming into an area, but with the rise of Asia’s economy as well as the profuse number of Asians and Asian Americans in the creative class, we can no longer blame Chinatown’s gentrification solely on the arrival of middle and upper class white residents. Studying gentrification in New York’s Chinatown thus requires us to examine how shifts in Asian purchasing power, as well as Asian American social mobility have prompted neighborhood businesses and cultural institutions to turn away from the working class demographic that they were born of. Only with this in mind, can we understand that the relationship between race, class, culture, and urban space is a shifting one, dictated increasingly by global forces and the real estate market rather than the immigrants on the Bowery.
Figure 5 Photo by Author. *Cooks and Customers, Doyers Street.* 2018.
As the child of a Hong Kong immigrant mother and Chinese American father, I was always made more conscious of my race in my mother’s presence. This comes as no surprise, as it was her thick accent that stuck out each time she spoke—she who relied on me to order bread if we were out at a restaurant: the servers could never understand her R sounds, which don’t exist in Cantonese. The word would curl up in her mouth, sounding more like bled, and I would wait until—exasperated and misunderstood—she implored me in Chinese, Would you just say it?

These moments with my mother certainly served to remind me of our Asian identity, but so did her sense of what seemed like immediate camaraderie with any passerby who appeared minutely Chinese. I remember us standing at one end of a New York City crosswalk on the Upper East Side, in what must’ve been the late 1990s or early 2000s: We stood a couple feet away from another family, whose familiar tonal inflections my mother must’ve picked up: They’re Chinese, she hissed—a flicker of astonishment in her voice, as if Cantonese-speaking people were a rarity in Manhattan. Occurrences like this took place all the time throughout my childhood—my mom stirred each time we crossed paths with Chinese people and me hardly batting an eye. I still don’t know what her motivations were for this: whether she did really feel a connection to these strangers, tied vaguely to us by an ethnic thread, or if she seldom heard Cantonese spoken in New York. I’ve never thought to ask.

What I do know is that for my mother, there was no need for this forced sense of affinity with other Asians when we were in Chinatown. There, she ordered food for me, and still does. She has her favorite restaurants and has become friendly with the management. She knows where to get clothing altered at the cheapest rate and can go to her Tai Chi class, buy groceries, and meet with her accountant within a four-block
radius in the time for the alteration to be done. Often, she sees someone who looks familiar on the street, and they’ll realize they share the same favorite restaurant or have a mutual friend in common. In these moments, the city shrinks and that vague thread connecting members of the Chinese diaspora actually feels real.

This sense of community exists in Chinatown for a number of reasons: many residents walk to work, a practice that was made particularly popular during the height of the neighborhood’s garment industry in the 1970s and 1980s. As more immigrants settled in Chinatown after 1965, garment factories took advantage of the burgeoning supply of labor. In turn, restaurants opened to accommodate the factory workers, and the demand for labor encouraged more immigration—demonstrative of the symbiosis between the residential, economic, and cultural uses of the neighborhood that keep the community small. Chinatown’s working class ethnic identity is also still embedded within the spatial semiotics of neighborhood landscape, even if its early kinship networks and original storefronts are slowly disappearing. In spite of this, New York’s Chinatown is not just a hollow exhibit for tourists; working class Chinese still live and labor there. But as gentrification effects begin to reveal themselves in the appearance and meaning behind urban landscape changes, they indicate a shift in who has power over the very construction of space and the way that an ethnic space can continue to exist as ethnic.

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, gentrification has posed deleterious effects on the affordable housing stock in New York’s Chinatown. Because of global and local pressures, landlords are raising rent costs on tenants who are
already rent burdened. The desire to close the rent gap coupled with lax zoning regulations have also made the neighborhood desirable for developers to build new projects altogether. As working class residents are priced out and a wealthier demographic replaces them, the consumption preferences of the former are displaced and replaced as well. These preferences threaten the viability of restaurants, small businesses, and cultural fixtures that have long been servicing locals and visitors, as when these neighborhood staples go, so do the people who are drawn to the community because of them.

In his article on the embedded landscape of gentrification, Jason Patch argues that the physicality of gentrified neighborhoods often derives from the aestheticization of their ethnic or industrial pasts. He also maintains that embedded ethnic physical markers in a space aren’t what makes neighborhoods ethnic. In his argument, he references Jerome Krase, who contends that it’s an ethnic population that does this, not the way a neighborhoods looks itself: “What makes a neighbourhood a Chinese neighbourhood or an Italian neighbourhood is not only that they change what the space looks like, but the fact that they’re there, they are doing something.” Patch asserts that there are higher stakes in toggling with the physical appearance of an ethnic neighborhood than just changing what it looks like because there’s deeper meaning embedded in existing physical structures. When gentrifiers manipulate an ethnic neighborhood’s physical landscape, it re-inscribes the question of who the community exists for. More often than not, the answer lies in whichever demographic has the most capital and purchasing power.

\[156\] Rent burdened refers to those who spend more than half of their income on housing each month.  
In New York’s Chinatown, there’s perhaps no area where this question is more relevant than on Doyers Street. As one of the earliest streets in the neighborhood’s core, there’s still an undeniably old-timey feel to the winding alleyway. It’s noticeably narrow, even relative to the already tapered streets in Chinatown, so cars rarely pass through and pedestrians walk in the street. The built landscape is low-lying, consisting of tenements no higher than five stories—most of them comprising small businesses in their bellies. In Chinatown, the business landscape is divided into informal clusters: most of the jewelry stores are on Canal, while the Bowery constitutes the Lighting District. The storefronts on Doyers Street have long been composed of barbershops and hole-in-the-wall restaurants.

Today, the business landscape of Doyers and the demographic it’s brought to the street is almost unrecognizable from what it was even five years prior. High-end bars and restaurants like Apotheke and Chinese Tuxedo are beginning to crop up next to the no-frills barbershops that have existed on the street for decades. Chinese Tuxedo, a contemporary Chinese restaurant housed in what was an opera house, charges $28 for a plate of char siu (roast pork), a popular Cantonese street food staple. At Apotheke, a nineteenth century absinthe den themed cocktail bar, one can purchase a premium bottle of an organic, herb-infused mixture for as much as $500.158 The bar’s website touts itself as much more than a bar: “The entire experience from wandering down a hidden street to find the entrance, to tasting the first sip of a specialty cocktail made with exotic herbs and fruits—is a privilege.”159 Just from the wording of this blurb, it’s clear that Apotheke is marketing itself to a

clientele not comprised of people who live and work in Chinatown, as for anyone who has even visited Chinatown as a tourist, Doyers Street is hardly “hidden.” In the neighborhood’s early years, the intersection of Doyers and Mott Streets was known as the “Bloody Angle,” the site of clashes between the On Leung and Hip Sing tongs. Today, residents frequent Doyers to go to the post office, get a haircut, or grab a quick bite to eat. The street’s sharp turns, narrow sidewalks, and gritty history, however, make it easy for a narrative of enigma to serve establishments like Apotheke, even though these very narratives were once employed to stigmatize Chinese American urban spaces and contest the eligibility of Chinese to secure American citizenship.

What’s more jarring than the price points of Chinese Tuxedo and Apotheke is that the two storefronts are mere steps away from hair salons like Yi Fa, which still charge only $8 for a haircut. As one can imagine, the types of people found walking on Doyers Street reflect the polarity of the businesses that line it. The potential for intergroup contact—between working class Chinatown old-timers and the more well-to-do nightlife crowd—has thus risen since the arrival of these new, trendier storefronts. This is particularly true during the early evening hours, when the salons are servicing their last customers of the day, and Apotheke and Chinese Tuxedo are gearing up for their first rush. During these hours, it’s as if there are two Doyers Streets—the portion closer to the Bowery crowded with hip millenials waiting to be seated for dinner and the upper part of the alleyway, where line cooks, still clad in their stained white aprons, stand outside of takeout joints on their smoke breaks.

There are few other sites in New York City, if any, where intergroup contact between these types of people would take place. As the former are symptomatic of
gentrification in Chinatown while the latter represent the neighborhood’s existing demographic, one might wonder whether the dynamics of interaction between the two would result in peaceful coexistence, or a sense of mutually perceived threat.

There’s no doubt that some Chinatown residents feel like they are being replaced, and the 2010-2014 American Community Survey figures echo this concern: between 2000 and 2010 there was a 42.2 percent increase of whites living in Chinatown, with a loss of 15.2 percent of Asian residents, demonstrative of Chinese leaving the enclave, and more whites are moving in. To reiterate Bethany Li’s point, this increase in the white demographic is typically indicative of gentrification taking place, but as we know, gentrification in Chinatown cannot be reduced to whites moving into an ethnic space, as second generation Chinese Americans and more affluent overseas Asians are responsible for the neighborhood’s changes as well.160

A few weeks ago, I stood on Doyers Street, taking note of the changes—the new restaurants and bars that look rather anachronistic there. I’d long viewed Doyers to be the street most associated with “old Chinatown.” The street still looks like an alley that one might find in Hong Kong: pedestrians dominate, walking past off-duty barbers and cooks, who stand outside of their storefronts. Many of the small restaurants and barbershops keep folded chairs outside when the weather is warm, so employees can rest during their breaks. They don’t take the chairs in until closing time, and for the most part, no one bothers them about this.

That evening, Doyers Street was busy, with people waiting outside the restaurants for open tables, socializing after enjoying drinks at the bars. A few young

men walked down the street, taking swigs from a champagne bottle, while playing loud music from a speaker. One of them grabbed a folding chair from outside of a barbershop, took it into the middle of the street, and sat on it while posing for a photo with his bottle in hand. From inside the barbershop, an old Chinese man looked on but didn’t say a word. He waited for the men to finish their impromptu photo shoot and then proceeded to walk outside to retrieve the chair. While the photo shoot was taking place, employees from other businesses on the block peered out from their storefronts and silently collected their chairs, bringing them indoors. Nobody confronted the men—they just watched and reacted.

Though this anecdote doesn’t offer us any empirical information about intergroup contact between existing residents and gentrifiers in Chinatown, it’s clear that the owners of these small Doyers Street businesses felt it more worthwhile to retreat, changing the way they carried about everyday tasks, rather than to confront the two men about moving their chairs. While the decision of the shopkeepers to bring the chairs indoors in this instance may not mirror how working class Chinatown residents are confronting gentrification on political or social levels, their behavior in the moment might be telling of shifts in out-group perception and feelings of attachment to the neighborhood. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so, it might be fruitful to measure longstanding residents’ levels of political engagement or emotional investment in the neighborhood prior to and following the first signs of gentrification.

Leaving folding chairs outside of family businesses likely doesn’t strike most as being a distinctly Chinese practice in the slightest. This setup, which blurs the line business and street culture, calls to mind scenes of family-owned businesses in
immigrant neighborhoods at large. But there are other markers of ethnic identity in Chinatown that are distinctly Chinese, and these—like affordable housing and working class residents—are at risk of being displaced and overwritten as well. In Elizabeth Dwoskin’s 2010 piece in The Village Voice, she hones in on two Delancey Street buildings that had formerly been home predominantly to Chinese families, but were then beginning to be seen as desirable by NYU and Parsons students. Art students started moving in, and these new residents went about their lives—going to school, taking advantage of neighborhood’s cheap eats, coming home late and drunk on weekends. The relationship between them and the older residents grew strained, each perceiving the other as alien: “The newcomers are mostly surprised—or thrown off—by the buildings’ long-term Chinese tenants, who chat with each other in a strange language, leave their doors open so their neighbors can see them eating soup in their boxers and sandals, and let their children play in the hallway.” The older tenants regarded the newcomers with suspicion; though they shared a building, some of the newcomers live in renovated apartments and paid more for rent, exacerbating the perceived difference and polarization between the two groups.161

Like the 83-85 Bowery tenants, the long-term tenants on Delancey experienced neglect and harassment from their landlord, but the landlord-tenant fight there caught media attention when the Chinese tenants’ Lunar New Year signs were mysteriously ripped off their doors. In 2008, Madison Capital acquired the Delancey buildings and quickly enforced a series of rules that were targeted at the living habits of the Chinese residents only. They were told to keep their doors shut because of the

“cooking odors,” and to avoid congregating in the hallways. But the most serious policing of Chinese tradition had to do with the New Year signs—usually small door ornamentations with the fook character on them, meant to usher in luck for the forthcoming year. According to the lawsuit that followed, the landlord—or some adjacent actor on his behalf—ordered for the removal of Chinese cultural symbols from the apartment doors, but allowed Christmas wreaths to hang undisturbed. Eventually, the landlord agreed to a settlement, but the harassment left the Chinese tenants on edge. In the aftermath, they regained the right to put up the signs, but many didn’t bother anymore.162

Scholars within the field of political psychology have come up with inconsistent findings with regards to whether racial threat or a greater sense of outgroup tolerance dominates during instances of intergroup contact. In the aforementioned Doyers and Delancey Street examples, intergroup contact appears to prove an overwhelming disadvantage for existing Chinatown residents, amplifying their lack of power in the face of newcomers. However, J. Eric Oliver and Janelle Wong found that at the neighborhood level, those who live amongst more out-group members have more positive attitudes toward these groups as compared to those who live with more members of their own racial group.163 This suggests that with increased diversity in Chinatown, perhaps residents old and new can eventually live harmoniously. On the contrary, Ryan Enos found that when a majority black housing complex was demolished in Chicago, the adjacent white communities, which had voted more conservatively and more often, became less politicized when the black

162 Ibid.
population nearby dispersed. Enos’ research suggests that with more racial out-group members in a neighborhood, groups might be incentivized to voice their demands more, but these findings center on black-white relations, which would likely differ from Asian-white ones. Perhaps interacting with more whites has increased the sense of trust that some Chinatown residents feel towards them and the indicators of gentrification that they’re associated with. Conversely, they might feel that their neighborhood is being “taken over” or changed for the worst.

My own take on the matter is that wealthier Chinatown residents—perhaps business owners or landlords, with the linguistic abilities to interact with outsiders—would be more likely to come away from increased intergroup contact with a more positive view of whites and see the neighborhood changes to be exemplary of adaptive revitalization rather than displacement. Such individuals are likely to experience economic gain from a Chinatown that is now more open to outsiders: perhaps more customers at restaurants, or more rent revenue at the end of each month, since the demand has driven rent prices upward. These economic gains for business owners, however, don’t bring the same benefits to working class Chinese, which, along with disparate lifestyle preferences between the two groups, accentuates the divide between Chinese Americans along class lines. Today, middle and upper class Chinese Americans not only live in different types of buildings and frequent different businesses than their poorer counterparts; they benefit from altogether different visions of Chinatown’s future.

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Some prominent examples of these types of Chinatown community members include the Chu and Tang families, who own the new Hotel 50 Bowery and Nom Wah Tea Parlor, Chinatown’s oldest dim sum restaurant, respectively.165 The Chus own the building that houses the posh Hotel 50 Bowery, equipped with a rooftop bar called The Crown, which sells pricey Asian inspired cocktails. The hotel was also once projected to include an opium den themed cellar lounge, The Green Lady, before the idea was shut down for exploiting harmful Asian stereotypes. Though the opium den theme never materialized, The Crown’s menu still exemplifies the symbolic inclusion of exoticized “Asian” details by serving Japanese beers and cocktails with the names “Black Dragon Tea” and “East India.” Since Joie de Vivre Hospitality, a hotel and restaurant company, runs the hotel, it’s unclear how much influence the Chus themselves had in these types of decisions, and though the Chus do own the hotel and they are Chinese, Hotel 50 Bowery might not be able to be considered a local ethnic business. Its very presence threatens the vivacity of the ethnic demographic that lives in the area and its existence works against the mission of cultural preservation and neighborhood affordability that the Chinatown Working Group’s proposed zoning sought to advance. Serving Asian cocktails at unaffordable price points is not enough to make a business ethnic.

In recent years, Wilson Tang, on the other hand, expanded the hours of his uncle’s dim sum business, to make it so that a meal customarily enjoyed during brunch hours is now served all day. In what was once a jaw-dropping subversion of tradition, many other dim sum parlors have followed suit, shifting the focus of business to tourists and non-Chinese locals who might crave dumplings at later hours.

165 Tabor.
Nom Wah has also arranged events with *Vogue* and Nike, capitalizing on the enclave’s move away from insularity.\(^{166}\) The Tang and the Chus are just two examples of Chinese American families who have actively adapted business tactics to serve increased intergroup contact and they’ve both seemed to benefit from this, at least, economically. But at the other end of the spectrum is the older Chinese immigrant, who relies on Chinatown to be the supportive ethnic enclave it had been historically: a close-knit community operated for and by Chinese—where a foreign country suddenly ceases to feel so foreign.

Residents of a lower socioeconomic strata are less likely to reap benefits from increased tourism or a wealthier demographic settling in the neighborhood: they might be immigrants that don’t speak English, or view whites—and wealthier Asians—through the lens of power threat. These distinctions predicated on socioeconomic class and degrees of assimilation hearken to Gordon Allport’s Intergroup Contact hypothesis, which is discussed in Thomas Pettigrew’s article on intergroup contact theory. Allport suggests that with equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and mutual support of law, authorities, or customs, intergroup harmony can be realized.\(^{167}\) But with intragroup ties within the Chinese American community fraying, the notion of intergroup contact becomes even more muddled. Well-to-do Chinese and Chinese Americans can hardly be considered one group with their working class counterparts, as the former has more capital, more of an economic stronghold over the neighborhood, and don’t necessarily have common goals with working class Chinese. In fact, Chinese and Chinese American storefronts often look

\(^{166}\) Ibid.

distinct from one another too. This calls into question whether intergroup contact should, in the case of Chinatown, be examined across class and cultural identity lines rather than race lines.

In Krase’s article on spatial semiotics in ethnic neighborhoods, he alludes to the impact that expressive and phatic signs have on an ethnic population’s claim to their space. Expressive signs give subjects a voice and are created in the course of everyday practices that reinforce notions of origins and identity. Flags or the incorporation of national colors in a sign are a good example of this. Phatic signs are artifacts of quotidian social interaction that become markers of day-to-day life, indicators that we are “at home” in our neighborhood. An example of a phatic sign is a storefront awning, which, in ethnic neighborhoods, often has text inscribed in the community’s native tongue. Krase maintains that in global cities, ethnic semiotics “do something” for the urban landscape and the ethnic community, imbuing both with distinctive substantive content that is usually indigenously conceived and controlled. “Something,” however, runs the risk of becoming “nothing”—giving way to “sameness”—if an ethnic enclave cannot withstand the homogenizing pressures of globalization. Though Krase does not address gentrification directly, we’ve already seen how globalization and gentrification are linked processes with a mutually dependent relationship.

In Chinatown there are still ethnic commercial spaces new and old. Among them are Nom Wah Tea Parlour, Chinese Tuxedo, and, arguably, Hotel 50 Bowery—that is, if being Chinese-owned is enough for it to be marked as ethnic.

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169 Ibid., 371.
However, too many ethnic establishments in Chinatown today—especially newer ones—are wrought out of homogenizing forces that render their ethnic characteristics devoid of any distinctive substantive content. As alleged cultural fixtures, they only include perfunctory aspects of Asian ethnic identity that are palatable to the general public, forging an affinity to “nothing” rather than “something.” This symbolic inclusion of Chinese identity is certainly present to an extent in Chinese Tuxedo’s concept. There’s no mark anywhere along the restaurant’s sleek exterior that bears its English name, only a wood paneled awning with the Chinese characters tam fa lau etched in gold lettering and a bright neon sign that reads min gun. The former likely refers to Chinese Tuxedo’s Chinese name while the latter translates roughly to “noodle shop.” But given that a large percentage of the restaurant’s clientele are likely not Chinese-literate, it would seem that the Chinese-only awning would just make for inconvenience.

Figure 6 Photo by Author. Chinese Tuxedo Exterior. 2018.
This is where another one of Krase’s points comes in. He argues that, “In some instances, phatic signs of working-class life become transformed into expressive signs of middle-class ‘hipster’ authenticity. Globalization encourages the appropriation of phatic signs for expressive consumption.”\footnote{Ibid., 372.} Given the price points of Chinese Tuxedo’s menu, we can infer that the Chinese-only awning isn’t meant to accommodate working class immigrant residents who don’t speak English, like others in Chinatown might. With this in mind, it’s clear that the signage serves a purely aesthetic purpose—a gesture that convinces diners that, yes, they are about to eat at an “authentic” Chinese restaurant. It’s not surprising that Chinese Tuxedo customers need this reassurance, as the chef, Paul Donnelly is not Chinese, but a Scot, and has called his menu “fusion.” Perhaps Chinese Tuxedo’s ambiguous identity is depicted best in Pete Wells’ 2017 \textit{New York Times} review: “On some nights, the crowd is a mix of white people here simply because it’s new, and Chinese families tentatively poking at the fried eggplant and pork dumplings topped with flying fish roe. They look as if they are trying to decide whether this is really Chinese food.”\footnote{Pete Wells, "Culinary Clashes End in Harmony at Chinese Tuxedo", The New York Times \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/dining/chinese-tuxedo-restaurant-review.html} (accessed March 20 2018).} The question of what can be considered ethnic in Chinatown extends beyond the realm of the dishes being served at Asian fusion restaurants; it looms larger into the business and cultural landscape of the neighborhood, as “trendy” and “ethnic” begin to clash and blur together all at once.

Though gentrification has aided in displacing Chinatown residents and small businesses from the neighborhood, one would be surprised to learn that there’s
actually an inverse relationship between the displacement of “ethnics” in the neighborhood and the increase in businesses visibly identified and promoted as “ethnic,” which again recalls the divide between working class immigrants and more affluent Chinese in the neighborhood.¹⁷² According to a report published by non-profit community organization, CAAAV, the increase in trendy restaurants—loosely characterized by exclusively English-language menus, price points targeting the wealthy, and non-bilingual wait staff—alter the urban character of Chinatown, which offers seemingly cosmetic benefits to the neighborhood, but at hidden costs.¹⁷³ Behind storefronts that still serve Chinese food, with Chinese-language awnings intact, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between examples of revamped phatic signs and phatic signs that have been re-appropriated as expressive ones by hip gentrifiers hoping to exert ownership over a formerly ethnic space. Gentrification thus possesses the capacity to mask the plight of working class Chinatown residents by disguising displacement and replacement as revitalization carried out by longstanding community members. As Lena Sze writes in her article on Chinatown’s Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) and its relationship with gentrification, “[G]entrification in Chinatown is, to some degree, not a clear-cut process of racial displacement of people of color since it was partially initiated by ethnic Chinese.


Chinatown can also simultaneously be visibly and commercially ‘ethnic’ and experience gentrification that threatens that ‘ethnic’ character.”

With this in mind, we ought to redefine what we view as “ethnic” in Chinatown and how physical and ensuing cultural landscape changes in the neighborhood can be better harnessed to support long-term residents. The designation of a commercial space or institution as ethnic shouldn’t only be reserved for places that cater to working class immigrant “ethnics.” Doing so would perpetuate exclusion era narratives of Chinese, which conferred a reputation of stagnancy and poverty on to an entire ethnicity. At the same time, in America, we describe something as “ethnic” to refer to something associated with a non-white European culture, positioning whiteness as the unmarked normative descriptor. “Ethnic,” then, should seek to be a retaliation against whiteness and the privilege it connotes. Ethnic storefronts, even if geared toward more upper class ethnic consumers, should not repurpose ethnic phatic signs to be markers as hipster ornamentation, or contribute to the displacement of an ethnic demographic. If it does, the business can only be symbolically ethnic, even if owned and operated by ethnic individuals.

Though the chef at Chinese Tuxedo is a Scot, one of the two owners is Jeff Lam, a Chinese man who has been working in Chinatown for years. In opening the restaurant with Eddy Buckingham, his Australian business partner, Lam sought to modernize Chinese dining, creating a menu to have “broad appeal” to attract diners from outside the neighborhood. The two want to help advance an alternate narrative of Chinese food to Chinatown visitors—that Chinese cuisine is just as diverse as the

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Chinese community in the neighborhood. There’s more to it than cheap takeout. And who can blame them? There are fewer and fewer older Chinese residents in the neighborhoods, making it increasingly difficult for businesses to subsist solely off the old demographic. In his New York Magazine article, Nick Tabor interviewed Chinatown community members about how they’ve adapted their business strategies in order to stay afloat in the changing neighborhood: “A lot of people still come back to see me because their families have been using our herb shop,” said Carl Shan Leung, founder of Kamwo Herbal Pharmacy. “But our business has changed to adjust to the reality. If we only did Chinese business, we wouldn’t survive.”

New York’s Chinatown has sustained itself for over a century by way of its willingness to be adaptive. Its ability to transport kinship networks and modes of living from overseas—and then transform and reinvent them—has kept the community fed, employed, and close-knit. For immigrants like my mother, Chinatown emblematizes familiarity, and still remains one of the few places in New York where she feels altogether comfortable being alone. But in “broadening their appeal” to the changing “realities” of the neighborhood, restaurants and other businesses run the risk of perpetuating out-of-scale development and the affordable housing crisis. Business owners like Leung say that they are the ones adapting to the demographic changes and shifting needs in the neighborhood, but proponents of demand side theories of gentrification would argue otherwise: it’s the trendy restaurants, bars, and boutiques that bring more affluent individuals into formerly working class areas.

176 Quoted in Tabor.
177 Hamnett, "Gentrification and the Middle-Class Remaking of Inner London, 1961-2001."
What makes gentrification so difficult to tackle is that it’s a multilevel process initiated and perpetuated on various fronts. Developers look to the business and cultural landscape, seeing if the neighborhood can serve as an incubator for the type of gritty but comfortable lifestyle that young members of the creative and professional classes crave. Existing business owners survey the changing demographic of the neighborhood, and, if they have the means to do so, revise the way they market themselves to suit the needs of the new demographic. Prospective business owners take note of all of this from afar and might decide to open up shop, even if their services won’t cater to the needs of the existing residents in the neighborhood, thus reigniting the speculative development stage of the gentrification cycle once again. All of these factors working together in Chinatown first alter the way the neighborhood looks physically, but then empties the businesses, the semiotics, and the very streets of their meaning; they become constructed and self-constructed containers of ethnicity that are hollow inside.

For those who can fight the forces of gentrification, they lean into them and adapt, but for Chinatown’s most vulnerable and longstanding residents, they’re often forced into a state of retreat. Because of language and education barriers, for example, they may not know when a new zoning is about to be proposed to the city. They don’t know that zoning affects the types of storefronts that enter the neighborhood and that those storefronts threaten the existing ones that cater to them. In the face of change, and especially the type of change that encroaches on what had always been familiar, it sometimes feels easier to tear down the Lunar New Year signs and take the chairs out of the street. But modifying the physicality of Chinatown produces, and is a product of, more deeply embedded transformations that can
permanently alter the way lower class Chinese relate to the space that had once been uncontestedly theirs. What’s more consequential is the manner in which spatial alterations to New York’s Chinatown have unveiled fissures in the Chinese American community. Today, wealthier and more assimilated Chinese can join the ranks of white outsiders, who have long been claiming urban spaces in New York City that were born of, and panaceas to, the marginalization experienced by immigrants of color.
A few months ago, I attended a panel on gentrification and city planning at McNally Jackson Books in SoHo, which focused on the way zoning decisions disproportionately impact communities of color. The panel featured a cohort of urban planners and community and grassroots organizers, who spoke about the anti-gentrification work they were doing in neighborhoods throughout the city. Toward the end of the following Q&A session, a young black woman stood up and offered her thoughts. Up until this point, the mood of the evening was fraught but uplifting: the panelists established that gentrification is taking place in neighborhoods from east Brooklyn to the Bronx, but with increased awareness and engagement, the displacement of poor people of color isn’t inevitable. When the woman began to speak, her tone frustrated but fiery, she did as if she sought to refute everything that had been said before. She insisted that there was nothing anyone could do about gentrification, and that if a Whole Foods ever opened up in her Bronx neighborhood, she would proudly eat there because she had to eat.

Unsurprisingly, the woman’s comment was met with a long uneasy silence in the room, until Marina Ortiz, one of the panelists, and a community organizer from East Harlem Preservation, addressed it directly. Ortiz asserted that everyone that lives in a gentrifying community of color has some degree of agency in curbing its harmful effects. As consumers, we don’t need to shop at the big chain stores when they move into ethnic enclaves, and can make a conscious effort to patronize small and locally owned businesses whenever possible. From the other side of things, businesses new and old should feel a responsibility to serve the neighborhood and residents that house them. They should also encourage people to feel more attached to their surroundings, and urge them to use their spaces as sites where they can have substantive contact.
with their neighbors, even those with different lifestyle patterns and preferences than
their own.

Wing On Wo & Co. is a good example of a Chinatown business that does this well. The antique and jade shop, which is said to be the oldest continuously run
business in Chinatown, began operations in 1890.翼 Today, Wing On Wo is more
than a gift shop for tourists—it’s reverted to the former role that it inhabited in the
early days of Mott Street’s Chinese quarter, as a meeting hub for community
members. But instead of getting together to wire money back to China or reminisce
about the villages they came from, community members are coming to Wing On Wo
to discuss the future of Chinatown. Since 2016, the storefront has held and sponsored
artist talks, screenings, and panels on the changing landscape of the neighborhood。翼
It’s also worked with the Museum of Chinese in America and the New York Public
Library to lead oral histories workshops, which have encouraged residents to share
their own Chinatown stories, or those of family members。翼

In carrying out these programs, Wing On Wo isn’t stopping market forces in
their tracks: displacement and development are still running their course. But the
storefront, with its own rich history, is helping both second generation and immigrant
residents partake in a dialogue about what exactly is happening in the neighborhood.
The former might be surprised to learn of their own complicity in the erasure of
cultural fixtures and ethnic businesses, while immigrant residents might find new ways
to become more informed about the policy decisions that affect them, and meet

178 Alex Vadukul, "On Brink of Sale, Family Shop in Chinatown Stays in Family", The New York
(accessed April 11 2018).
others who are also navigating the changes that are making Chinatown feel unfamiliar. They might learn about tenants’ rights and the resources they can seek out if they run into trouble with landlords, which could make these tenants more resilient if confronted with harassment. Though products sold at Wing On Wo target tourists who are willing to shell out cash for pricey antiques, the space itself is inclusive and seeks to engage with all Chinatown community members. It’s by and large an ethnic space.

Even if most businesses reconfigured themselves to be more like Wing On Wo, it’s unlikely that gentrification pressures would relax altogether. For that reason, it’s easy to assume a defeatist attitude like the woman at the McNally Jackson panel, and feel powerless before the monoliths of globalization, capitalism, and neighborhood change. The reality is that all of us are agents of our environments, and even if resistance can’t bring back shuttered businesses and take away the high-rise towers, no one can stand by idly—not existing residents, business owners, or even gentrifiers themselves. New York’s Chinatown has existed for over a century because of its ability to incubate a distinctly Chinese American culture that has fluidly conformed to the needs of Chinese in New York specifically, beginning in the decades of formal exclusion through those of de facto societal marginalization. Today, that culture must focus more on preserving the livelihoods of the neighborhood’s most vulnerable residents, while not shying away from new ventures that second generation Asian Americans seek to share with the community. Chinatown belongs to us just as much as it does the immigrants that settled there decades ago, but neither of us can erase the other.
As I went through the stages of research and writing for this project, I wondered what my relationship with Chinatown would be like once I leave college and likely join the swelling numbers of Asian Americans in the creative class. Many of my peers have graduated and moved into their first apartments in New York, often in historically low-income neighborhoods of color like Chinatown, Crown Heights, and Harlem. It isn’t that we shouldn’t live in these areas altogether if financial circumstances necessitate it, but if we do, we ought to be conscious of our consumption patterns and the manner in which we engage with the neighborhoods we inhabit. Are we shopping at local businesses, voting in municipal elections, and informed of city policies that might not affect us but have displacing effects on existing residents? Are we interacting with our neighbors and listening to them? Or are we merely appropriating symbols and fragile vestiges of the histories they’ve embedded in the built landscape, marketing them as ethnic, and using them for our benefit only?

We cannot continue to let race or class divisions form a wall between us and working class immigrant New Yorkers in gentrifying neighborhoods. When I say “us,” in this section, I intend to address white and middle to upper class gentrifiers of color. Though we must certainly encourage working class residents to assume a stance of resistance and not give way to the wishes of developers, landlords, and real estate moguls in their neighborhoods, those of us with the means should make these channels of resistance more accessible to them, by making their demands ours too. Neighborhoods don’t just undergo change without reason, but as a consequence of human action that advances or curbs more intractable environmental and economic forces. In order to check development pressures in Chinatown, all members of the
community must be cognizant of their distinctive roles in perpetuating the process, even those who might be seen as victims of it.

Though gentrification and development are both urban studies words that have managed to enter the cultural mainstream, most people are still unaware of how these processes, and the zoning policies that perpetuate them, are implemented with a racial edge. Non-English speaking lower class New Yorkers are at the greatest disadvantage, because they’re least likely to organize or speak up if policies adversely affect them, and in turn, they usually do. Echoing urban planning scholar Tom Angotti’s sentiments on the matter, I too hope that the city can one day acknowledge on the record that race and class are implicated in zoning, planning, and displacement.\textsuperscript{181} I hope that these studies, which for some reason are only viewed as legitimate when published under government auspices, can validate what working class residents in Chinatown, and other ethnic neighborhoods, have known for decades.

Because I don’t have a background in statistics or quantitative data analysis, I wanted to tell a small part of the Chinatown gentrification story from an anecdotal, historical, and journalistic angle. I sought to incorporate my own experiences and those of individuals who haven’t been lucky enough to speak out on their own. These stories haven’t yet made it into history books. For this thesis, I only conducted interviews with English speaking Chinatown residents, which, I acknowledge, poses limitations to the scope of narratives this project includes. I am confident that in the near future, someone with the resources, linguistic abilities, and insight can extend the work done in these pages to help inspire policies that can make for lasting change for

\textsuperscript{181} Zoned Out! Race, Displacement, and City Planning in New York City, 33.
working class residents of color in ethnic enclaves. I believe that with increased awareness of and engagement in our cities, this will happen. It begins with each and all of us.
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