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From the Garden to the Streets:

Working-Class Immigrant Foodways as Resistance in a Gentrifying Los Angeles Chinatown

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Asian American Studies

by

Frances Huynh

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

From the Garden to the Streets:

Working-Class Immigrant Foodways as Resistance in a Gentrifying Los Angeles Chinatown

by

Frances Huynh

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Valerie J Matsumoto, Chair

From the Garden to the Streets: Working-Class Immigrant Foodways as Resistance in a Gentrifying Los Angeles Chinatown explores how foodways traditional to working-class senior immigrants in Los Angeles Chinatown provide grassroots organizing tools and epistemological frameworks to challenge gentrification, exercise the right to the city, and reimagine community health. Through both a research thesis and a community-oriented storybook presenting creative text, photographs, and visual illustrations, *From the Garden to the Streets* centers these seniors and their life experiences in relation to their sense of well-being, self-determination, and collectivity. Foodways provides a critical lens to explore the intersection of race, class, and space in the neighborhood, while their stories paint a complex and multidimensional narrative of Chinatown.

An unsustainable and inequitable form of neoliberal economic development facilitated by capitalist structures of power, gentrification is an intentional process of racial, spatial, and economic segregation. It aims to physically and figuratively erase the livelihoods and narratives of working-class senior immigrants who are deviant to the state. The sites of gardens and informal food economies produce knowledge and social networks that foster the community's cultural wealth and collective power for resistance. Ultimately, these sites produce anti-capitalist politics that have the potential to actualize a vision of an equitable Chinatown that continues to support the poor, the elderly, and immigrants. Highlighting their narratives, thus utilizing their knowledge production as tools to address gentrification, renders possible working-class senior immigrants' seemingly impossible continued existence in the midst of a gentrifying Chinatown.

This thesis of Frances Huynh is approved.

Victor Bascara

Min Zhou

Valerie J Matsumoto, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2018

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All photos were taken by Frances Huynh.

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Growing up, my family taught me how to communicate love and appreciation through food: questions of “did you eat yet?” and extra servings of leafy greens, roasted duck, and melon soup. As I sit here writing my acknowledgements, I am reminded of all the ways people have supported me and all the ways I wish I could express my deep gratitude towards them.

I am so grateful for my family. Thank you to my parents, *mommy* and *bah*, for all that you’ve taught me and continue to teach me. You nourish me with homecooked meals and stories of Vietnam. Thank you to my auntie *goo goo* for your phone calls from Seattle and for all those trips to Chinatown growing up. Thank you to my brothers for our shared love and intense knowledge of old school television shows, your hand-me-downs, and your different ways of caring. Thank you to my many aunts, uncles, and cousins for being family. Thank you to my grandmas and ancestors for watching over me. Your love guides me everywhere I go.

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grounded having gone through graduate school with the support of this community and the powerful history and movement of Asian American Studies.

As I struggle with my conversational Cantonese and basic skills in using a Chinese-English dictionary, I am so lucky to have had friends help me with translations and interpretations. I am forever grateful for Annie, Christina, Desmond, Tiffany, and Vivian. I would not have been able to connect with the seniors as much as I did without your presence and language skills. Jason Li double checked and refined the written traditional Chinese in this thesis, and Sophia helped translate my consent form into Chinese. My parents had to endure my never-ending questions: What does this mean? What is this vegetable called? Can you say that again?

This thesis has gone through so many revisions and edits that I have lost count. Many friends helped me with developing my writing and analysis. Annie, Aaron, Alex, Arturo, Craig, Katie, Kenny, and Taiji read through a very early version of my thesis and provided valuable insights. Kenny and Promise were some of the final eyes to read my thesis when it was almost complete and gave feedback I found incredibly constructive and helpful.

I am so grateful for the community I have found within Chinatown. Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) has been incredibly instrumental in shaping this thesis, in addition to shaping who I am. There is so much power to who we are and what we do. Thank you for challenging me and pushing me to imagine all the possibilities of a Chinatown that serves the working-class. I am deeply appreciative of all the community organizers and volunteers who I've met through CCED: Annie, Cathy, Craig, Charlotte, Diane, Felix, Jenny, Jon, Katie, Kenny, King, Lisa, Lorna, Lucy, Patrick, Preeti, Promise, Phyllis, Sophat, and so many more. Finally, thank you to the seniors who teach me the value of sweet potato leaves, meaningful connections, and what it means to think beyond yourself.

Introduction

Tohng Yahn Gaai was what we once called where we lived: “China-people-street.”

Later, we mimicked Demon talk and wrote down only Wah Fau - “China-Town.”

The difference is obvious: the people disappeared.

Translations - Wing Tek Lum

In front of Pauline’s apartment sits a raised plot of dirt overflowing with the green leaves of sweet potato plants. Vivian and I stand there, holding onto reused plastic grocery bags from her kitchen. Pauline starts to slowly cut off different sections of leaves with a large pair of scissors. *These are the pretty ones*, she points out to us in Cantonese, *because they have no 窿 (holes)*. To cut the leafy greens, you get rid of the hard part of the stem, or you can keep the stems to eat with the leaves. In a few days, they will all grow back. While she gifts us her garden’s harvest, I am reminded of something she often says during our walks throughout Chinatown: “你幫人. 人幫你. (*You help people. People help you.*)” It seems so simple: I help you, and you help me. Yet, these words highlight the importance of compassion, accountability, and mutual aid, particularly in a neighborhood where socioeconomic and health disparities and the threat of gentrification grow. To embody this line of thinking and have it manifest in everyday life and various forms of resistance can be truly transformative in ensuring communities are equitable. It serves as both a reminder and a call to action, especially when we’re confronted with the question: what is the future of Chinatown?

Reflections on *From the Garden to the Streets*

Bus Rides and Prayers: From the Classroom to the Kitchen Table to Chinatown and Back

At the end of 2015, both *ma ma* and *ah ma*, my grandmothers, passed away within a month of each other. Never had I felt the impact of death so closely and deeply. I was sad for a very long time. I don't think that grief has ever gone away. It continues to wash over me like waves.

When *ma ma* and *ah ma* passed away, my parents told us not to cry too much. In our Buddhist beliefs, the spirits of those who have passed continue to be here for a little while longer. We prayed to wish *ma ma* and *ah ma* peace and to guide their spirits to heaven. *Na mo a mi tuo fo*. Our deep sadness would only make them worry. I learned to see grief taking many forms and our prayers holding power.

The end of 2015 was also full of beginnings. This was when I started graduate school, trying to find peace and comfort in my public health and Asian American Studies classes when my heart and mind were always somewhere else — at home. At this time, I also began to learn what it meant to commit myself to community organizing with Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), a multiethnic and intergenerational all-volunteer grassroots organization. I reconnected with Chinatown, a community my parents and auntie often took me to during the weekends throughout my childhood living in the neighboring San Gabriel Valley. I began to come back to Chinatown for meetings, neighborhood outreach, dim sum socials, political education workshops, and grocery shopping. I would see older women walking down the streets. Their long-sleeve knits and short speckled white-and-grey hair reminded me of *ma ma* and *ah ma*.

Much of my personal and political growth has happened in Chinatown. I often ask myself how and why I devoted the past three years of my graduate research and political organizing to Chinatown and the answer is always the same: the seniors. The seniors I've met through CCED

and my research have taught me to see aging, health, and community in new ways. They have fed me, welcomed me into their lives (and gardens!), and given me their patience as I struggled to form thoughts into sentences with my conversational Cantonese. *From the Garden to the Streets: Working-Class Immigrant Foodways as Resistance in a Gentrifying Los Angeles Chinatown* centers their wealth of knowledge.

Through this research thesis and an accompanying storybook, I hope to bridge the spaces of academia and community that have shaped my understanding of and commitment to social justice and health equity. I hope to contribute to conversations, research, organizing, and reimaginings of an equitable and just world for black and brown, indigenous, queer and trans, Muslim, disabled, immigrant, and working-class communities. This thesis is rooted in histories of progressive political movements and grassroots organizing that have taken different forms on campuses, in gardens, on the streets, and in homes. *From the Garden to the Streets* centers the narratives of working-class senior immigrants in Chinatown who often get left out of article headlines, urban planning processes, activist circles, and social media highlights. Their everyday existence in a Chinatown where gentrification seeks to displace and erase them is a form of resistance. It isn't always loud or visible, but it is powerful. What can we learn from them?

Audience: Conversations in Liminal Space

During graduate school, there have been many moments when I walked out of a seminar and cried from feelings of incompetence and frustration not only with myself but with what I was learning in regard to institutions and systems of oppression. The academic jargon and theory oftentimes felt heavy and disconnected from what I saw happening outside the classroom and in communities of color and my home. *Why am I here?* In many ways, academic spaces have generated violent notions of what it meant for me to belong, participate, and exist as a scholar, a

community organizer, and a woman of color. In many other ways, these very spaces have brought me joy, growth, and transformative power, nurturing me with a sense of self and direction personally, academically, and politically. I truly believe that my entire time in graduate school has been part of a continuous conversation that I have been having with the seniors in Chinatown, *ma ma*, *ah ma*, *mommy*, *bah*, and myself.

There is power in both dialogue and silence. They both have shaped this ongoing conversation of mine. What I cannot say in class, I say at home in Teochew, posed in questions to my parents about their experiences growing up in Vietnam, coming to the United States as poor refugees, and living in the San Gabriel Valley as ethnic Chinese immigrants. The articles and books I read are channeled into the school papers and poetry I write on weekends spent in Chinatown. The words that stumble and wrangle themselves out of my mouth to my peers, I translate into thoughts of and prayers to my grandmas. To *ma ma* and *ah ma*, to *mommy* and *bah*, and to the seniors in Chinatown who fill these pages with their narratives, this is a letter to you.

Building Relationships in Chinatown

Volunteering at one of Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED)'s monthly outreach days was when I first began to realize the importance of Chinatown, not just as an aesthetic, historical site, or symbol of social justice, but as a home for the people who live, work, and socialize here. Each month, CCED volunteers walk the residential neighborhood, knock door-to-door, and talk with tenants about housing issues and their rights. Outreach is an essential part of CCED's commitment to build the power and self-efficacy of residents to fight collectively for the Chinatown they envision. As I talked further with residents, I heard their joys of living in the community and their fears of losing their homes to rising rents and evictions. The neighborhood provided them a sense of familiarity and comfort, being able to run into friends on

the street, buy groceries nearby, and talk with neighbors, service providers, teachers, and restaurant workers in their primary languages.

When I interviewed people from July 2017 to May 2018 for *From the Garden to the Streets*, I relied heavily on existing relationships, outreach, and word-of-mouth. Through my involvement with CCED in the past two to three years, I've been able to build personal and political relationships with senior residents. Seniors, such as Pauline, Tam Gong Gong (Mr. Tam), Julie, Peter, and Mrs. Mar actively participate in CCED's Resident Concern Group, a collective of key Chinese-speaking senior residents from the neighborhood who meet monthly for political education and leadership capacity-building. At the same time that I've been able to organize alongside them to advocate for tenant rights and quality low-income housing, I've been able to learn more about them through the stories they openly share with me. Their collective combination of sass, humility, and critical political insight have deeply informed how I have navigated Chinatown, my organizing work, and this thesis.

In an immigrant ethnic enclave such as Chinatown, word-of-mouth is an important avenue for communication amongst residents. Co-organizers and friends, inside and outside of CCED, have helped connect me with seniors through tips on neighbors they've noticed gardening and introductions over dim sum. Annie, Vivian, and Tiffany accompanied me at different times during the first few months of outreach and interviews, helping to interpret in Cantonese. We'd walk around neighborhood apartments to talk with residents who garden and North Broadway to talk with aunties who sell produce as informal street vendors.

Throughout the summer and fall, I also attended healthy eating and active living workshops held by Asian Pacific Islander Forward Movement at the local library and Chinatown Service Center. I met Yee (auntie) and Lee Tai Tai (Auntie Lee) who were skillful storytellers,

full of warmth. Over the months, Pauline and I became good friends. She accompanied me during my interview with Wong Baak (Uncle Wong) and the conversation flowed seamlessly. For the later months of my interviews, my friend Desmond both provided me company and filled in the words that I did not know in Cantonese. Our conversations with the seniors were full of food and laughs. For someone who grew up in Chinatown where his grandparents and parents first lived when they immigrated to the United States, spending time with the seniors helped Desmond reconnect with the community.

In the beginning, I stumbled over my English and Cantonese words when I described my thesis to seniors I met for the first time. It has taken reflection and practice to improve my skills in both outreaching and interviewing. Many of the street vendors we interacted with said they did not have anything important to share about their lives and experiences in Chinatown. Gradually, I learned to frame my thesis as a project that aimed to preserve the stories of these seniors so that younger generations, such as mine and that of their grandchildren, could learn from them. I also brought examples of literature, such as 華報 (WAPOW), a bilingual community quarterly magazine focusing on news and culture in Los Angeles Chinatown that launched in September 2017, and a booklet of healthy recipes and articles to provide the seniors a physical and visual idea of what the *From the Garden to the Streets* storybook could look like.

Meeting the Seniors

The narratives of fifteen seniors are shared in this thesis. Mostly women, the seniors are all connected to Chinatown, living, working, and/or socializing in the neighborhood. While they are all part of a working-class community that is vulnerable to gentrification, it is important to note that their financial means are diverse. Some of them are relatively more privileged compared to others. This includes modest financial support from family members, formal

education from the countries they emigrated from, homeownership, and retirement benefits. Some have experiences that speak to class backgrounds that have varied at different points of their lives. While these seniors range from having low-to-moderate incomes, they all hold values and live lifestyles that reflect their connections to the working-class rather than the bourgeois.

Tam Gong Gong, Yee, Wong Baak, Wong Po Po, Pang Baak (Uncle Pang), Yu Sook (Uncle Yu), and Lim Yee (Auntie Lim) are avid gardeners. They spend much of their time tending the different types of 菜 *coi* (vegetables) and 水果 *seoi gwo* (fruit) that fill up the spaces around their homes. On the other hand, Pauline happens to be a gardener by chance. The small dirt patch in front of her apartment sprouts sweet potato leaves that her next door neighbor planted one day. Yee and Wong Baak live outside of Chinatown but visit often for workshops, lunch, or family association meetings. Wong Baak used to sell his *coi* and *seoi gwo* on Broadway, working as a street vendor like Ko Tai (Auntie Ko), Po Po (Grandma), and Teochew Auntie. Their informal food economy brightens the grey concrete sidewalks with colorful displays of produce that both residents and visitors buy.

All of these seniors are immigrants, having relocated to California from their homelands of Hong Kong, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Tam Gong Gong has lived in Chinatown since the early 2000s while Pauline, Julie, Peter, Lee Tai Tai, Pang Baak, Yu Sook, and Lim Yee are longtime residents, having lived in the neighborhood for several decades. Mrs. Mar used to live in Chinatown for several years before moving into a neighboring city. Yet she came back regularly to work at a newspaper stand for several decades. Her smile lights up the room whenever she attends a Chinatown Community for Equitable Development gathering with Tam Gong Gong, Pauline, Julie, and Peter, other active members. They are only a few of the many working-class elders who have built Chinatown and continue to sustain its cultures, spaces, and

community today. Their experiences and perspectives provide a window into the history, culture, and politics of this changing multiethnic enclave. Their narratives fill these pages.

Foodways as a Lens

While the seniors who live, work, socialize, and organize in Chinatown are the focus of *From the Garden to the Streets*, food is the thread that holds this thesis together. Foodways provides a critical lens to explore the intersection of race, class, and space in Chinatown. As gentrification, the backdrop of the neighborhood's most pressing socioeconomic concerns, threatens Chinatown, working-class tenants, community organizers, business owners, property owners, politicians, and developers will increasingly contest the value of land, and by default, the people who occupy it. How that value is defined and whether or not it is defined alongside or against neoliberal ways of relating and imagining space speaks to the future of Chinatown as a working-class immigrant community. The sites of the garden and informal food economy of street vendors offer a physical and epistemological space to unpack, analyze, and perhaps most importantly, challenge gentrification and its embodiment of neoliberal state violence.

Examining the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects of food reveals much about the knowledge production of the working-class senior immigrants and their relationships to land and each other. Gentrification seeks to physically and figuratively render these seniors invisible because of their deviance from neoliberalism and their inability to be profitable in a capitalist society. Yet, gardens and informal food economies produce powerful tools and frameworks to challenge gentrification through progressive grassroots organizing and a reimagining of the city as equitable. Through the stories produced and shared around and about food, *From the Garden to the Streets* explores the themes of well-being, self-determination, and collectivity in relation to how the seniors navigate Chinatown.

Unpacking Gentrification: Neoliberalism and Community Cultural Wealth

A Gentrifying Los Angeles Chinatown

Gentrification threatens Chinatown's existence as a working-class immigrant neighborhood. Chinatown where it stands today is a historical ethnic enclave that the Chinese American community (re)built in the 1930s after being displaced from its original 1880s location by Union Station. In a rapidly industrializing Los Angeles in the 1930s, the construction of this railroad terminal came at the expense of the "old Chinatown" community. In a rapidly gentrifying Los Angeles today, the development of market-rate projects, rent increases, and evictions threaten to displace Chinatown's working-class population and their community spaces. The displacement happening in Chinatown today is not new but reflects a history of racist and classist policies that have oppressed and segregated communities of color. While acknowledging the histories of displacement that many communities of color continue to face, it is important to recognize that they are rooted in even earlier histories of displacement: government policies rooted in settler colonialism have displaced indigenous peoples from their land. Chinatown and the rest of Los Angeles occupy unceded Tongva territory.¹

Geographically bounded by the Interstate 110 Arroyo Seco Freeway (I-110), the Los Angeles River, and Dodger Stadium, Chinatown today is a multiethnic, multigenerational commercial and residential neighborhood. Over the years, it has grown to house a large population of multiethnic working-class immigrants (64% foreign born, of whom 82% are Asian

¹ This thesis does not do justice in fully exploring ongoing efforts for indigenous sovereignty. By recognizing that Chinatown rests on indigenous Tongva land, I hope to take one step towards fighting the continual erasure of indigenous peoples as relics of a colonial past. For working-class immigrants in Chinatown to fight for their right to stay in the neighborhood, it is important to have deeper discussions of what anti-gentrification movements look like in relation to and in solidarity with indigenous communities. See "Mapping Indigenous LA: Place-Making through Digital Storytelling," UCLA, <https://mila.ss.ucla.edu/>.

and 17% are Latinx²) and tenants (95%³). The fastest growing segment of the U.S. population,⁴ a significant number of seniors (65 years and older) live in the neighborhood (20%⁵).

Chinatown has experienced a history of disinvestment and marginalization by the city, but it has been recently marked as a prime location for real estate speculation and increased investment from wealthy developers due to its proximity to the urban center of Downtown Los Angeles. With an influx of middle-to-upper class residents and development projects that cater to them, rising commercial and residential rents, and the displacement of working-class residents, Chinatown is being gentrified.

Rooted in a History of Exclusion

Gentrification's threat to Los Angeles Chinatown is not a "random event"² but a "systematic process" rooted in a history of exclusionary laws and policies that specifically barred Asians from immigration and naturalization. The first immigration legislation to explicitly exclude people based on nationality and race, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prevented skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. Not long after, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act was enacted in 1917 to bar immigration from countries in the Asia-Pacific zone, targeting the significant number of South Asians immigrating at the time.⁶ The Immigration Act of 1924 was designed to target southern and eastern Europeans, but amidst growing anti-Asian sentiment, a provision barring the immigration of "aliens ineligible for

² Wendy Chung, "One Chinatown" (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2016), 18.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "2010 Census Shows 65 and Older Population Growing Faster Than Total U.S. Population," U.S. Census, November 30, 2011, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb11-cn192.html.

⁵ Chung, "One Chinatown," 18.

⁶ Shelley Sang-Hang Lee, *A New History of Asian America*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 143-144.

citizenship” was added.⁷ While this provision aimed to exclude Japanese in particular, it excluded all Asians except for Filipinos who were considered nationals up until the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934.⁸ As a political gesture towards China, a U.S. ally during World War II, a quota system based on nationalities and regions was established in 1943, allowing 105 Chinese immigrants to enter the country every year. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 ended blanket exclusions of immigration from Asia and allowed Japanese to naturalize but continued to uphold quotas. It was not until 1965 that this national origin quota system was abolished by a new Immigration and Nationality Act. This opened the doors for immigration from Asia as well as other countries through two pathways: 1) *family reunification* of the immediate relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents, and 2) *occupational preference* for skilled workers to fill labor shortages in the United States.

Nevertheless, anti-Asian racism persisted in laws such as racially restrictive covenants that prohibited people of color, particularly African Americans and non-citizens, from purchasing or leasing homes in certain neighborhoods. The California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 prohibited Asians, who were considered “aliens ineligible for citizenship,” from owning or holding long-term leases for land.⁹ On the federal level, the 1930s Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) and homeowner programs of the Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration explicitly used race to determine where they would approve mortgages.¹⁰ HOLC redlined almost every majority-black neighborhood in the United States,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰ Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City: Gentrification, Inequality, and the Fight for the Neighborhood* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 113.

preventing them from receiving loans.¹¹ Through racist planning policies, the federal government deliberately created suburbs for the white and wealthy and disinvested from “dense, mixed-use, and diverse”¹² inner cities deemed undesirable such as Chinatown.

Unpacking Gentrification

A multifaceted process resting on the notions of urban redevelopment and economic growth, gentrification spatially, culturally, and economically restructures communities of color that have historically experienced disinvestment from the state and developers but are now found to be profitable. It is a process that represents “cycles of investment and disinvestment in urban centers.”¹³ Where land is perceived as cheap and buildings are underfunded or declining, developers speculate they will have the biggest potential for profit.¹⁴ In other words, wealthy developers buy real estate at lower values and sell them for exponentially more. All the while, rising commercial and residential property costs spatially and economically exclude working-class residents and small businesses who cannot afford to participate in a city’s economic growth. The poor and their community spaces are deemed deviant given their inability to be productive or profitable in a system of capitalism that prioritizes profits over people. According to Peter Moskowitz, it is “a system that places the needs of capital (both in terms of city budget and in terms of real estate profits) above the needs of people.” Cities transform from being

¹¹ Ibid., 111.

¹² Ibid., 114.

¹³ Brooke J. Havlik, “Eating in Urban Frontiers: Alternative Food and Gentrification in Chicago” (Oregon: University of Oregon, 2013), 30.

¹⁴ Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*, 37-39.

spaces that provide for the poor and middle classes into spaces that primarily generate capital for the rich.¹⁵

The process of gentrification pushes out poor, immigrant, and elderly people of color in favor of corporations and the wealthy elite. It is an extension of racist and classist structures that work in tandem with individuals — such as real estate developers, upper-class Chinese Americans who participate in both state and market processes that drive gentrification, and a demographic of upwardly mobile professionals, artists, and consumers — to restructure Chinatown. As “the spatial expression of economic inequality,”¹⁶ it disrupts “existing social structures of support and exchange within communities, most dramatically among people such as the elderly, the poor and non-white racial and ethnic groups.”¹⁷ These groups not only are at risk of losing their physical homes but the support networks that give them a sense of community. Ultimately, gentrification is unfettered privatization of land that threatens Chinatown’s existence as a multiethnic enclave that sustains its predominantly working-class immigrant population. It does not benefit or prioritize low-income communities of color.

Functions of Gentrification

While the city’s privileged and powerful profit from investments in market-rate developments and a rebranding of Chinatown, the community’s most marginalized face illegal rent increases, poor housing conditions, and the loss of important community institutions. However, which story gets heard and centered in conversations and planning processes? Chinatown’s low-income immigrant residents are often ignored by developers, politicians, and

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ “What We Don’t Understand about Gentrification,” YouTube.com, TEDx Talks, Jan 15, 2015, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqogaDX48nI>.

¹⁷ Havlik, “Eating in Urban Frontiers,” 13.

community leaders. This is reflected by more development proposals for market-rate housing than for low-income senior housing, by more mainstream media coverage of Chinatown's rising hip food scene than on the longtime family-owned restaurants hustling to serve noodle soups and stay in business, and the elders being served eviction notices and rent increases by landlords.¹⁸

There is a growing economic and social divide between working-class community members and the new wealthier, often white, professionals and "creatives" in Chinatown. This speaks to the ways in which the state and state-like private and public institutions, such as the non-profit Chinatown Business Improvement District, render certain people visible (and valuable) and others invisible (and not valuable) through the promotion of neoliberal economic development. Business Improvement Districts are a tool of gentrification, participating in the increasing criminalization and privatization of urban cities. Working closely with both local governments and private investors, they play a large role in the decision-making processes of urban redevelopment. With property owners sitting on their boards and a lack of engagement with working-class residents, they are far from representative or accountable to the needs of the rest of the neighborhood.

A key and inherent element of gentrification is the displacement of low-income people of color and homeless communities through increased rents, evictions, criminalization, and aggressive policing, the latter of which disproportionately impacts black and Latinx communities. In Chinatown, gentrification threatens to indirectly and directly displace existing informal economies, small family-owned businesses, cultural institutions, and the significant population of seniors, tenants, and immigrants. Although more than 41% of the population lives

¹⁸ One group of tenants organizing around their rights includes the majority senior and low-income residents at 651 Broadway who have been fighting against illegal rent increases and poor habitability issues. See Brittney Le, "Los Angeles Chinatown Tenants Protest 'Illegal Rent Increases'," October 15, 2017, <https://asamnews.com/2017/10/15/los-angeles-chinatown-tenants-protest-illegal-rent-increases/>.

in poverty,¹⁹ more spaces are made inaccessible and unaffordable for residential and commercial tenants, forcing them to leave Chinatown because of rising rents. Public spaces are also increasingly being policed by private security who are hired by the Chinatown Business Improvement District. They work closely with the Los Angeles Police Department to “keep crime down in the neighborhood.”²⁰ They have harassed street vendors, musicians, and homeless individuals who make up the community.

A Manifestation of Neoliberalism

Gentrification is an intentional process of racial, spatial, and economic segregation that manifests within the epistemological and political structures of neoliberalism. According to Grace Kyungwon Hong, neoliberalism is foremost “an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and gendered violences are things of the past.”²¹ With neoliberalism comes the defunding of social programs that serve poor people of color, the deregulation of market forces that enable elite interests and corporations to flourish, and the increased commodification of places and people.

Through neoliberalism, the state extends recognition and protection to particular “bodies” and “spaces”, a select few at the expense of many. This is done by ascribing value to formerly racialized, gendered, and sexualized groups of people while rendering others devalued.²²

Affluent East Asian property owners, developers, and young professionals who constitute some

¹⁹ Randy Mai and Bonnie Chen, “The State of Los Angeles Chinatown” (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, 2013), 11.

²⁰ Jean Trinh, “The Past, Present, and Future of Chinatown’s Changing Culinary Landscape,” KCET.org, February 28, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/the-migrant-kitchen/the-past-present-and-future-of-chinatowns-changing-culinary-landscape>.

²¹ Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7.

²² *Ibid.*, 7-12.

of the drivers of gentrification in Chinatown are part of these former groups who now have “access to capital and citizenship in ways that were previously unimaginable.”²³ This ranges from property owners who serve on the board of directors for the Chinatown Business Improvement District²⁴ to middle-to-upper-class entrepreneurs opening artisanal coffee shops in the neighborhood.²⁵ Gentrification works within a neoliberal framework to disavow the social, economic, and geopolitical violence it enacts on poor bodies of color and their physical and social constructions of space in favor of whiter, financially wealthier bodies and spaces. It physically and figuratively erases the bodies, community spaces, and narratives of working-class people of color.

Physical Erasure: Who Are These Spaces For?

Gentrification creates spaces inaccessible to working-class residents of color, physically erasing their bodies by limiting their ability to afford, feel welcomed, or exist in these spaces. In Chinatown, gentrification most visibly manifests as residential and commercial projects that range from luxury mixed-use apartment buildings to art galleries to hip coffee shops and eateries. From Jia Apartments on Broadway to the isolated galleries on Chung King Road to the chef-driven restaurants in Far East Plaza, these projects all function together to drive and sustain gentrification by catering primarily, if not solely, to the younger, upwardly mobile demographic of professionals and “creatives” that developers, such as Tom Gilmore and Izek Shomof (two of

²³ Ibid., 11.

²⁴ Chinatown Business Improvement District, “Boardmembers & Staff,” March 15, 2016, accessed June 12, 2018, <http://www.chinatownla.com:80/cbid.php?pageId=29>, Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160315232930/http://www.chinatownla.com:80/cbid.php?pageId=29>.

²⁵ See Javier Cabral, “Meet the Former Molecular Biologist Who Fought Cancer and Now Makes Amazing Coffee,” February 26, 2016, https://munchies.vice.com/en_us/article/mgkn3b/meet-the-former-molecular-biologist-who-fought-cancer-and-now-makes-amazing-coffee. Also, see Allyson Escobar, “Coffeeshall Chinatown: Brewing Community and Rotating Roasters in the Heart of Los Angeles,” July 7, 2017, <https://www.kcet.org/food-living/coffeeshall-chinatown-brewing-community-and-rotating-roasters-in-the-heart-of-los-angeles>.

Los Angeles's biggest gentrifiers), market to and profit from. These are the commercial spaces that line developers' visions of trendy urban destinations and the people who can afford market-rate studios and goods that are too expensive for most of Chinatown's residents. As both the executive director of the Chinatown Business Improvement District and vice president of Macco Investments Corp. (the investment company that owns Far East Plaza) George Yu is frequently credited for bringing these new businesses into Chinatown.²⁶

Gentrification disregards the livelihoods of existing working-class immigrant residents and the need for culturally competent healthcare and social services, community gathering spaces, grocery markets, and quality low-income housing. Despite these increasing demands, developers seek to build more market-rate projects in Chinatown that the majority of residents cannot afford to live in. Jia Apartments and Blossom Plaza are two luxury mixed-use (retail and commercial) buildings with monthly rents starting around \$1,903 and \$1,845 for 571²⁷ and 436²⁸ square feet studios, respectively. As a superficial attempt to fit within the neighborhood, these buildings feature facades with red accents, lanterns, and certain names (Jia means "home" in Mandarin) to evoke an exoticized Chinatown aesthetic (see figure 1). Yet, in Chinatown, where the median household income is \$18,657 and 95% of the population are renters,²⁹ who can afford to call these places home?

²⁶ Katherine Spiers, "Chinatown's Far East Plaza Is a Dining Destination Thanks to George Yu," LAWeekly.com, May 3, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.laweekly.com/restaurants/george-yu-turned-chinatowns-far-east-plaza-into-a-culinary-hotspot-8174773>.

²⁷ "Jia Apartments," Equity Apartments, Equity Residential, January 29, 2018, accessed January 29, 2018, <http://www.equityapartments.com/los-angeles/chinatown/jia-apartments###bedroom-type-section-0>

²⁸ "Floor Plans." Blossom Plaza Apartments, March 26, 2017, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.blossomplazala.com/floor-plans/>.

²⁹ Chung, "One Chinatown," 18.



Figure 1 Jia Apartments: Whose Home Is It?

A significant number of Chinatown’s residents already struggle to pay rents that fall far below those of Jia Apartments and Blossom Plaza Apartments. From 2012 to 2016, 23% of residents paid between \$100 and \$499 and 30% paid between \$500 and \$999 in gross rent, while 47% paid more than \$1000.³⁰ The median gross rent for different parts of the neighborhood ranged from \$653 up to \$1560 where the market-rate apartment development The Orsini is located.³¹ Many residents are rent burdened, spending more than 30% of their household income on rent. Even worse, a growing number of tenants are considered severely burdened, paying more than 50% of their incomes towards rent.³² High housing costs limit how much they can afford to spend on healthy food, transportation, and healthcare. In 2016, 60% to 67% of the

³⁰ Chinatown is made up of U.S.Census Tracts 2060.10, 2071.01, 2071.02, and 2071.03. See U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “The State of the Nation’s Housing 2017,” Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 5.

population faced these financial strains.³³ This is a significant increase compared to prior years. In 2013, 49% to 57% of the population was already rent burdened.³⁴ The degree of rent burden and the percentage of those who are rent burdened can be expected to rise as wages continue to stay low and rents continue to rise with the construction of unaffordable housing projects. These luxury apartments are not built to house people, especially the poor, but to generate capital. When housing and businesses are developed solely to attract “a younger, more privileged and upwardly mobile demographic,”³⁵ gentrification is economic investment in a new affluent community at the expense of the existing working-class one.

Figurative Erasure: How Do We Talk About Chinatown?

Gentrification sustains itself through everyday discourse and functions to figuratively erase the stories and experiences of working-class residents. It is “reproduced on a daily basis through the lived experiences of those within the neighborhood and the discourse about the neighborhood.”³⁶ Oftentimes, the changes and displacement associated with gentrification are seen as inevitable, especially in order for a city to progress and grow. However, presenting gentrification as the “revitalization”³⁷ of a low-income neighborhood ignores how deeply unjust and unequal this process is. For restaurateur Alvin Cailan, Chinatown is “just modernizing,” with “newer entrepreneurs [and] newer residents coming into the neighborhood.”³⁸ Celebrity chef Roy

³³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Chung, “One Chinatown,” 11.

³⁶ Havlik, “Eating in Urban Frontiers,” 76.

³⁷ Farley Elliot, “Inside the 20-Year Effort to Turn Chinatown Into a Thriving Cultural Center Once Again,” *LA.eater.com*, March 7, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://la.eater.com/2017/3/7/14796842/morning-briefing-restaurant-news-los-angeles-chinatown-history>.

³⁸ Trinh, “The Past, Present, and Future of Chinatown’s Changing Culinary Landscape.”

Choi, on the other hand, doesn't feel that Chinatown has changed, believing that older residents haven't been pushed out.³⁹ These restaurateurs of newer eateries are often quoted as being empathetic toward and appreciative of the older generation of small businesses that continue to or used to exist in the neighborhood.⁴⁰ However, they lack a critical, nuanced understanding of Chinatown's changes as being rooted in a larger process of inequitable economic development, one that values them but will eventually displace the older businesses that they try to honor. George Yu believes "everybody benefits" from replacing "underutilized" commercial properties with new businesses such as Cailan's and Choi's.⁴¹ According to geographer Neil Smith, this rhetoric of neighborhood revival benefiting all enables gentrification to thrive.⁴² All the while, low-income people are targeted as obstacles to this revival.⁴³

Gentrification does not occur naturally but is "the result of highly politicized and racialized origins"⁴⁴ and inequitable decision-making. Sociology professors Jan Lin and Oliver Wang both see the shift in Chinatown's traditional Chinese immigrant identity and culture as a transformation that is "bound to happen" partly because of its aging population and "just demographics."⁴⁵ For Wang, the senior population is "going to be leaving the neighborhood sooner or later, so there is going to be some kind of demographic shift no matter what."

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Eddie Kim, "How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven," *ladowntownnews.com*, March 28, 2016, accessed September 1, 2017, http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/how-an-aging-chinatown-mall-became-a-hipster-food-haven/article_b407e372-f2c3-11e5-a794-e70f2ee0afe3.html.

⁴¹ Trinh, "The Past, Present, and Future of Chinatown's Changing Culinary Landscape."

⁴² Miranda J. Martinez, *Power at the Roots: Gentrification, Community Gardens, and the Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side* (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2010), 23.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Havlik, "Eating in Urban Frontiers," 11.

⁴⁵ Trinh, "The Past, Present, and Future of Chinatown's Changing Culinary Landscape."

Although these scholars recognize potential generational changes in the Chinese American diaspora, their statements disregard the existing population of residents who are very much vulnerable to the impact of gentrification today. Thus, they contribute to a framework that reinforces the oppressive structures entwined in race and class that enable neoliberal economic development to thrive and displace. Framing gentrification as a naturally occurring process of urban economic growth fails to recognize and hold accountable the powerful players and systems of oppression that drive racism, classism, and socioeconomic inequity. It enables people to be complicit with the functions of the neoliberal state which 1) physically and figuratively erases certain gendered and racialized bodies, spaces, and narratives and 2) disavows the violent impacts of gentrification on working-class communities of color. There exists an inequitable distribution of resources, inaccessibility of residential and commercial spaces, and a growing income gap, all of which gentrification worsens.

In mainstream media, narratives on Chinatown center the so-called revitalization of the community and most recently, its changing food scene. From Eddie Kim's "How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven" to well-known food writer Jonathan Gold's "Chinatown Emerging as LA's Hottest Restaurant Destination", these articles mirror a deep history of Orientalism that has defined Asians and ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown against the standards of Western racial and gender norms so that they are both feared as perpetually foreign and hypersexualized as exotic.

Today, Chinatown's existence as a working-class immigrant neighborhood is often described as fading, dying, or aging, contrasting with a parallel description of it as trending, hip, and revitalizing. Gold refers to it as an afterthought, a "hokey, half-dead tourist enclave" that

used to have attractive Cantonese cuisine and now has an alluring mix of new and old eateries.⁴⁶ It has been “sparked into life” by the cheap commercial rents and art gallery boom that spur recent economic development.⁴⁷ Many of the new wave of restaurateurs, most of whom are Asian American and white, are attracted to “the romance of Chinatown’s history and culture” such as the “raw coolness” of roasted ducks in shop windows.⁴⁸ These descriptions are extensions of Orientalist narratives that dehumanize and hypersexualize Chinatown as a dirty, backwards, yet captivating tourist destination. Together they feed into a framing of the neighborhood as something that can then be exploited, conquered, and controlled.

In addition to Orientalism, the language that journalists, restaurateurs, and investors use to describe Chinatown can evoke unsettling references to colonialism.⁴⁹ Painting cities as “urban wilderness” that needs to be cleaned up and developed, especially by those who are wealthy and white, the language of gentrification incorporates frontier imagery reflective of European colonialism in the Americas.⁵⁰ Chinatown is seen as both a “fringe neighborhood,”⁵¹ unconventional and “egalitarian,” but holding much potential for economic growth. Jonathan Gold once described the former Starry Kitchen as almost qualifying as a Chinatown “pioneer” in

⁴⁶ Jonathan Gold, “Chinatown Emerging as LA’s Hottest Restaurant Destination,” *Los Angeles Times*. January 16, 2015, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-future-gold-20150117-story.html>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven.”

⁴⁹ Some anti-gentrification groups call gentrification the new colonialism. However, this fails to acknowledge settler colonialism and disregards indigenous communities who continue to face the violence of colonialism. Gentrification targets communities already marginalized by the state, but it is a process that is very different from colonialism. See Wakinyan Waánataŋ (Matt Remle- Lakota), “Gentrification is NOT the new Colonialism,” <https://lastrealindians.com/gentrification-is-not-the-new-colonialism/>.

⁵⁰ Neil Smith, *New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Incorporated, 1996), xxiii-xiv.

⁵¹ Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven.”

“a brave new culinary world.”⁵² It would be unsurprising if Gold also used this word to describe Roy Choi who believes Chinatown is a “great area for growth because it’s like an island... you can create your own wonderland over there because it’s all encapsulated.”⁵³ Similarly, Derrick Moore, a principal with the commercial real estate services firm Avison Young, calls Far East Plaza a “destination project in the works.”⁵⁴ Most articles on Chinatown highlight narratives such as these, barely, if at all, scratching the surface of the culinary scene’s relationship to residential displacement or a longer history of systematic oppression. By centering narratives of chef-driven eateries and their upwardly mobile entrepreneurs and clientele, these frameworks decenter and erase the narratives of those most threatened by gentrification: the existing small businesses and working-class residents.

Community Cultural Wealth

Chinatown is a community that continues to bustle with traditional Cantonese and Vietnamese restaurants serving noodle dishes of house special chow mein and bún riêu, longstanding Chinese family associations that serve as political and social support systems for newly arrived immigrants, and informal economies such as the street vendor aunties who sell produce on Broadway. People live here. Community spaces important to them, such as Alpine Park, gardens, temples, churches, and herbal shops, still exist. To remember the community’s strengths is just as important as recognizing its needs and issues of inequality.

Although the working-class community lacks the financial wealth of the upper class, the socioeconomic opportunities of the upwardly mobile, and the political clout of corporations, they are rich with community cultural wealth. These assets have been integral in helping immigrant

⁵² Gold, “Chinatown Emerging as LA’s Hottest Restaurant Destination.”

⁵³ Trinh, “The Past, Present, and Future of Chinatown’s Changing Culinary Landscape.”

⁵⁴ Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven.”

community members navigate and create homes in unfamiliar environments, in addition to helping Chinatown thrive for so long. They take form in social networks, knowledge production, cultural practices, and values of collectivity, all of which help foster politics in the site of gardens and informal street vendors. These politics have the potential to challenge neoliberal forms of economic development and ways of relating to one another by providing alternative anti-capitalist epistemologies and grassroots organizing tools. As gentrification becomes a larger threat to the neighborhood's well-being and working-class livelihoods, centering this community cultural wealth becomes more important in ensuring Chinatown's equitable future.

Recentring

The history and narratives of working-class immigrant residents should not be remembered only as an afterthought or in ambiguous references, when what is perceived as "Chinatown culture" can be exotified and commodified. Jarring examples include the architectural designs of new luxury apartments and white-owned art galleries and boutiques' use of old signage belonging to the Asian-owned businesses that used to occupy those very same spaces. Chinatown's relevancy should not be dependent on how "up-and-coming" it is for developers and young professionals. Chinatown's significance should not rest on its ability to be profitable and to participate in gentrification-driven notions of urban modernization and progress.

When the dominant narratives heard in everyday conversations, mainstream media, and decision-making processes regarding the future of Chinatown are those that primarily highlight the new residential and commercial projects, rather than the needs or history of the existing community, gentrification is both centered and disavowed. Centering the narratives and livelihoods of the working-class immigrant community can enable us to imagine the possibilities

of an equitable Chinatown, one where people are prioritized over profits. Whether these alternative economic development models look like community land trusts or business and housing cooperatives, the vision of Chinatown should be driven by working-class communities.

If people change the ways they talk about Chinatown and gentrification so that they center working-class immigrants, what individual actions, policies, and collective grassroots organizing could this manifest materially? Across Los Angeles, collectives such as Defend Boyle Heights, Los Angeles Tenants Union, and Chinatown Community for Equitable Development challenge gentrification through direct actions and tenant organizing. In Boyle Heights, this ranges from boycotting corporate-funded art galleries to protesting wealthy white landlords who attempt to evict longtime community members such as the mariachis who perform at Mariachi Plaza.⁵⁵ In Chinatown, this includes building deep relationships with low-income tenants and working with them to develop their self-efficacy and agency around their rights. These groups imagine and fight for communities in which housing is respected as a human right and working-class communities of color continue to exist and thrive. Gentrification is not inevitable. It is a process that can be interrupted.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jacob Woocher, “Mariachi Plaza, Evictions, and the Bullsh*t Ideology Of Capitalism,” medium.com, November 15, 2017, accessed March 18, 2018, <https://knock-la.com/mariachi-plaza-evictions-and-the-bullsh-t-ideology-of-capitalism-8cef584756ee>

⁵⁶ Havlik, “Eating in Urban Frontiers,” 76.

Chapter 1: Contested Chinatown Spaces: Street Vendors and Informal Economies

Ord and Broadway

Walking down Broadway, I stop in front of the intersection at Ord Street. On one corner sits the aquarium I remember passing by during weekend trips to Thien Hau Temple and Wing Hop Fung with family. Small single-unit apartments line the upper floors of the building. Across the street is the convenience store where auntie used to buy lottery tickets after she took me shopping at the swapmeets of Saigon Plaza. Images of plastic sandals and matching pajama sets appear. On another corner stands the gift and souvenir shop where I like to buy sunhats and reusable grocery bags. Postcards, fake flowers, and toys spill over the tables.

On the last corner of Ord and Broadway (see figure 2), older aunties and uncles make their way through stacked boxes of produce that line the small grocery storefronts. A bundle of green onions gets picked up and put back down. Shoppers run fingers through open containers of grapes. *Pluck!* Bursts of Cantonese, Toisan, Spanish, English, Vietnamese, Teochew, or Mandarin can be heard at various moments. I see the 83 bus driving up and making its stop. More aunties and uncles join the crowd.

It's a Sunday morning, but this scene could be any day of the week. If you're lucky, Wong Tai Tai will be selling homemade *zongzi* (glutinous rice often stuffed with meat, mung bean, and dried shrimp wrapped and steamed in bamboo leaves) alongside other street vendors. As the day moves forward the crowds simmer down and a sweet quietness lingers.



Figure 2 Street Corner: Ord and Broadway

Po Po

Po Po sat on a small plastic chair in front of Lucky Deli, a restaurant where other street vendors also gathered. In front of her lay bags full of peanuts, beans, lemons, limes, a jar of peanut butter, two boxes of raisins, and store-bought garlic on one large plastic sheet. Her daughter grows some of the fruits and vegetables that she sells. While we talked, she took out a few brown jujubes and handed them to Tiffany and me. “*Do you dry them? My mom and dad grow these too,*” I say in Cantonese. “*You can eat it like that,*” she tells us. “*很甜. (It’s very sweet.)*” Jujube skins speckled the ground near her. She had been slicing the skin off with a knife and eating jujubes while waiting for people to buy her produce (see figure 3).

Living nearby in Chinatown, Po Po comes out every day. When there are things to sell, she will set up shop on Broadway. I asked her if it was difficult working as a street vendor and if

a lot of people buy from her. *“It’s hard,”* Po Po said. *“This is what old people do. If we have something, we’ll sell it.”*



Figure 3 What Po Po Sells: Jujubes, Lemons, and More

Seniors, mostly immigrant women like Po Po, congregate daily at the intersection of Ord Street and North Broadway. Lining the sidewalks with makeshift mats fashioned from plastic bags or cardboard, they sell produce, little knick knacks, and homemade traditional Chinese foods for a source of income. The fruits and vegetables they sell can often be found in the gardens tended on apartment balconies and in front yards throughout Chinatown’s residential neighborhood. The different types of produce reflect regional and local traditions and cultures of the seniors and many of their customers who are Asian and Latinx immigrants.

Informal Economies: Chinatown’s History of Street Vendors

Occupations that conventionally require intensive manual labor and little formal education, such as gardening and peddling produce, have historically provided Asian immigrants opportunities to support themselves financially, develop independence, and build social networks. Difficulty in accessing jobs in the formal economy because of the lack of certain skills or training, education, and work experience recognized by the state are some driving factors for people's entry into the informal economy. According to Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes, informality in practice is operationalized as activities unregulated by the state.⁵⁷ It includes "all relationships of production and exchange outside of the modern and state-regulated economy."⁵⁸ Ananya Roy elaborates further, arguing that informality is a "mode of urbanization" — "a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization."⁵⁹ It is not a separate sector but a "series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another."⁶⁰ Women, in particular, have played significant roles in sustaining informal economies that often interact closely with larger regulated and recognized economies. In Los Angeles, they constitute the majority of street vendors.⁶¹

The informality of gardens and street vendors in Chinatown have the potential to be "important for survival"⁶² for working-class senior immigrants. This survival includes the day-

⁵⁷ Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, "Reading the Informal City: Why and How to Deepen Planners' Understanding of Informality" (SAGE Journal of Planning Education and Research, 2015), 4.

⁵⁸ Alejandro Portes and Saskia Sassen-Koob, "Making it Underground: Comparative Material on the Informal Sector in Western Market Economies" (The American Journal of Sociology, 1987), 31.

⁵⁹ Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning" (Journal of the American Planning Association, 71:2, 2005), 148.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Dakota Smith, "Street vending advocates protest in downtown L.A.," Los Angeles Times, March 9, 2018, accessed April 16, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-vending-system-protest-20180308-story.html>.

⁶² Ibid.

to-day hustle of making ends meet but also their right to exist in a gentrifying Chinatown. The seniors grow, cook, and sell food traditional to their homelands, sustaining Chinatown and its multiethnic and multigenerational residents literally and figuratively. Existing outside state control, these sites and their informality have the potential to “nestle radical possibilities,”⁶³ such as challenging oppressive neoliberal economic development and reimagining the use and consumption of spaces. Yet, forms of informality are often racialized and gendered as deviant.

Historically, Chinese produce vendors in Chinatown have faced scrutiny from the state. In the 1910s, they sold door-to-door and on the streets because they were excluded from selling in two major markets in Los Angeles.⁶⁴ Municipal officials targeted these vendors, deeming their storage and handling of produce unsanitary.⁶⁵ In 1914, this led to the arrests of eighteen peddlers.⁶⁶ Today, informal economic activities often continue to be perceived as irrelevant and criminal, framed as irrational and unorganized in comparison to recognized economies.⁶⁷ In Chinatown in particular, informal economies are tolerated but harassed by the state and non-state actors that include Asian Americans.

Chinatown Summer Nights: Contrasting Visions of Community

As Chinatown gentrifies, public spaces are increasingly policed. The working-class immigrant residents and their spaces of informality increasingly stand in the way of developers, property owners, and institutions that profit from the urban transformation of the neighborhood.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Lee, *A New History of Asian America*, 132-133.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2.

This can be seen through the actions of Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID) security employees who have harassed street vendors and musicians integral to the community.

Throughout the summer, the Chinatown Summer Nights festival is held one weekend each month in the outdoor Central Plaza, West Plaza, and Mandarin Plaza. According to Lee Tai Tai, a longtime resident, “以前是外國人 (*it's all foreigners, referring to white people or Westerners in this context*)” who go to these “parades” but very few 唐人 (Chinese people). Similarly, she doesn't believe the art galleries and creative spaces nearby cater to the neighborhood of Chinese residents such as herself. “以前 Chinatown 醫院後邊... Chung King Road... 是賣啲啲中國古董. 啲啲金舖嘅嘢. (*Back then, there were Chinese antique stores and jewelry stores behind the hospital in Chinatown [at] Chung King Road.*)” However, “而家啲十幾年全部冇啲啲啊. 冇棒啲幾乎俾晒所有啲啲外國人. (*Now after ten or so years, there's none of that anymore. Everything has practically been given away to all those foreigners.*)” “好似賣啲啲 art. (*They seem to be selling art*),” Lee Tai Tai says. “以前是見啲啲啊. (*That's all I see.*)” They've been replaced with galleries that have goods that evoke an Asian aesthetic but are meant for white people to consume. Their facades include the old signs of former businesses, such as In Sun Company Jade & Jewelry, and new red and gold signs that read “Good Luck Gallery.” “咁啲啲... 啲啲外國人鍾意我中國人啲啲 culture. (*Those foreigners like our Chinese culture*),” she says, but Chinese people do not feel similarly towards what they create. “唔鍾意啊. (*We don't like it.*)”

In the summer of 2016, two police officers and event staff accosted an elderly street performer at Chinatown Summer Nights. A group of individuals, including myself, happened to be walking by after a meeting when we saw this happen. The police officers and event staff

repeatedly demanded that he leave the premises because he did not have an official permit to perform. In a community where seniors have historically made a living by working in informal economies, this harassment elicited understandable anger and disbelief.

One could often find this elderly man playing his erhu, a two-stringed bowed musical instrument traditional to China, most days on Broadway and during events like Chinatown Summer Nights in order to make some money from the large influx of tourists. The erhu's calm melancholy sound wove its way through the busy crowd of mostly young professionals and creatives. However, it was unarguably drowned out by the music of featured artists who performed on the neighboring stages sponsored by the local radio station KCRW.

As the executive director of the BID, which oversaw the planning of this event, George Yu initiated the policing. While members of our group defended the erhu musician's right to stay and perform, Yu adamantly claimed that the senior was creating a disturbance at the event. All the while, the artists who were recognized by BID as legitimate performers played music loudly all through the night. Their disturbance of the surrounding Chinatown neighborhood did not warrant the same hostile attention that the police officers and event staff directed towards the elderly performer. The policing of the community members who are not recognized as valuable by BID or developers is innate to gentrification. This form of policing bodies and spaces continues through the evictions of low-income residents and the criminalization of the homeless. Gentrification attempts to silence their voices – and music – in favor of those who are white, upwardly mobile, and profitable in a capitalist society.

Setting Up Shop

Driving from her home in South Pasadena, Ko Tai comes to Chinatown on the weekends to sell vegetables from her garden. On Broadway, a few feet away from Po Po and next to a

yellow fire hydrant, bundles of tía tô (purple perilla leaves), and rau răm (Vietnamese coriander) lie on top of the plastic bag on the ground in front of her. Rau răm is eaten raw, wrapped inside spring rolls and thrown into bowls of phở and other Vietnamese soups. It is also eaten with ăn hột vịt lộn, boiled duck eggs that contain developing bird embryos. Ko Tai tells us, “我種啲食. 咁食唔曬,帶埋. 拿這幫助啲水錢. (*I grow things to eat. If I'm not able to eat all of it, I'll bring it along [to sell]. I'll take [what I make] to pay for the water [I use to garden].*)”

Not yet in her sixties, Ko Tai is ethnically Chinese from Vietnam. Both Tiffany and I also identified as 華人 (ethnic Chinese), our families having immigrated from Vietnam to the United States. I asked Ko Tai if she came in “七十九 (79)”, referring to a common year in which a significant number of people left Vietnam following the end of the war. From her seat on a baby blue plastic chair, she explained that she left Vietnam during that time but did not come to the United States until the early 1980s. As a refugee, she first lived in Macau and then the Philippines, where she learned English, before making her way to Los Angeles.

While we talked, an auntie walking down the street stopped in front of the white plastic bucket that sat near us (see figure 4). With one swoop, she stuck her hand into the five-gallon Kikkoman soy sauce bucket and picked out a pale yellow green vegetable. As she brought it to her nose, she made an unpleasant face in reaction to the smell. She threw the pickled vegetable back into the bucket. “一磅四蚊 (*It's \$4 a pound*),” Ko Tai told her, but the auntie had made up her mind and walked away. “是乜嘢? (*What is that?*)” I asked. Ko Tai pulled up a picture of leafy mustard greens on her phone to show us. Once pickled, dưa cải chua can be eaten as a side dish or cooked in soups.



Figure 4 Herbs and A Bucket of Pickled Vegetables

Further down Broadway and closer to Alpine Street, you can find Teochew Auntie sitting in the shade next to the longstanding 永安鷄鴨欄 (Superior Poultry) every day from around 9 to 10AM until mid-afternoon. According to her, many *láo nāng*⁶⁸ (seniors) set up shop to sell vegetables as early as 8 or 9AM. Pointing towards Ord and Broadway, she tells me in Teochew, a Chinese language, “*Zêng jing joi chăi. (They grow a lot of vegetables.)*” The *láo nāng* who work as informal street vendors sell fruits and vegetables that they buy from the market or that are grown in gardens by them or their relatives.

Teochew Auntie doesn’t garden much because of the difficulty. For a long time, she tried to grow dragon fruit. After eight years, she exclaimed, she has only been able to grow one. She doesn’t grow enough fruits and vegetables at her apartment in Chinatown to sell, but they are

⁶⁸ In this thesis, the Chinese language Teochew is written using the Gagiang Peng-Im System. This system was developed by the organization Gagiang to represent Teochew sounds through romanization.

enough to sustain herself and her husband. Teochew Auntie has the largest selection and stock of fruits and vegetables of the street vendors I've seen on Broadway. On two flattened rice bags sat bundles of cactus pears, garlic, ginseng, limes, cucumbers, celery, peanuts, potatoes, and onions (see figure 5 and 6). She buys the produce *pi* (inexpensively) from a market and then resells them to visitors and residents to make a small profit. "*Bhòi, tàng nītgià. (I sell it and profit a little.)*" Sometimes her husband joins her in selling produce but oftentimes, she can be seen working by herself.

There aren't that many people who buy from Teochew Auntie on *payng yeek* (the weekdays). The streets of Chinatown's commercial district are typically busier on *loy bye lak*, *loy bye chik* (Saturday and Sunday), the time when more people buy from her. When folks walk by her, she'll call out "one dollar, one dollar", "lemons" and other names of the items she sells. To catch the attention of passersby, other street vendors who primarily speak one or more Asian languages often call out the similar short phrases and words they know in English to people who walk past their informal shops. "*Bhòi muet giá, gao jīāt, hai chùjou. (Selling things provides enough money to buy food to eat and pay rent.)*"



Figure 5 and 6 Teochew Auntie's Fruits and Vegetables

Like Auntie, some of Chinatown's seniors continue to work well past the United States' expected retirement age of 65 years in order to support themselves. With little to no income or resources, a significant number of the seniors who live in Chinatown rely on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a federal assistance program, to provide for themselves financially. To qualify, the monetary value of their belongings must amount to less than \$2,000 if they are single or less than \$3000 if they are a married couple who live together.⁶⁹ In 2018, individual seniors in California receive \$910.72 in SSI payments each month if they are categorized as having an "independent living status".⁷⁰ Couples with this status receive \$1,532.14.⁷¹ This is extremely

⁶⁹ "Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in California," (United States: Social Security Administration, 2018).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

little income given the high cost of living in Los Angeles and more specifically, the rising rents in Chinatown.

The median gross rent in most of Chinatown increased from 2000 to 2013. Certain parts of the neighborhood saw increases from \$591.30 to \$623, while other parts increased from \$643.95 to \$889.⁷² A couple who relies solely on SSI as their source of income would be considered rent burdened if they paid more than 30% of their income, or \$459.64, on monthly rent. As Chinatown gentrifies, rents are expected to rise exponentially, increasing problems of housing affordability that the neighborhood's working-class residents already face. Through monthly outreach, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development increasingly comes across tenants who have or are being served with legal and illegal rent increases. For the low-income, mostly senior, tenants at 651 Broadway, their landlords Elaine, Howard and Robert Chan attempted to illegally increase rents up to as high as 50 percent.⁷³ As a rental building built before October 1, 1978, it is covered by the Los Angeles Rent Stabilization Ordinance (RSO) which allows landlords to legally increase rents up to 3% annually, or 5% if they pay for utilities. Although these legal increases are considered minimal compared to increases of 30, 40, or 50 percent, they can still create significant financial burdens for working-class tenants who may already struggle to pay for rent, food, healthcare, and transportation. The tenants in non-RSO buildings in Chinatown are even more vulnerable to potential rent increases that essentially have no limit.

Changing Landscapes

⁷² Miriam Zuk and Karen Chapple, *Urban Displacement Project*, (Los Angeles: University of Los Angeles, California, 2015).

⁷³ Le, "Los Angeles Chinatown Tenants Protest "Illegal Rent Increases'."

Many of the residential and commercial projects associated with Chinatown's gentrification, such as the hip eateries and market-rate studios, developed within the past five years. This gentrification is not captured by the Urban Displacement Project, which maps changes in socioeconomic and housing characteristics in Southern California. During 2000 to 2013 and years prior, the neighborhood is not shown as being gentrified or vulnerable to gentrification. Mapping is only done for the data of multiple census tracts up until 2013. However, much has occurred since then.

Far East Plaza has transformed into the nexus of the neighborhood's changing commercial and culinary scene (see figure 7). George Yu, who oversees leasing, is considered "the man pulling the strings".⁷⁴ In the spring of 2013, Korean American Roy Choi opened Chinatown's first celebrity-chef-driven restaurant, Chego, after meeting with Yu.⁷⁵ Over the next few years, Chego's opening would bring an influx of similar "hot-ticket"⁷⁶ eateries and boutiques that cater to upwardly mobile professionals and creatives. According to Nguyen Tran of the former Starry Kitchen that opened in late 2013, Choi "shined a guiding light towards Chinatown"⁷⁷ and was "the catalyst that convinced us to consider [opening shop there]."⁷⁸ Ten months following Chego's opening in May came the popular artisanal ice cream shop Scoops.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Farley Elliot, "Meet the Man Who Brought Chinatown's Far East Plaza Back to Life," March 28, 2016, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://la.eater.com/2016/3/28/11318662/chinatown-far-east-plaza-george-yu>.

⁷⁵ Spiers, "Chinatown's Far East Plaza Is a Dining Destination Thanks to George Yu."

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Nguyen Tran, "How to Run an Illegal Restaurant," *munchies.com*, September 27, 2017, accessed March 14, 2018, https://munchies.vice.com/en_us/article/pgxvxxv/how-to-run-an-illegal-restaurant.

⁷⁸ Lesley Balla, "Starry Kitchen Begins Serving in Chinatown This Weekend," *zagat.com*, July 12, 2013, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://www.zagat.com/b/los-angeles/starry-kitchen-begins-serving-in-chinatown-this-weekend>.

⁷⁹ Kim, "How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven."

In 2014, Eddie Huang, well-known Taiwanese American chef and author of the autobiography-turned-TV-show *Fresh Off the Boat*, brought his New-York based Baohaus into the retail space formerly occupied by Pok Pok Phat Thai, one of two Thai restaurants in Chinatown owned by the white Andy Ricker. In late 2014, the Filipino American chef Alvin Cailan, who was popularized by his Eggslut in downtown's Grand Central Market, opened Ramen Champ, which then switched owners not long after. He would go on to open Unit 120 in the space of the former Pho 79.⁸⁰ This "culinary incubator" rotated up-and-coming chefs who wanted to experiment with restaurant concepts, such as the Filipino brother duo LASA who took over the space later on. In April 2016, the white Johnny Zone and Amanda Chapman opened a brick-and-mortar version of Howlin' Ray's, a Nashville-style hot chicken food truck. The most recent celebrity chef to come to Chinatown is David Chang. In January 2018, he opened Majordomo in what one writer dismissively calls "north Downtown,"⁸¹ a far side of Chinatown filled with industrial warehouses that another writer foresees becoming the next Arts District.⁸² These businesses foster their own community in Chinatown, one different from whom the street vendors serve and are part of. Without self-critiquing the financial and social capital that enables them to open shop in Chinatown and explicitly challenging inequitable development, these businesses are complicit in the neighborhood's gentrification. Their presence drives further

⁸⁰ Danny Jensen, "Exploring LA's Growing Filipino Food Movement with Alvin Cailan of Eggslut," *citizine.tv*, Citizine Networks, Inc., January 3, 2017, accessed June 12, 2018, <https://www.citizine.tv/article/exploring-las-growing-filipino-food-movement-with-chef-alvin-cailan-of-eggslut>.

⁸¹ Matthew Kang, "David Chang's Majordomo Opens Tonight: Here's What to Expect," *LA.Eater.com*, Eater Los Angeles, January 23, 2018, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://la.eater.com/2018/1/23/16923818/majordomo-david-chang-momofuku-los-angeles-opening-food>

⁸² Farley Elliot, "Is Majordomo Already Changing Real Estate Fortunes in Far Chinatown?" *LA.Eater.com*, Eater Los Angeles, April 19, 2018, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://la.eater.com/2018/4/19/17246950/morning-briefing-restaurant-news-los-angeles-chinatown-real-estate>.

development and enables the discourse that ignorantly frames this gentrification as “a new commercial renaissance”⁸³ rather than working-class displacement.



Figure 7 Changes in Far East Plaza

At the same time that Chinatown experienced a wave of celebrity chef-driven restaurants led by Chego following 2013,⁸⁴ it saw the beginning of massive market-rate and multi-story projects. In 2014, the developer Equity Residential opened the six-story \$93-million Jia Apartments,⁸⁵ the neighborhood’s first luxury mixed-use development. Since then, more proposals have been made to build majority, if not all, market-rate developments across the neighborhood. These proposals include: S&R Partners’ Elysian Park Lofts, which includes 920

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Gold, “L.A. restaurant review: Chego the sequel opens with familiar pan-Asian flavors,” Los Angeles Times, July 5, 2013, accessed February 7th, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-gold-20130706-story.html>.

⁸⁵ Blanca Barragan. “Chinatown's Jia Apartments Opens With Rents Starting at \$1,690,” LA.curbed.com, VOX Media, March 4, 2014, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2014/3/4/10136378/chinatowns-jia-apartments-opens-with-rents-starting-at-1690>.

apartment units, 17 live/work lofts, and 17,941 square feet of retail space;⁸⁶ Atlas Capital Group's College Station Project, which includes 770 apartment units and 51,390 square feet of commercial floor area for a market, restaurants, and retail space;⁸⁷ and architectural firm Studio Gang's 26-story apartment and hotel tower, which includes 300 apartments, 149 hotel rooms, and retail.⁸⁸

These transit-oriented developments are concentrated near the Metro transit line that cuts through Chinatown at the Gold Line Station. Nearby, the \$100-million 237-unit Blossom Plaza opened in 2016.⁸⁹ Neighboring the Blossom Plaza is the Capitol Milling project which is in the midst of construction. The development firm S&R Partners, which belongs to the Riboli family who owns the well-known San Antonio Winery, plans to open a microbrewery, restaurants, and offices.⁹⁰ In addition to these transit-oriented developments and their proposals, well-known Los Angeles developers and gentrifiers, such as Tom Gilmore, Izek Shomof,⁹¹ and Tom Majich have purchased properties where small businesses and apartments exist. Much has changed since 2013. Chinatown is gentrifying.

⁸⁶ "Initial Study: Elysian Park Lofts Project" (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning, 2017).

⁸⁷ "Initial Study: College Station Project" (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning, 2016).

⁸⁸ Bianca Barragan, "Studio Gang unveils its first Los Angeles project: A wavy, 26-story tower in Chinatown," LA.curbed.com, VOX Media, April 19, 2018, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2018/4/19/17254338/studio-gang-los-angeles-chinatown-tower>.

⁸⁹ Steven Sharp. "Blossom Plaza Headed Toward the Finish Line," urbanize.la, Urbanize Media, January 5, 2016, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://urbanize.la/post/blossom-plaza-headed-toward-finish-line>.

⁹⁰ Blanca Barragan. "Checking in on the Chinatown's Capitol Milling project," LA.curbed.com, VOX Media, June 13, 2017, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2017/6/13/15787438/capitol-milling-project-development-brewery-chinatown>.

⁹¹ Cathaleen Chen. "Izek Shomof plans 122-unit Chinatown complex," therealdeal.com, Korangy Publishing Inc., September 20, 2016, accessed February 7, 2018, <https://therealdeal.com/la/2016/09/20/izek-shomof-plans-122-unit-chinatown-complex/>.

Chapter 2: Creating and Sustaining Chinatown: Gardens and the Right to the City

Gardens

One hot summer day in late June, Annie and I met Tam Gong Gong, a Chinatown resident and avid gardener, for what I thought was the first time. My friend Tim, who I had talked with the week prior, had mentioned to me over pastries and *baos* at KBC Bakery that he had noticed an older woman gardening outside the apartment building next to where he and his grandparents lived in the neighborhood. A large garden flourished in the front yard of the building. Vines peppered with yellow flowers wove themselves around the white yarn strung across the front gate. A pathway cut across the middle of the garden, leading to a door painted evergreen. It was locked. Annie and I stood outside for a few minutes until an auntie who lived there happened to come home. “*Do you know who gardens here?*” we asked her in Cantonese. Unlocking the door, she shyly said no and pointed to the first door in the hallway facing us. It was the unit where Tam Gong Gong and his family lived.

When we arrived at this building, everything looked familiar to me, but I wasn’t quite sure why. When Tam Gong Gong opened his door and we asked about the garden outside, it gradually dawned on me that I had talked with him before. It had been a brief doorway conversation that took place during one of the monthly neighborhood outreaches that I helped coordinate for Chinatown Community for Equitable Development. The weekend prior, some CCED volunteers had also talked with Tam Gong Gong and his wife Tai Tai about tenant rights and housing issues. The landlord who had purchased their building in 2016 had been attempting to force tenants out through “cash for keys”, a common tactic used to pressure low-income tenants to *voluntarily* move out of their apartment units by offering them money. Despite the building being protected by the Los Angeles Rent Stabilization Ordinance, the tenants are

vulnerable to such tactics of displacement. Because of the statewide Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act, which severely limits municipal rent control and prohibits vacancy control, the landlord can rent to new tenants at any price once units are vacant.

In a capitalist economic system that prioritizes productivity and profitability, the livelihoods of working-class seniors, such as Tam Gong Gong, are disposable. Tam Gong Gong and Tai Tai share a two-bedroom apartment with their son and his wife and children. The \$1,000 monthly rent is too expensive to afford on their own because of their fixed income. If they were not splitting costs with their son's family, the majority of this elderly couple's Supplemental Security Income would be spent on rent, leaving them with approximately \$400 for food and other living costs. Their monthly rent feels high and increases by 3% each year, but it seems that for their landlord, it is not high enough. If the existing working-class tenants leave, their vacant apartment units can be rented for any amount at the landlord's discretion. Thus, the landlord seeks to displace them for higher-income, higher-paying tenants. Lacking the financial and social capital recognized as valuable by the property owners and developers who gentrify Chinatown, Tam Gong Gong and his family are devalued for their inability to be profitable. Similarly, spaces that serve working-class residents are also devalued because of their role as sites that sustain the livelihoods of minoritized life. This includes Tam Gong Gong's garden.

Flourishing Community Gardens

Gardens of various sizes and varieties speckle Chinatown's residential neighborhood. They can be found in the backyards of family homes and on empty plots of land. Many of the neighborhood's tenants cultivate gardens in apartment balconies, communal front yards, and patches of dirt lining the side of buildings and pathways. Chinatown's working-class residents depend on these gardens in various ways. Representative of other social and physical spaces that

serve working-class immigrants in the community but holding potential for their own unique political possibilities, they are sites for growing food, sharing knowledge, and socializing with neighbors and passersby.

In these gardens, one can find an abundance of different varieties of 菜 *coi* (vegetables). This includes leafy greens commonly used in Chinese cuisine such as 莧菜 (red amaranth), 白菜 (bok choy), a-菜 (a-choy), and 番薯 (sweet potato leaves). In the late fall to early winter months, 冬瓜 (winter melons) are ready to harvest according to Tam Gong Gong. Popular in both Chinese and Southeast Asian dishes, herbs such as 韭菜 (chives), mint, basil, and lemongrass seem to grow effortlessly in the California sun. Common fruits, such as 火龙果 (dragon fruit), 金橘 (kumquat), 枇杷 (loquat), 紅棗 (jujube), tangerine, guava, grapefruit, persimmon, and pomegranate, are grown, gifted, and sold at different points of the year. Some of these plants require long-term cultivation. Their growth speaks to the gardeners' persistence and patience, qualities that are also essential to seeing the fruition of grassroots organizing and the movement of building working-class power.

Tam Gong Gong

Tam Gong Gong, Tiffany, and I stand outside in the shade of a pomegranate tree. Although the open space between the apartment and its front gate is fairly small compared to the spacious front yards of many of Los Angeles's suburban homes, the garden is quite large. Greenery fills nearly every square inch of dirt on both sides of the central concrete walkway. The space belongs to all of the tenants in the building, but only a few of them garden. Tam Gong Gong, who claims to garden the most of all of his neighbors in the building, grows and tends one side of the apartment's garden (see figure 8).

Retiring not too long ago, Tam Gong Gong began gardening as a way to pass the time. He waves off the labor of his hobby as easy. *“All you do is throw the seeds in the dirt and water them,”* he says modestly. *“When they bud, you spread them and replant them further apart.”* In early September, Tam Gong Gong’s garden flourishes with 茼蒿 (edible chrysanthemum) and the bulbous 球莖甘藍 (kohlrabi). In one section, a large winter melon peeks out from the cool shade of its broad leaves (see figure 9). Planted in March and harvested in October, these winter melons are almost ready for Tai Tai, who makes all the meals at home, to chop up and cook into nourishing winter soups.



Figure 8 and 9 Tam Gong Gong's Garden: Lush Greens and Winter Melon

Politics of the Garden

Seniors, such as Tam Gong Gong, comprise a significant percentage of Chinatown's population. Walking through the neighborhood, you can see them huddled in corners around tables playing Chinese games, stopping in the middle of sidewalks to talk with friends they run into, and waiting at bus stops to go grocery shopping. These seniors nurture and sustain Chinatown as a working-class immigrant neighborhood with their social networks, physical and emotional labor, and cultural practices. They play a large role in making Chinatown what it is today, but the fact that they are poor, elderly, and immigrant makes them vulnerable to displacement at the hands of neoliberal economic development. Their existence is a reminder of Chinatown's past, its present, and the possibility of its future as a community that continues to serve some of those who have been racialized, gendered, and devalued by the state.

Chinatowns have historically existed outside the social and cultural boundaries of acceptability of white America. Their deviance from the state has taken the form of opium dens, gambling, informal economies, poverty, and the perpetually foreign: Asians, particularly Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodians. Common across Chinatowns, city officials targeted San Francisco's Chinatown as a danger to environmental and public health since the early nineteenth century.⁹² The racialized perception of the neighborhood as one of blight and "infection," made worse by the presence of bachelors and prostitutes and the absence of Christian nuclear families, enabled its heightened surveillance and harassment.⁹³

Chinatown has wavered between existing outside and inside the state. Following Union Station's dismantling of Old Chinatown in the 1930s, New Chinatown in Los Angeles emerged out of middle-class Chinese American businessmen's vision of a business-oriented district self-

⁹² Lee, *A New History of Asian America*, 95-126.

⁹³ Ibid.

funded by the community. The adoption of sanitized and industrialized ideals of American spaces included modern buildings “correctly engineered for earthquake, fire safety, and sanitation,” Chinese architectural designs, wide streets, and no “houses of vice, such as gambling.”⁹⁴ The move to recreate Chinatown as clean and modern reflects Chinese Americans’ resistance to racist discourse and its material manifestations which include the state’s economic disinvestment in the community. At the same time, it calls attention to the community’s desires to incorporate into white America in attempts to avoid further socioeconomic and physical exclusion.

However, the protections that this incorporation provides have significant consequences today. The value and protection that the neoliberal state ascribes to middle-to-upper class Chinese Americans comes at the expense of working-class immigrants who now significantly live in Chinatown. It also comes at the expense of black and Latinx communities who experience violence and marginalization from the racialization of urban neighborhoods as slums and ghettos. By separating from racialized notions of dirtiness and backwardness, these Chinese Americans also attempt to disassociate from communities that continue to be targeted. While highlighting the community’s history of resistance, it’s necessary to call into question its complicity in sustaining systems of oppression. Without facing the contradictions arising from Chinatown’s past and present, conversations about its future will be severely limited.

Gardening is part of a larger progressive history of Chinatown’s self-determination and self-sustenance. When the state has failed to provide for Chinatown, community members have advocated, organized, and provided for themselves. In 1971, the Chinatown Service Center

⁹⁴ Suellen Cheng and Munson Kwok, "The Golden Years of Los Angeles Chinatown: The Beginning," reprinted from *The Los Angeles Chinatown 50th Year Guidebook*, June 1988, accessed May 6 2017, <http://oldchinatownla.com/history.html>.

formed in response to the lack of culturally competent healthcare and social services in the neighborhood.⁹⁵ According to Phyllis Chiu, a longtime organizer in the neighborhood, a group of politically conscious students from UCLA created the Chinatown Youth Council (CYC) in the late 1960s to early 1970s to address the lack of services and access to education for immigrant teenagers. CYC initially ran a summer youth employment program that provided bilingual education and job development. Soon, it grew into an umbrella group that housed many programs that served the neighborhood's wider working-class residents. Given that major newspapers in Chinatown did not publish daily, they produced and distributed the monthly 覺華報 (Chinese Awareness Newspaper) to share community news and news from China. They would sell it in restaurant kitchens and sewing factories for about 25 cents each. On Saturday mornings, Chinatown Food Co-op purchased fruit and vegetables from a wholesale market downtown and distributed the food to residents outside someone's home in Chinatown. Although the community had many markets at the time, including the former Ling's Market (now Ai Hoa), Yee Sing Chong, Kwan Lee Lung (now closed JC Market), and BC Market, the Food Co-op was formed to provide low-income residents another means of accessing affordable fresh produce.

According to Monica White, “gardening becomes an exercise of political agency and empowerment” when “members of the community face harsh economic realities.”⁹⁶ In Detroit, a city with a deep history of working-class resistance to housing discrimination and racial segregation, black women have used food to reclaim land and resist social, economic, and environmental injustice. They have transformed vacant land into urban gardens, creating a community-based food system that “allows them to be able to feed themselves and their

⁹⁵ Chinatown Service Center, “History,” accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.cscla.org/history>.

⁹⁶ Monica M. White, “Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* (Indiana University Press, 2011), 19.

families.”⁹⁷ In the context of a gentrifying Chinatown, gardening has potential to transform from a hobby and necessity to an act of resistance. Gardening offers insight into the ability of the community’s working-class senior immigrants to exist uninterrupted by neoliberal forces, at the same time that it reflects their increasing vulnerability to neoliberal forces in the midst of gentrification. To engage in activities that sustain them and bring them joy while living in a system that aims to physically and figuratively erase them speaks to the transformative power of gardens in challenging oppression that manifests in poverty, poor health, and displacement. At the intersection of food and space, seniors produce knowledges, which include gardening practices, cultural beliefs, traditional recipes, community news, and land use, that foster the possibility of “a politics of difference that radically rethinks self and community.”⁹⁸ While unpacking Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* essay “Learning from the 60s,” Grace Kyungwon Hong defines this difference as: “an epistemological position, ontological condition, and political strategy that reckon with the shift in the technologies of power that we might as well call ‘neoliberal.’”⁹⁹ Difference is a reference to “a cultural and epistemological practice that holds in suspension (without requiring resolution) contradictory, mutually exclusive, and negating impulses.”¹⁰⁰

The politics that can arise from Chinatown’s gardens challenge how land and people in the neighborhood are perceived and valued by the neoliberal state and provide alternative reimaginings of economic development, community health, and working-class existence. These politics allow us to imagine a vision that contrasts greatly with that of gentrification, one of an

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal*, 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

equitable Chinatown that can be actualized. The garden is a site of duality, symbolizing both the vulnerability and strength of working-class senior immigrants in a gentrifying Chinatown. It offers a physical and epistemological space to unpack and, ultimately, challenge gentrification.

The (De)Commodification of Space

Vulnerability Arising from Deviance

Gardens, such as Tam Gong Gong's, are viewed as deviant because of their inability to be profitable for the city, developers, property owners, and non-profit institutions that operate as extensions of the neoliberal state. Like the working-class residents who tend and rely on them, they are vulnerable to displacement. According to Henri Lefebvre, contradictions in society, such as those between the forces and relations of production, emerge in space and at the level of space.¹⁰¹ He points to a contradictory process that degrades and eventually destroys urban space: "the proliferation of fast roads and of places to park and garage cars, and their corollary, a reduction of tree-lined streets, green spaces, and parks, and gardens."¹⁰² The contradiction itself lies in the clash between a consumption of space which produces surplus value and one which produces only enjoyment."¹⁰³ In Chinatown, gardens and informal street vendors produce enjoyment and sustenance for working-class residents rather than profit for the elite who control the means of production in a capitalist system. Thus, they are rendered unproductive and disposable.

When we spoke in July 2017, Tam Gong Gong had never met his new landlord. Instead, he had met the handful of individuals whom the landlord hired to tell him and his low-income neighbors to move out so that the apartment building could be renovated. According to Tam

¹⁰¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 358.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 359.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Gong Gong, everyone refused to leave because they knew they wouldn't be able to find an affordable place to live in elsewhere. Whatever amount of money the landlord offered would not be sustainable, especially for those relying on government assistance. *"Even if they gave me \$100, the government would take away \$100 from my SSI."* For the tenants, this is their home. Yet, by using cash-for-keys tactics and refusing to meet with them directly, the landlord disregards their livelihoods. This lack of interpersonal interaction between the landlord and the tenants exemplifies the dehumanization of certain racialized and gendered groups that occurs within gentrification.

Given Chinatown's proximity to downtown Los Angeles and inequitable economic capital generating projects such as the Metro transit system, tourist destinations, and arts districts, land that was once disinvested in is now ascribed with capitalist value because it is profitable. While the state does not recognize the gardens of Chinatown's working-class senior immigrants as valuable, it unarguably recognizes the land that these gardens occupy as holding great potential for profitability. This rent gap, "the disparity between how much property is worth in its current state and how much it would be worth gentrified," is becoming larger in Chinatown.¹⁰⁴ As real estate speculation and profit-driven urban development increase, property values in the neighborhood, such as where Tam Gong Gong's apartment building stands, will increase. Developers seek to build development projects that can better generate financial capital. Gentrification is further commodification of land by neoliberal forces. The value of land is narrowly measured by its financial worth in the present and in a speculative future. This framework dismisses the social and cultural values that working-class senior immigrants place on land in Chinatown.

¹⁰⁴ Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*, 38.

The sites of gardens and informal street vendors are consumed by local residents in ways that contrast with the consumption of neoliberal economic development, such as the new wave of eateries and boutiques, art galleries, market-rate mixed-use residential and commercial buildings, architectural offices, wineries, and breweries. In Chinatown, this clash in consumption grows as gentrification leads to the creation of more profit-generating spaces and the hastened removal of public communal spaces. The process of creation and removal extends to include the different bodies who occupy and consume each space. Valued and protected groups, such as middle-to-upper-class professionals and creatives, are welcomed, while racialized and gendered groups, such as the low-income senior immigrants, are displaced from the spaces that serve them. The existence of Tam Gong Gong's garden is tied to his ability to continue living in his home of seven to eight years. Without him, who will sow the vegetables and water the plants as they grow?

Everyday Joys

Tam Gong Gong spends most of his time gardening. Aside from allowing him to pass the time during retirement, it brings him joy. To see something he has planted grow and to eat it uplifts Tam Gong Gong. In the morning and early evening, he goes outside to water the plants. However, as he's grown older, the laborious nature of gardening seems to have impacted how much Tam Gong Gong can do physically. In the past two years, he hasn't been gardening as much as before because of his aching back and knees. In addition to Tai Tai, who will sometimes water the plants, his adult children help him tend the garden.

In contrast to Tam Gong Gong, Pauline doesn't readily see herself as a gardener. There's nowhere for her to grow food, she tells me, because she lives in a first-floor apartment. As quickly as she insists that she isn't a gardener, she also says that she grows 番薯 (sweet

potatoes). “是 garden! (*That's a garden!*)” I exclaim in a mix of English and Cantonese. But she waves it off as something that's done casually and requires minimal effort.

This is because gardening came by chance for Pauline who, at age 26, immigrated to Chinatown from Hong Kong with her husband and 5-year-old daughter over fifty years ago. Growing up in the city, she didn't have the opportunity or space to plant fruits and vegetables. “我唔識種. 我是香港出世. 乜野都唔識. (*I don't know how to grow things. I grew up in Hong Kong. I don't know anything.*)” One day, her neighbor who had sweet potato plants but no 地方 (space) to grow them came over and planted the vines in the empty plot of dirt in front of Pauline's apartment in Chinatown (see figure 10). Pauline watered them, and they just grew. Now her garden is full of 番薯 (sweet potatoes) and a lone 辣椒 (chili pepper) plant that sits in one corner. Peanut shells used for compost are scattered in the dirt.



Figure 10 Pauline's Garden: Sweet Potato Leaves

Fostering Community

Gardens, alongside the public streets that street vendors occupy, provide spaces for informal conversation and interaction that help create and sustain the community's social networks. While Vivian and I stood outside on the street with Pauline, an auntie walking by noticed our gathering around Pauline's garden and stopped to comment. They didn't know each other but spoke with familiarity. This was a common scene in Chinatown: strangers striking up friendly conversations in shared languages on bus rides, in small grocery stores, and at Alpine Park, all spaces that are accessible to them. On this neighborhood street at dusk, it was no different.

Similar to the rest of the community spaces that serve the neighborhood's working-class residents, gardens serve as "a forum to build connections and reciprocity of social capital among groups of people."¹⁰⁵ Working-class immigrant residents can be found exchanging community news, resources, and greetings. Where neoliberal development practices create less socially cohesive neighborhoods and dismantle existing working-class social networks through displacement, saying 你好 (hi) or 早上 (good morning) and having the spaces for these interpersonal connections are powerful. Within capitalism, lives become increasingly isolated and commodified, so saying hello to your neighbor can be considered a radical act because it is unprofitable and uncommodifiable.¹⁰⁶ Gardens can function not only as spaces for enjoyment but also as sites for building a stronger sense of community among working-class residents.

Residents take care of one another through the community's social networks. Through gardens and the relationships they foster, residents share food with each other, in addition to tips about the best deals on fresh affordable groceries, how to navigate the city and government

¹⁰⁵ Havlik, "Eating in Urban Frontier, 63.

¹⁰⁶ Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City*, 216.

institutions as immigrants and limited English speakers, and how to grow and cook sweet potato leaves. Although their neighborhood and relationships are increasingly threatened by gentrification, working-class immigrants in Chinatown have social networks that can provide them the power to effect change within their community.¹⁰⁷ When it comes to grassroots organizing, they are better equipped to mobilize one another around issues of inequity because of a developed sense of mutual support. According to Mrs. Mar, “有相信 (*there's trust*)” when she, someone with a deep relationship to Chinatown having lived and worked here for many years, talks with other residents. Collectively, working-class residents can wield immense power with their social capital, sense of community, and shared experiences as marginalized people.

Shaping and Redefining Land through Knowledge Production

While proposals for market-rate mixed-use developments recognize and prioritize expertise in the form of architects, urban planners, and developers formally trained to shape land use, Chinatown's gardens do not. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced, serving as “a tool of thought and of action”.¹⁰⁸ He goes on to say that “in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.”¹⁰⁹ How landscapes reflect, reinforce, and reproduce socioeconomic hierarchies is apparent when looking at who has access to spaces and their planning processes, in addition to what values are embodied and what knowledges are recognized and utilized. Neoliberal economic development centers a capitalist notion of land and value that erases other understandings of the relationship between land and people. Through privatization, land is rendered as property. It is transformed into not just an

¹⁰⁷ Havlik, “Eating in Urban Frontiers,” 63.

¹⁰⁸ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 26.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

object but a “set of rules and sanctions that determine an individual’s power to dispose of an object in the act of exchange.”¹¹⁰ These rules establish the power of individuals,¹¹¹ ranging from landlords to developers to city officials, to exclude or limit the claims that others,¹¹² such as working-class tenants, may make upon that object. Informality, which takes form in gardens and street vendors, disrupts this exclusive, capitalist ownership model of property. At these points of tension where informality confronts us, Ananya Roy argues, we are *required* to recognize the right to the city¹¹³ — which is “not merely a right of access to what already exists” but, in the case of working-class senior immigrants, “a right to change it.”¹¹⁴

Working-class knowledge shapes the land that gardens occupy in Chinatown, producing spaces that are central for relationship building, enjoyment, and community health. They are vulnerable to displacement compared to the spaces produced by recognized modes of expertise which are valued in neoliberal development practices. Yet, working-class senior immigrants have the power to challenge the elite’s control of space that occurs within capitalism. Stemming from the community cultural wealth produced and sustained in gardens, the politics of difference arising from these spaces enable the possibility of transforming land as “private commodity”¹¹⁵ back to “common use.” They enable the possibility of recovering and holding onto land in the form of equitable, community-oriented production and control of spaces, thus imagining systems of economic development alternative to capitalism.

¹¹⁰ Roy, “Urban Informality,” 153.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid, 148.

¹¹⁴ David Harvey, “The Right to the City” (International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 2003), 939.

¹¹⁵ Donald A. Krueckeberg, “The Difficult Character of Property: To Whom Do Things Belong?” (Journal of the American Planning Association, 1995), 302.

Tucked away at the end of a cul de sac, Pang Baak's garden is easy to miss walking or driving by. A narrow dirt pathway scattered with old clothes and sporadic concrete steps leads to his garden. The backsides of homes and apartment buildings, one of which has been spray painted with graffiti, surround it on one side, while a panoramic view of Chinatown's commercial district surrounds it on the other. Leafy greens and herbs grow out of styrofoam containers, plastic buckets and crates, and old produce boxes filled to the brim with dirt (see figure 11). Over forty empty tofu storage containers sit side by side on the ground ready to be reused. While we talk, Pang Baak tends his plants. He plucks two bright red cherry tomatoes and hands them over (see figure 12). Their vines stretch across the top of a well-crafted wooden archway; dragon fruit plants grow at the bottom. After retiring from work at a Panda Express restaurant, which he refers to as "panda", he began gardening several years ago. He immigrated from Taishan, China and has lived in Chinatown for over 20 years. "唔識打麻將. (*I don't know how to play mahjong.*)" He goes on to name several other activities that other seniors in Chinatown commonly engage in to pass the time but he doesn't know how to do. For him, he gets a sense of purpose and fulfillment from gardening.



Figure 11 and 12 Pang Baak: Garden Resourcefulness and Cherry Tomatoes

The informality of the seniors' gardens complicate notions of ownership that are tied to property rights. Pang Baak does not legally own the property that his garden occupies but stakes claim to the land with the labor, food, and joy he produces. While the seniors' creative and resourceful use of land is usually ignored or tolerated until it stands in the way of profitable development, in Pang Baak's case, the property owner supports his gardening. Pang Baak used to live in one of the adjoining apartments. Although he moved to another location a mile away some years ago, he continues to return every day, driving over in a car that he uses to transport tools and supplies. The land that his garden occupies is part of the property of one of the adjacent apartment buildings. “佢知道你種嘢嗎? (*Does he know you're planting things?*)” I ask. Pang Baak's plot of fruits and vegetables is the largest of several in this space. He exclaims that the property owner wants him to garden, otherwise someone would have to be hired to take care of

the land. In what appears to be an informal arrangement, Pang Baak is able to utilize the space, while the landlord receives some tax benefits from the presence of a garden on his property.¹¹⁶ Their relationship speaks to the ways in which informal land use can both challenge and coexist with formality.

Where Chinatown and Solano Canyon meet lies an undeveloped plot of land. The 110 North freeway separates it from Chavez Ravine, a historical neighborhood home to generations of Mexican Americans who were forcibly displaced by the city of Los Angeles and replaced with the Dodger Stadium in the 1950s.¹¹⁷ In the middle of the plot, a garden of green herbs and vegetables flourishes, contrasting greatly with the empty space of dry grass and dirt surrounding it (see figure 13). Two small raised beds of dirt sit to the side, closer to the shade of the bordering apartment's trees. These gardens aren't gated, compared to the formal Solano Canyon Community Garden across from them to which access is only allowed to those who can pay the monthly fee to own their own plot. According to a young Latino artist who recently moved into the neighborhood and exhibited work at an art gallery at Blossom Plaza Apartments, the middle-aged Spanish-speaking Latino immigrant caretaker who he befriended through shared language watered and cared for most of these plots. The caretaker's own garden sat to one side, green, loved, and thriving.

The gardens that occupy the open space across from the Solano Canyon Community Garden are shared by several immigrant residents from the neighboring rent-controlled apartment building: the Yu family, Lim Yee, and another Chinese family. At a glance, this

¹¹⁶ Through the statewide Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone Act (2013), the county of Los Angeles provides reduced property tax assessments to property owners who transform eligible vacant or unimproved land into an agricultural use. See "Los Angeles County Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone Program," <http://planning.lacounty.gov/uaiz>.

¹¹⁷ Independent Lens, "The History of Chavez Ravine," PBS.org, accessed April 14, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/chavezravine/cr.html>

informal space appears to resemble values more true to the concept of community gardens as communal space. Community gardens are increasingly institutionalized, overseen by non-profit organizations. They are also capitalized on by developers given their ability to often increase property values. However, the informality of this particular garden speaks to immigrant creativity and a sort of renegade quality: community members seeing empty land and reimagining it as food and joy, a space unrestricted by property rights and zoning laws. It stands ungated, its plants seemingly vulnerable to being ravaged or stolen. On the other hand, it stands open, a space for others to help tend, contribute to, and borrow from in exchange for labor, more plants, or simply, a deep appreciation of its abundance or a need for its nurturance. A degree of trust surrounds this open space. The way it has been constructed and how it exists openly speak to a form of land use and design that contrasts greatly with current development. The informal communal garden produces a knowledge and framework that shifts how communities are built.



Figure 13 Informal Community Garden

As rice paddy farmers in China, Yu Sook and his family are skilled at cultivating land for food. Although they have lived here for 20 years, they have only been gardening on what he says is government-owned land for six years. According to him, it costs around \$20 to \$40 to garden at the Solano Canyon Community Garden, and there is a waiting list. With access to this land next to their home, why pay to use that community garden? The family's middle plot flourishes with sweet potato plants, cilantro, chives, and A-菜 (*a-coi*) that are enough for the family to eat (see figure 14). Yu Sook says that he and his neighbors help each other “斟水 (*pour water*)” on the plants when they get home from work. If anyone picks some of their vegetables without asking, he says that they wouldn't mind. The biggest issue seems to be the birds and rodents who eat all the fruit from Lim Yee's loquat tree. Even then, Lim Yee, who immigrated here from Cambodia over thirty years ago, seems content with her gardening. At 89 years-old, she gardens for fun but finds it harder to do nowadays as she's getting older. “*Bhoi lak (no energy)*,” she says in Teochew, walking me slowly to her plot of lettuce that she calls “Cambodia salad” (see figure 15). She finds it difficult to carry containers of water outside after the landlord had complained about the tenants using too much water and locked up the hose. Yet, her garden, however small, is lush. Her neighbors help her water the plants.



Figure 14 and 15 Abundant: Yu Family's Greens and Lim Yee's Cambodia Salad

Similarly, Pauline's garden symbolizes collectivity and mutual aid, speaking to the ways in which working-class senior immigrants nurture and sustain Chinatown. While her neighbor started the garden, Pauline waters it to ensure its growth. It sits in front of her apartment, openly facing the residential sidewalk. Sometimes people she knows will come over and take without asking. She tells me that someone once pulled the vegetable from its roots because they didn't know the proper way to pick it. However, she doesn't mind. She would have shared her harvest regardless because sweet potato leaves “很快出啊! (*grow really fast!*)” Community members, both acquaintances and strangers, are welcome to take what plants they need from it, giving back to her their own garden harvests and resources: a gift of grapefruits from a neighbor's tree that she then gives to me and snacks they bought at the market. Tam Gong Gong also shares his garden's harvests with “很朋友 (*good friends*).” During these moments, food becomes more than a commodity, a form of appreciation and care.

In Pauline's garden, older women transmit knowledge of Chinese foodways through the sharing of gardening practices and recipes. Pauline's neighbor happened to be home when she noticed us standing outside. Joining us, she grabbed the scissors from Pauline and cut the leaves at a quick pace. Our bags filled with leafy greens. "*She knows much more about gardening than me,*" Pauline shrugged. Her neighbor cut specific leaves and stems for Vivian and me to replant. "返回種. 插落去. (*Go back home and grow it. Plant them into the ground,*)" Pauline said.

Believing that we didn't know how to garden, she told us "問你的媽點得啊 (*You can ask your mom how to do it.*)" Agreeing, her neighbor said matter-of-factly in a mix of Cantonese and Toisan, "媽識整啊. 老人素識整. (*Moms know how to [garden]. Old people usually know how to do it.*)"¹¹⁸ Their insistence that our mothers knew how to garden speaks to women's role in knowledge production.

As street vendors, waitresses, caretakers, gardeners, cooks, aunties, mothers, and grandmothers, women play a significant role in transmitting traditions, guidance, and beliefs amongst each other and intergenerationally through food. With many tasks taken up by women, labor around food is often gendered. While these gender roles reveal sexual divisions of labor that can be unfair and uncompensated, they also speak to women's agency in producing knowledge. Wong Po Po's garden occupies multiple patches of green space found on the public sidewalk in front of her apartment building (see figure 16). Commonly eaten in Toisan-style soup, 大白菜 (*big bok choy*) hang on the bars of her window to dry. When she shares how to cook different vegetables from her garden with Desmond and me, second-generation Chinese Americans, she both preserves and shapes Chinese diasporic culture. For 韭菜 (*chives*), she stir

¹¹⁸ Pauline and her neighbor assumed that my mom would know how to garden and were right! Not only does my mom garden but also my dad. They grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables at our home.

fries them with eggs. For the bitter 枸杞 (goji berry leaves), she cooks it in soup. 茼蒿 (crown daisy or edible chrysanthemum) leaves are added to hot pot soups. We recognize the vegetables, remembering their taste in our mouths, their images in homecooked meals, but she teaches us names and practices. She bends down to pick handfuls of 麥菜 (Indian lettuce, also known as *a-coi*) to gift us (see figure 17), telling us in Toisan to boil and saute, then add soy sauce or oyster sauce. At home, I give the 麥菜 to my mother who then sautes them in a large pot. The process of growing, harvesting, cooking, and eating is powerfully shaped by the women who nourish us.



Figure 16 and 17 Sidewalk Life: Wong Po Po's Vegetables

Cooking can reflect immigrants' cultural maintenance of habits and knowledges learned from their homeland and cultural adaptations that are made in new places. Pauline learned how to cook while growing up in the Kowloon region of Hong Kong. In order for her to learn how to make meals on her own, her mother asked the domestic worker who helped their family not to

cook anymore. Pauline has carried these skills into old age. Now retired and living with her 先生 (husband) in Chinatown, she cooks all the meals at home. Some of them include her garden's sweet potato plants.

Sweet potato plants can be cooked in various ways similar to other Chinese leafy greens. Pauline likes to saute or stir fry the stems and leaves together with fried onions, then adding 蝦米 (small dried shrimp) or 腐乳 (fermented bean curd), both common ingredients in Cantonese dishes. To balance the saltiness of these two ingredients and the slight bitterness of the leafy greens, a distinct taste that her neighbor says is liked by some and disliked by others, she suggests adding a small amount of 糖 (sugar). Boiling the leaves in a pot of water also creates a nutritious soup. When we finish eating ours, she told us, we can come back for more. The sweet potato leaves would have all grown back in a few days. “一個禮拜, 很多. (*After one week, there will be a lot*),” her neighbor said.

Differences in Growth

Although the gardens and the informal street vendors stand in opposition to forces of neoliberalism and capitalism, they also embody the potential to produce the politics that can challenge the inequitable manifestations of these oppressive systems. Through the site of the garden, land is reimagined as a space for enjoying one's time, nurturance, and social interactions. Thus, land is decommodified. Seniors occupy apartment balconies, front lawns, and pathways in Chinatown to tend soil, grow food, and hold conversations with neighbors. Working as informal street vendors, some seniors take their harvests and sell them to make modest incomes. They occupy parking lots and public streets, interacting with acquaintances and passersby. In contrast

to spaces produced by neoliberal development, gardens do not solely function to produce surplus value. They function to serve working-class immigrants finding ways to sustain their livelihoods.

At the same time that working-class residents rely on these communal spaces, they sustain them. They enable their own continued existence in the community with the joys, uses, and knowledge produced in gardens. Community-oriented and driven spaces are alternative models of economic development that stand in the way of the hyper-privatization of land that accelerates with gentrification. Thus, they have the potential to actively challenge this process. How working-class residents relate to these spaces and each other provides a framework that imagines land not as property that produces surplus value, but as community that produces enjoyment: communal sites to exercise agency and self-determination, take care of oneself and others, and exist equitably. In this vision of Chinatown, the working-class community as a whole, rather than a few rich interests, controls the means of production, distribution, and exchange.

Chapter 3: Envisioning Chinatown's Future as a Working-Class Immigrant Neighborhood

Day-to-Day

Every morning Monday to Friday, Julie joins about sixty other seniors to eat at Golden Dragon, a longstanding Cantonese restaurant commonly frequented by seniors like Peter, Pauline, Tam Gong Gong, and Wong Baak. She enjoys eating the healthy meals provided by the “senior nutrition lunch” program.¹¹⁹ Afterwards, she walks home to her apartment several blocks away and spends the rest of the day listening to the radio and watching Hong Kong dramas on television. When dinnertime comes, she walks to one of several restaurants in the neighborhood to buy what she considers “fast food,” convenient Chinese takeout. By then, time just passes by. While Julie lives alone, this independence seems to bring her peace and joy in old age.

Crossroads of Immigration: Family and Labor

Handing us two cans of iced coffee, Julie seats herself across from Desmond and me. We sit in the living room of her apartment in Chinatown. The pink floral stitching stands out on the sleeveless navy blue vest she has layered over a long-sleeve top. A few photographs of her parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews are posted near the kitchen counter. She begins to tell us about her family and life in Hong Kong to which her parents had emigrated from the Guangdong province of China. Although she's Chaozhou (Teochew), she doesn't speak much of the language.¹²⁰ In Tsim Sha Tsui, a popular tourist area in the Kowloon region, her father owned a business that catered to visiting foreigners. One of Julie's youngest sisters was the first to

¹¹⁹ St. Barnabas Senior Services is a non-profit organization that provides free nutritious meals to low-income adults 60 years and older at fourteen congregate meals sites including Golden Dragon. There is a suggested donation.

¹²⁰ While walking to a restaurant for dinner, Julie told me that if I spoke Teochew to her, she might understand. I said “*jiat beung!*” which literally translates to “eat rice” but is meant as “let's eat.” Right away she responded with “*Jiat beung! Jiat muē! Sí m sí? (Eat rice! Eat congee! Is that right?)*”

immigrate to the United States. Once she started to feel lonely, “佢很想我嚟美國 (*she wanted me to come to America.*)” In 1980, “我爸爸媽媽同埋最細的妹最細的細佬嚟過先. (*My parents came with my youngest sister and brother first.*)” They lived in Chinatown, where Julie’s dad continued to run his own business, setting up shop a few blocks down in downtown.

For many of the seniors in Chinatown, the push and pull factors that led them to emigrate from the Kowloon region of Hong Kong, provinces in Southern China, or cities in Vietnam and Cambodia and come to the United States are complex and layered. In the case of Hong Kong, the transfer of the country’s sovereignty from imperial United Kingdom to China in July 1997 spurred a large exodus of emigrants. According to Mrs. Mar, some people supported this political handover while others did not. Following the 1965 Immigration Act, women made up the majority of U.S. immigrants from Asia.¹²¹ The growing presence of Asian immigrant women would be reflected in their large labor force participation in industries across the country, particularly in manufacturing, service, and healthcare.¹²²

While the seniors interviewed spoke little about explicit geopolitics, the stories they shared about their immigration experiences revealed much about their social networks, labor, and values. For women such as Julie, Lee Tai Tai, and Mrs. Mar, having young children significantly shaped their decisions revolving immigration and labor. The relocation of their families abroad influenced Julie and Lee Tai Tai to also emigrate. Everyone that Julie knew was leaving Hong Kong to move to the United States. However, she was reluctant to go with them because it was “很不习惯 (*very foreign*).” Eventually, Julie, who was in her 40s, and her eight-year-old son joined her family in Los Angeles. Yet it would take some time before she permanently settled

¹²¹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 73.

¹²² *Ibid.*

abroad. This new country was “很悶 (*so boring*),” she said, so she went back home to Hong Kong after a few months. But after realizing how traveling back and forth would impact the stability of her son’s education, she made her way back to Chinatown. Like Julie, Lee Tai Tai’s family, especially her children, influenced her decisions to leave. Lee Tai Tai remembers life in Hong Kong as nice. Both she and her husband had held decent jobs. After graduating from school at 17, she had worked as a kindergarten teacher until her thirties, while her husband worked as an accountant. Yet, in 1983, Lee Tai Tai immigrated to Los Angeles. “香港全部唔使親戚拉 (*There were no more relatives in Hong Kong*),” she says. “全部是過來. (*Everyone came over here.*)” In retrospect, she believes her son and daughter might not have gone to college if they had not come to the United States. Even though they are older now, in their thirties and forties, she continues to worry about their futures. As an immigrant mother, she expends emotional labor hoping that they’ll be more socioeconomically successful than her and her husband.

The seniors’ experiences with both wage-paid labor and Chinatown’s informal economy reflect issues related to gender, class, and age. Working-class residents in neighborhood commonly found work in restaurants, garment factories, and caretaking, often with the help of their social networks. In contrast to her husband, who initially could only find work within restaurants — which made him dislike immigrating to the United States — Lee Tai Tai held various jobs in Chinatown. “我以前做工是 Spring 街同 Ord 街. 海城餐館對面. 我做到一九八零幾年. (*Back then, I worked [in a video store] on Spring and Ord that was across from CBS Restaurant. I worked until 1980 something.*)” After it closed down, she, like many of Chinatown’s working-class immigrants, found herself in the informal economy of the garment

industry. “我去車衫. 在家車車十幾年. (*I worked as a seamstress. I sewed clothes at home for 10 or so years.*)”

Both in the past and present, Asian immigrant women have constituted a significant portion of garment workers.¹²³ They have turned to this industry because it is one of few job opportunities available to those who speak limited English and have minimal professional skills recognized by U.S. employers. Los Angeles is the center of the garment manufacturing industry in the nation, totaling 510,900 workers in 2014.¹²⁴ The labor force of cut-and-sew workers is largely made up of women (60%) and immigrants (71%, of whom 40% are Latinx and 24% are Asian).¹²⁵ While this industry has provided working-class immigrants easy entry to employment in the city’s service-sector economy, it has also been highly exploitative, especially towards women. Working within an already exploitative corporate contracting system, Asian men working as garment contractors for larger manufacturers have historically exploited the labor of Asian immigrant women in order to sustain business in the face of competition.¹²⁶ Workers are often paid low wages and forced into poor working conditions, the impacts of which can manifest in poor health. Pauline and Teochew Auntie sewed clothes before working at Castelar Elementary School and as a street vendor, respectively. However, they both stopped after the laborious tasks negatively impacted their health. Pauline’s eyesight began to decline, while Teochew Auntie’s leg started to hurt. “*You can work when you’re young,*” according to Teochew

¹²³ Ibid., 85-86.

¹²⁴ Tiffany Hsu, “Los Angeles is largest manufacturing center in U.S., government says,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 2014, accessed May 2, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-los-angeles-manufacturing-20140829-story.html>.

¹²⁵ Janna Shaddock-Hernández, Zacil Pech, Mar Martinez, Marissa Nuncio, “Dirty Threads, Dangerous Factories: Health and Safety in Los Angeles’ Fashion Industry,” Garment Worker Center, UCLA Labor Center, UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program, (Los Angeles, 2016), 9.

¹²⁶ Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men*, 85-86.

Auntie, alluding to both the social barriers to and physical demands of labor made more difficult by old age. Tam Gong Gong, who taught calligraphy to youth back in China, and his wife also both worked at a garment shop for six and ten years, respectively. But because of his old age, he struggled to find work afterwards. He visited ten or so local restaurants, but no one would hire him. They saw the white in his hair and thought he was too old, so when he became a citizen and was able to receive Supplemental Security Income, he retired.

While Asian immigrant women faced disproportionately gendered disadvantages in the garment industry, their labor also sheds light on their resourcefulness and key roles in sustaining family economies. In the 1970s, low-cost, full-time childcare was a “desperate need” in Chinatown,¹²⁷ particularly for mothers who had to “work to [e]nsure that the family [had] adequate income.” Shortly after immigrating to the United States from Hong Kong in 1971, Mrs. Mar worked at a garment factory formerly located on Chung King Road. It bustled with activity in contrast to its isolation and quietness today. She worked tirelessly, often taking fabric home to sew on the sewing machine she purchased to use on days that the garment factory was closed. Without access to childcare, Mrs. Mar would bring along to work her second daughter, who was not yet old enough to attend school. Her own mother, who would have done the labor of caregiving, hadn’t yet joined her abroad. Exercising agency in the midst of limited resources, Mrs. Mar and other women who lived nearby created their own makeshift daycare. “好多新移民 . 個個帶埋仔女返工. (*There were a lot of new immigrants. Everyone brought children to work*),” she explained. They would let their young children play outside with one another while they worked close by. “我整啲飯. 夠 lunchtime 叫埋佢入嚟食啦. 食咗渠出. Chung King Road 兩頭有車啊. 你有帶, 我有帶. 咁個個細路哥去嗰度啊, 咁自己惊唔見, 有出搵嚇佢啊. (*I*

¹²⁷ “An Experience in Community Work, Chinatown Education Project,” *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America* (UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976), 231.

made food. At lunchtime, I called [my daughter] to come inside to eat. When she finished eating, she went outside to the road. Both ends of Chung King Road has no cars driving through. You bring [your kids], I bring [my kids]. All the kids go over there to play, so if you were scared [the kids] disappeared, you go out there to find them.)” Similarly, in 1974, some mothers and members of the former Chinatown Education Project started Little Friends Community Playgroup¹²⁸ to address the growing need for childcare as women entered the workforce in the neighborhood. Housed in someone’s apartment, it provided full-time childcare service for low-income families.

Domestic work is another form of labor, both paid and unpaid, found in Chinatown’s informal economy. The energy and effort that it requires often fail to be adequately compensated or recognized. Following their time as seamstresses, both Tam Gong Gong’s wife and Lee Tai Tai were caregivers for the elderly. Lee Tai Tai worked in this role before retiring 8-10 years ago. It demanded much physical and emotional labor and provided minimal pay, yet she could identify some benefits. “*很小錢但係我觉得很方便也是是 Chinatown. (You were paid little but I felt like it was very convenient. It was also in Chinatown),*” she says. The labor of domestic work is often gendered and done by older women. Having lived in Chinatown for over thirty years, Julie considers herself lucky for never having to work despite having raised her son as a single mother. She did not recognize the labor of motherhood as work, like the forms of wage-paid labor her sisters engaged in. Nowadays, Tam Gong Gong spends a significant amount of his time taking care of his daughter’s twin babies. His labor as a caregiver for his grandchildren exemplifies the crucial roles that seniors play in sustaining family economies.

A Chinatown for Working-Class Senior Immigrants

¹²⁸ Ibid.

The seniors enjoy living in Chinatown because of the accessibility of various businesses, healthcare services, and community-based institutions. Similar to Pauline, Lee Tai Tai thinks that “唐人街非常方便啊. (*Chinatown is very convenient.*)” “唐人街其實真的不錯. 唔是很大, 很集中. 所以我可以行路. (*Chinatown is really great. It's not too big. It's very concentrated, so I can walk around.*)” For groceries, Tam Gong Gong, Julie, and Pauline walk to Ai Hoa Supermarket or one of the small grocery stands on Ord and Broadway. Pauline can't walk for long periods of time, so she likes that she can simply walk out her door and shop anywhere in Chinatown. To her, living here does not require you to drive compared to Monterey Park, a neighboring suburb with a significant Chinese American community (see figure 18). Chinatown's accessibility also benefits Julie who has limited mobility with her legs. She enjoys learning new things and often attends workshops and meetings held in the community.

Lee Tai Tai sees Chinatown as a supportive, comfortable neighborhood to live in because it has spaces that are family-oriented and culturally-tailored to immigrants and their multigenerational households such as hers. “我喜歡住呢度. (*I like living here.*)” The neighborhood “全部乜都有 (*has everything*)”: a 公園 (park), 學校 (elementary school), 幼兒園 (nursery) and 成人日間保健中心 (adult daycare), 醫生 (doctors), 鋪頭乜都有 (all kinds of businesses), 餐廳乜的餐廳都有 (all kinds of restaurants), and 華埠服務中心 (Chinatown Service Center). These places are accessible and welcoming to someone like Lee Tai Tai.

As a multiethnic enclave, Chinatown provides its population of ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian immigrants a sense of familiarity and belonging. These immigrants' concentration in Chinatown portrays their capacity to build social networks and spaces where they can gather and connect with one another through shared languages and experiences. Apartments, shops, restaurants, and associations are all located in close reach of one another.

When Tam Gong Gong and his wife immigrated to the United States in 2003, they first lived with their daughter in Orange County. But they moved to Chinatown not too long after to be around other Chinese, particularly Toisan-speaking, immigrants with whom they could talk. This speaks to their agency as working-class immigrants to seek out community, social and physical spaces where they feel supported. The neighborhood has helped them develop social capital through their network of neighbors with whom they socialize. Similarly, Julie enjoys living in Chinatown because she knows many people. She often says hi to other Cantonese-speaking residents that she recognizes on the streets, and although she doesn't always remember their names, knowing she can communicate with them provides her a sense of comfort.

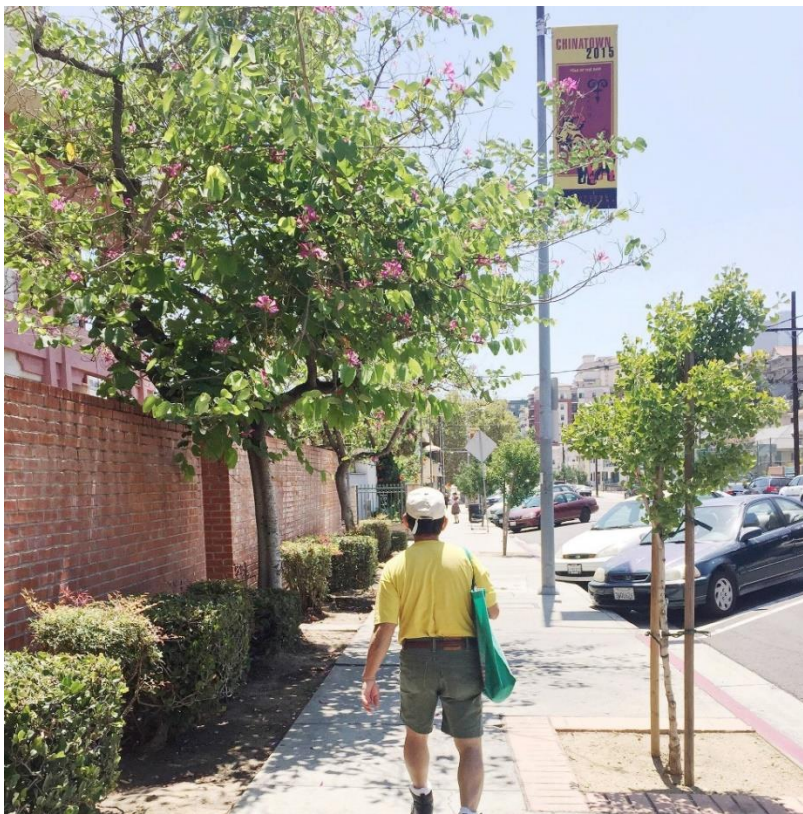


Figure 18 Sunday Walks in Chinatown

Friendship in Old Age

“洲太 (*Chau Tai/Auntie Chau*)!” the aunties just finishing their lunch called out to Pauline as they walked past our table. Peter, Pauline, and I happened to be sitting near the entrance of Golden Dragon. Throughout our lunch, people who knew Pauline would come to greet her. Everyone seemed to know her, from the aunties who lived in the neighborhood to the waitresses pushing around carts full of *dim sum*, small bite-sized portions of Chinese food served with tea typically for breakfast and lunch. Just minutes before we had arrived at the restaurant, she and I stopped several times on the streets to greet her acquaintances such as an auntie selling fortune cookies and produce on Broadway. “你很 popular! (*You're very popular!*)” I tell her whenever we walk around Chinatown together and she runs into friends. “Yes, I am,” she'll exclaim matter-of-factly. “大家你同我傾計, 我同你傾計. 有開心啊. 樣樣都要 make friend 啊 嚟. (*Everyone — you talk with me, I talk with you. It makes me happy. We need to all make friends.*)” During the Lunar New Year, she says, she sees so many friends on the streets that if she keeps saying happy new year to everyone she'll run out of saliva! A friend advised her to audio record herself so can play this greeting instead.

Spaces such as restaurants, public streets, and gardens help to create and sustain relationships that make up the social networks of seniors in the community. Having lived in Chinatown for many years, both Pauline and Peter have developed social networks that reflect their shared values and beliefs in old age. Their own friendship is one that speaks to the ways the neighborhood's landscape allow for social interactions among the significant ethnic Chinese immigrant population. They both know each other because Pauline is actively involved in a regional association¹²⁹ that happens to be located below the apartment where Peter lives. She

¹²⁹ There are multiple mahjong tables scattered throughout the association's communal room. At one end sits a shrine of Dr. Sun Yat Sen. In the middle, people surround a table to play a game of mahjong. Pauline walks in ahead of me and announces to the room of ten or so older aunties and uncles “Hello everybody! This is my friend.”

visits the space throughout the week to attend meetings and play *mahjong* with other members (see figure 19). Pauline is bold and outspoken, while Peter is humble. Their personalities differ from each other, but they share values rooted in compassion and mutual aid. Both find happiness in socializing and helping others. Emphasizing the importance of having a friendly demeanor, Pauline says “做人要有 friendly, 有朋友. 做人, 我鍾意交朋友. (*To be a person, you need to be friendly. As a person, I like to make friends.*)” “Smile!” she advised. “*You should smile instead of covering your face,*” her face broke into a smile, then a somber expression that she covered with her hands, and then a smile again. “Smile 有健康. (*Smiling is good for health.*)”

At old age, you need friends or you’ll be lonely, they tell me once over plates of Cantonese comfort food at the 茶餐廳 (Hong-Kong style diner) 香港美食坊 (J&K Hong Kong Cuisine), a longstanding restaurant at Far East Plaza (see figure 20). Cantonese shows play on the television in the background, while other seniors chat with friends and family at the tables around us. It is one of Peter’s, in addition to Lee Tai Tai, Pauline, and Julie’s, favorite restaurants. He enjoys eating their 海鮮粥 (seafood congee) and 水餃 (dumplings). “很平 (*It’s very inexpensive*),” Lee Tai Tai says (see figure 21). The seniors also frequent banquet-style Chinese restaurants such as CBS Seafood Restaurant, Regent Inn, Full House Seafood Restaurant, and Fortune Gourmet Kitchen. Where they enjoy eating reflects their taste preferences, in addition to the accessibility of different physical and social spaces.

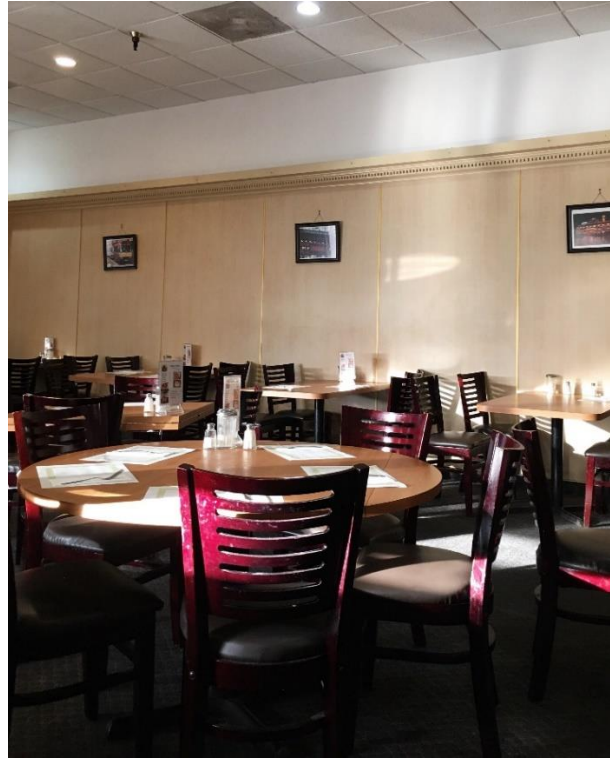
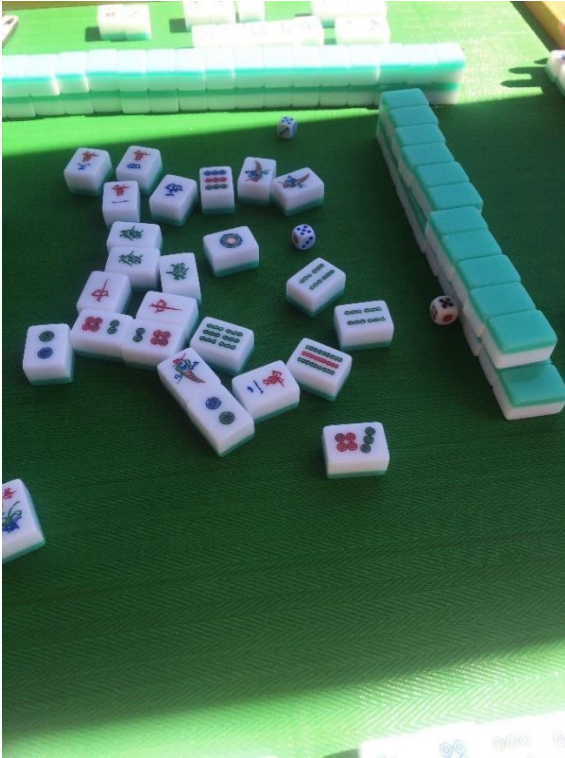


Figure 19 and 20 Socializing: Mahjong and Lunch at J&K Hong Kong Cuisine

Gentrification's restructuring of Chinatown is evident when looking at the neighborhood's food landscape. On the days that Howlin' Ray's is open, Far East Plaza sees crowds of young and middle-aged individuals waiting in lines that stretch outside the restaurant's doors to fill the plaza. To taste this trending food, the wait can be between two to four hours. Julie, Pauline, and Mrs. Mar wonder why people would wait that long for chicken. With that amount of time, they could do so much shopping instead. Longtime residents and seniors are outnumbered by the people waiting to eat at Howlin' Ray's, Chego, Lasa, or Baohaus. There seem to be fewer of them walking around the plaza nowadays, especially with the closure of Wing Hop Fung in early 2016. Opened in the 1980s, the two-floor herbal shop was a neighborhood cultural staple that served both Asian immigrant and non-Asian residents and visitors. A counter for Chinese traditional medicine sat on the first floor, while barrels of teas, seeds, and delicacies lined much of the store. Home goods and snacks could be found upstairs.

Outside the entrance stood a bright red counter where an older Chinese man would collect outside bags from customers before letting them go inside. They would be given a token which they could exchange for their bag afterwards. I remember seeing him when I accompanied my auntie to go shopping as a child. Years later, as the store was getting ready to close, I saw an elderly man, perhaps the same one, standing there greeting people.

In a gentrifying neighborhood, daily decisions on what to eat and what not to eat work to preserve and advance cultural identities and membership among communities of color.¹³⁰ When Tam Gong Gong first moved to Chinatown, there were more places to go to such as Wing Hop Fung. “*As places are closing and new places are opening,*” he says, “*things are getting more expensive.*” He has never gone to any of the new restaurants and businesses. He doesn’t go out to eat much because of his limited fixed income and simply prefers to buy produce at the local markets in Chinatown to bring home and cook. But when he does go out to eat, it’s at one of Chinatown’s longstanding traditional Cantonese restaurants. A time for socializing, he’ll eat dim sum with friends at Golden Dragon (see figure 22). “一個月咧最多是一次半次. 冇好多. (*You can eat there at most once every month or two. You can’t go a lot.*)” he says, speaking to how expensive it can still get for low-income individuals to eat there. During a conversation with Pauline and Wong Baak, who used to travel from City Terrace to Chinatown to sell his garden’s harvest as a street vendor, Wong Baak mentions to us that he also enjoys eating at Golden Dragon. Pauline does too but is quick to say that if the three of us are to eat there, it’d cost a lot. “*We can just eat cheaper at some place like Philippe’s,*” a local restaurant where she has morning coffee every day, “*and share a sandwich,*” she says in her sassy matter-of-fact way. Wong Baak notes that 海城 (CBS Seafood Restaurant) has also gotten more expensive over the

¹³⁰ Havlik, “Eating in Urban Frontiers,” 17.

years. “It’s \$7 to \$8 for a plate of chicken wings.” For these seniors, thoughts of money are weighed against thoughts of enjoyment and old age. After some reflection, Pauline goes on to say, “你點知幾時有得食, 所以食住先. (*You never know if it’ll be your last meal, so you should eat.*)”

When we go out for lunch together, Peter always insists on paying for our meals. He’ll wave off Kenny, another young organizer in Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, and me when we respectfully refuse out of a common social practice to decline when elders give gifts of any kind. We offer to pay instead, aware of the fixed monthly incomes of working-class residents in the neighborhood. I often wonder how much a meal for four really costs for Peter who has retired. But he assures us that it’s not a big deal, that he knows how to manage what money he has. This is one of many ways he takes care of his friends. It is an action that comes with deep gratitude, and it brings him joy.



Figure 21 and 22 Let's Eat! Hong Kong Diner and Golden Dragon Dim Sum

In addition to caring for friends through food, Pauline and Peter both think beyond their own immediate needs and issues by supporting low-income residents by providing tenant rights resources and showing solidarity through direct actions. One late afternoon while we were walking home from one of our lunches together, Pauline remembered seeing someone a few months ago wear a T-shirt with the words “creating stronger communities together.” Nodding her head in agreement, she emphasized to Peter and me, “唔使 money, 使 friendly. (*You don't need money. You need to be friendly.*)” Valuing meaningful reciprocal relationships more than financial wealth, thus placing people over profits, comes directly in opposition to capitalism. This belief, which the site of gardens can help sustain, informs a framework that could be transformative in shaping how cities such as Chinatown are built and how people exist in relation to one another. It speaks to a politics that is anti-capitalist. Differing vastly from the unaffordable housing, increased commodification of land, and proliferation of socioeconomic inequities that form the vision of neoliberal development practices, it speaks to a vision of Chinatown that can look like equitable development, community ownership of space, and collective well-being.

Critiques and Visions of the Neighborhood

The seniors' experiences living and working in Chinatown provide a complex, multidimensional narrative of the neighborhood. Although Chinatown provides them comfort and a sense of belonging as ethnic Chinese immigrants, they believe it can better support working-class seniors and families. Going beyond merely identifying problems of discomfort or annoyance, their critiques help shape a collective vision of the neighborhood. To voice their critiques and desires speaks to their agency to demand a better quality of life for not only themselves but others in the community. It points to their right to the city.

Shopping for Groceries

The seniors enjoy living in Chinatown because of the convenient access to cultural goods and services, but they acknowledge a need for increased affordability and availability. The seniors frequent Chinatown's small food retailers: Lee Tai Tai buys her poultry at a nearby chicken place and Tam Gong Gong buys fruits and vegetables from grocery stands at one corner of Ord and Broadway. However, they also often travel out of the neighborhood for cheaper and fresher produce, pointing to a need for better access to affordable quality produce in Chinatown. Lee Tai Tai, Julie, Pauline, and Tam Gong Gong all shop at Ai Hoa Market, the neighborhood's largest longstanding family-owned grocery store (see figure 23). It is located only blocks from where each of them lives. Julie hopes there will be more markets with a better selection. Ai Hoa sells common Chinese and Southeast Asian foods, but it is small and sometimes not as affordable as other places such as Food 4 Less, to which she now commutes, or Super King, a market carrying foods that cater to various ethnic groups such as the local Latinx and Asian population.

Seniors can often be seen waiting at the bus stop, shopping strollers in hand, so that they can make the trip down Hill Street towards Super King (see figure 24). According to Lee Tai Tai, it's cheaper. Tam Gong Gong believes this is the case because Chinatown's grocery stores pay so much towards commercial rent that they cannot afford to decrease their prices. Compared to the supermarket chain Super King, the much smaller Ai Hoa has less financial assets. This makes it more vulnerable to displacement in the face of downtown developers. In April 2018, Tom Gilmore closed escrow, completing the process of purchasing the property where Ai Hoa and the next-door immigrant-owned photo studio, Cambodian restaurant, and boutique are located. A few years prior, he acquired adjacent property on the same block. Community members fear that Gilmore will displace the existing businesses to replace them with a hotel.

Down the street, the Best Western Plus Dragon Gate Inn’s plans for expansion are forcing several businesses in the plaza, including the longtime Fong’s gift shop — formerly located at Chung King Road — to close down this spring. As some of the working-class community’s sources of food, the markets and restaurants, are threatened with displacement, the presence of gardens and street vendors become more significant. To fight for their continued existence is to fight for the sustenance they provide to community members in the form of food and social, cultural, and economic assets.



Figure 23 and 24 Grocery Shopping: Ai Hoa Supermarket and Waiting at Bus Stops

From Healthcare Services to Community Health

While Chinatown faces pressures from neoliberal economic development, which is inequitable by nature, and residents face displacement, the neighborhood’s commercial landscape also faces change. The closure of Pacific Medical Alliance Center (PAMC), the neighborhood’s only hospital, left many community members both fearful and angry. A few

weeks prior, a single piece of paper taped on the hospital's front door read in only English: "Effective Thursday, November 30, 2017, Pacific Alliance Medical Center will be closed. The number of employees [a]ffected is 638."¹³¹ It came from the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors and listed a few facilities downtown that provided in-patient emergency care. For many residents who relied on this 157-year-old institution, this was their only notice of the abrupt closure. Part of the neoliberal state's history of disinvesting in and dismantling programs that serve poor communities of color, PAMC's lack of accountability disregards the needs of its patients and employees.

The collective sentiment of residents and local organizations in Chinatown regarding the hospital closure is one of fear and anger.¹³² Both Julie and Lee Tai Tai emphasize the importance of having a hospital in the neighborhood: "希望醫院返到. (*I hope the hospital will return.*)" They, like many Chinese-speaking seniors, relied on PAMC for their in-language healthcare services. For residents like Lee Tai Tai, the closure is an inconvenience, since they can access emergency healthcare at the hospital downtown. However, for other residents, especially those who have limited mobility and are differently abled, it is more than an inconvenience but a significant loss. Now that it is closed, Julie will have to go to a hospital in San Gabriel Valley for similar culturally competent healthcare. Distance, language barriers, and high costs concern Julie greatly. If there is an emergency, she says, calling 911 is difficult because she doesn't understand the English recording. Her family members live too far, and she doesn't trust calling a taxi,

¹³¹ An image of the notice can be found on Chinatown Community for Equitable Development's Facebook page: www.facebook.com/ccedla.

¹³² Frank Shyong, "After 157 years in Chinatown, Los Angeles' oldest hospital shuts its doors," Los Angeles Times, December 18, 2017, accessed April 1, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-chinatown-hospital-closes-20171218-story.html>.

especially at the middle of the night. Living in Chinatown is nice except that, with the loss of the hospital, she now worries what will happen if she falls ill.

Following the closure, the French Benevolent Society that owns the property held a secretive bidding process for the land. As of April 2017, community members have been waiting to find out whether or not one bidder, the Allied Pacific physicians group, will be able to purchase the land and open a much needed 24-hour urgent care facility and health center. The hospital's closure cannot be separated from the gentrification of the neighborhood. It significantly impacts the future of Chinatown, influencing its changing landscape of development. According to Dr. Paul Chu, "The hospital's closure... has already had a negative effect on the area."¹³³ He and other physicians who work in Chinatown note that "about a dozen different medical professionals have closed up their practices, forcing seniors to travel farther to places such as Monterey Park to get medical help in their own languages," particularly various dialects of Chinese. The closure of longstanding institutions rather than the preservation or improvement of them highlights even more the need to fight for resources and development that are oriented around the aging population, affordability, and community health.

Skyrocketing Rents to Homelessness: The Need for Affordable Housing

Without creating protections for existing residents or ensuring low-income affordability, simply building more housing as a solution to California's affordable housing crisis further perpetuates inequities by driving displacement or excluding working-class — and even middle-class — people of color. Julie knows people whose landlords have offered them money to move out. Their firm belief that the landlords will rent out their apartments to new tenants at higher

¹³³ Frank Shyong, "Owners solicit bids for now-shuttered Chinatown hospital site; one group proposes an urgent care center," Los Angeles Times, February 18, 2018, accessed April 9, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-chinatown-hospital-bid-20180214-story.html>.

costs is not unfounded. Old apartments throughout the neighborhood can be seen being renovated for new, often younger and whiter tenants, to rent at significantly higher amounts compared to their older neighbors and the former tenants who were evicted or displaced. Chinatown's new apartments, Lee Tai Tai exclaims, are too expensive. “我哋住唔起. 很貴租. (*We can't live there. The rent is too high.*)” Even if new housing developments set aside a small percentage of affordable housing units, such as in the case of Blossom Plaza Apartments (see figure 25), they are not enough to meet the high need. “嗰度起個時候, 政府要佢拿五十個 unit 出俾啲啲 low-income 的人住. 但係我識得啲啲人. 有一個受到佢嗰度. (*During the time it was being built, the government wanted them to take out 50¹³⁴ units to give to low-income people to live in. But I know people [who applied]. No one was able to get it.*)” “五千個人 (5,000 people)”¹³⁵ applied but only “五十個人 (50 people)” got it, she emphasizes. With such a high demand for so little available units, “是有機會 (*there's no chance*)” that many low-income residents will be able to live there.

¹³⁴ Blossom Plaza actually has 53 units set aside as affordable. See Eddie Kim, “When It Comes to Affordable Housing, for a Lucky Few, the Price Is Right,” June 1, 2018, http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/when-it-comes-to-affordable-housing-for-a-lucky-few/article_c0b81796-1389-11e5-9c37-13b8e8a27071.html.

¹³⁵ Various anecdotal sources report different numbers, all of which range in the thousands. At a board meeting held by Chinatown Business Improvement District in 2016, it was said that over 9,000 applications for the affordable housing units at Blossom Plaza were passed out. A little over 2,300 applications were received in return.



Figure 25 Luxury: Blossom Plaza Apartments

At the same time that new apartments are financially inaccessible to working-class residents, the existing stock of housing is increasingly becoming much more expensive. “One bedroom 要九百六十文, 很貴租. (*One bedroom costs \$960. The rent is very high*),” Lee Tai Tai says. Near where she lives, Julie says there are one-bedroom apartments with rents starting at \$1500, which is only a few hundred dollars away from those at Blossom Plaza or Jia Apartments. Even housing meant to be affordable is still too expensive, according to Lee Tai Tai, who has a friend who lives at Grand Plaza Senior Apartments. It is one of 20 developments in Chinatown protected with various federal and state land use covenants that require setting aside a number of units as affordable for a set period of years. “Grand 街嗰度, low-income 嗰啲咧... 你是 low-income 都要八八六十蚊, 一個房. (*Over there on Grand Ave at those low-income [apartments]... you’re low-income but still need to pay \$886 for one bedroom.*)”

What Los Angeles considers affordable for housing is not affordable enough for Chinatown residents. Based on federal income limits, levels of affordability are calculated based on certain percentages of area median income (AMI); Los Angeles county's median family income is \$69,300 for 2018.¹³⁶ To be eligible for units with these affordable housing thresholds, residents must have incomes considered “low” (80% of AMI), “very low” (50% of AMI), and “extremely low” (30%/50% of very low-income limit). A significant number of Chinatown residents have incomes that fall far below what is considered extremely low-income. If these covenants expire without extensions, the neighborhood's affordable housing stock will decrease, worsening the already significant housing crisis.

In the United States, long-term income inequality is growing.¹³⁷ While the nation has experienced economic growth, Julie observes that socioeconomic benefits have not been distributed equitably. Those who need it the most are still struggling. “有經濟唔好是難搵嘢做啊。有啲租咁貴，搵到唔夠俾租，所以是很困难。 (*We have a bad economy. It's hard to find work. With the rent so high, you won't have enough to pay for it even if you find a job. That's why it's very financially difficult.*)”

Following the 2008 economic recession, the rise in housing costs has put disproportionate pressure on the poorest residents in Los Angeles.¹³⁸ Without more low-income housing, Julie notes, there will be more issues with homelessness. She points to the growing number of homeless encampments near the 101 freeway that cuts through Chinatown and downtown. They

¹³⁶ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “FY 2018 Income Limits Summary” for Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA HUD Metro FMR Area, *FY Income Limits Documentation System*, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2018/2018summary.odn>.

¹³⁷ “The State of the Nation's Housing 2017,” 13-18.

¹³⁸ Alastair Gee, “America's homeless population rises for the first time since the Great Recession,” *The Guardian*, December 6, 2017, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/05/america-homeless-population-2017-official-count-crisis>

are part of the large homeless community in Los Angeles that increased from 32,000 in 2012 to 55,000 in 2018, a tremendous growth of 75%.¹³⁹ “你睇個個 freeway 口, 幾多啲 homeless. 幾慘! 很慘啊! 屋太貴啊嚟! (*Look at the freeway entrance, there are so many homeless. It's very tragic! Rent is too expensive!*)” Nationwide, rising homelessness is occurring at the same time as simultaneous growth in poverty and an affordable housing crisis. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of people living below the federal poverty line increased exponentially from 33.8 million to 47.7 million.¹⁴⁰ Rents are increasing, while the availability of affordable housing decreases. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of rental units costing less than \$800 declined by 261,000, while the number renting for \$2,000 or more increased by 1.5 million.¹⁴¹ In 2015, there were only 35 rental units in adequate condition and not already occupied that were affordable for every 100 extremely low-income renters.¹⁴² “最好给一點低收入啦. 係嗎? (*It would be best to give some [housing] to low-income people. Right?*)” Julie says. “如果唔係咧, 第日多啲個 homeless. (*If we don't, there will be more homeless in the future.*)”

Gentrification worsens the loss of housing, healthcare, and social services serving poor and working-class communities of color that come from disinvestment or dismantlement. The amount of available quality resources in Chinatown are not enough to meet increasing needs. While accountability for inequity should be placed on the state and wealthy elite, a function of neoliberalism is one of disavowal. Thus, vulnerable populations who are impacted the most increasingly feel pitted against each other. While Julie sees the lack of affordable housing and

¹³⁹ Gale Holland, “L.A.'s homelessness surged 75% in six years. Here's why the crisis has been decades in the making,” Los Angeles Times, February 1, 2018, accessed April 14, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-homeless-how-we-got-here-20180201-story.html>.

¹⁴⁰ “The State of the Nation’s Housing 2017,” 17.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴² Ibid., 5.

fair, well-paying jobs as driving factors for homelessness, Lee Tai Tai has a different perception of the homeless community. She says she sees them and doesn't feel safe or comfortable. This fear speaks to the vulnerability she feels as an older woman; at the same time, it reveals how racism and classism manifest in urban neighborhoods. While she acknowledges that “有啲人他想搵唔到工, 所以要做乞兒啊. (*there are those who can't find work, so they have to become beggars*),” she cites individual laziness as a reason for homelessness: “有這是唔做工. (*There are those who don't want to work.*)” Shared by some residents, Lee Tai Tai's political analysis is complicated and, sometimes, contradictory. She falls complicit to the criminalization of homelessness, yet she observes that there's no crime in Chinatown. She feels safe around the Chinatown Business Improvement District's private security. Although they provide some residents a sense of safety, they alongside the Los Angeles Police Department, ultimately create an environment of fear and hostility through their policing of the homeless and informal street vendors and artists. Their active roles in the violent prison industrial complex exacerbates socioeconomic inequities. The seniors' contrasting perceptions of other racialized groups, such as the homeless community, illustrate the need for increased political education and coalitional organizing. To create a truly sustainable and equitable Chinatown requires confronting the ways we uphold systems of oppression.

Actualizing Visions of Chinatown: Discourse and Material Impacts

To envision a Chinatown that is equitable requires centering the working-class and their right to the city, rather than the desires of the wealthy elite and individuals with disproportionate decision-making power over what happens to the neighborhood. Media coverage of Chinatown

is saturated with discourse that acclaims George Yu as a “visionary.”¹⁴³ He is “a leader who genuinely cares about Chinatown,” according to former Pok Pok chef Andy Ricker.¹⁴⁴ However, the influx of inequitable development, increased harassment of community members by Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID) and landlords, and the growing displacement of people and spaces blatantly show how Chinatown as a working-class immigrant neighborhood is not cared for by people like Yu. He, alongside city officials and developers who support neoliberal economic development, work in tandem to sustain an inherently inequitable system. Yet, Yu is presented as “clearly not doing it for the rent money.”¹⁴⁵ Ricker elaborates, “[He] believes that the future of Chinatown is young people coming in and making a stand.”¹⁴⁶ As a celebrated white man who profits from cooking Thai cuisine, Ricker benefits from this particular vision of Chinatown, although his two restaurants there closed a few years prior. Yu is not representative of the working-class seniors, families, and tenants who make up Chinatown, despite his staking a claim to knowing what is best. “Because I’ve been here for so long I think I have a good idea of the needs of the community. [The] first priority is still clean and safe, and then all the other good things will follow.”¹⁴⁷ While issues of habitability and safety can be of real concern in Chinatown, BID’s major role in harassment points to problematic notions of cleanliness and safety that target poor people of color. Yu fails to prioritize the demands of residents and community members for stable affordable housing, culturally competent healthcare, and relevant businesses.

¹⁴³ Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven.”

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Trinh, “The Past, Present, and Future of Chinatown’s Changing Culinary Landscape.”

The future of Chinatown as a working-class multiethnic enclave is one that cares for the community's poor, elderly, and immigrants. “我希望唐人街給多點低收入啊. (*I hope Chinatown gives more [housing to] low-income people*),” Julie says. Similarly, Pauline hopes for more housing for seniors. “因為点解咧? (*Why?*)” Julie asks in regard to these wishes for the community. “因為呢道很多低收入啊, 嗰啲伯公公婆婆啊, 嗰啲外来人. 佢唔識英文啊. (*Because there's a lot of low-income people, seniors, and immigrants here who don't know English.*)” She and the other seniors continually emphasize that “唐人街很貴租啊! (*Chinatown's rent is very high!*)” However, developers continue to propose residential and commercial projects where community needs, such as truly affordable housing, are an afterthought. The state is accountable, because these projects come into fruition when the city's department of planning expedites¹⁴⁸ and approves urban planning processes that serve private interests. City planning has come to resemble entrepreneurial agents that seek to maximize growth, efficiency and accumulation.¹⁴⁹ Relying on neoliberal state and market processes to shape neighborhoods is insufficient in ensuring equitable control over the production of spaces. There is a great need to critically engage with working-class immigrant residents to center their right to the city. “希望如果第日唐人街是起啲新屋啊, 新樓啊. 希望他给一啲低收入入住. (*I hope that if Chinatown builds new housing and new buildings in the future — I hope they let some low-income people live there*),” Julie emphasizes. “因為咁樣好啲了. (*Because — this way things would be better.*)”

¹⁴⁸ Planning and Land Use Management Committee, “Motion: HOUSE LA: Expanding City Planning's Expedited Processing Section (EPS),” City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning, October 21, 2015, accessed May 3, 2018, http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlinedocs/2015/15-1251_mot_10-21-2015.pdf.

¹⁴⁹ Oren Yiftachel, “Theoretical Notes On ‘Gray Cities’: The Coming of Urban Apartheid?” (Planning Theory, 2009), 92.

This vision is grounded in a history of working-class resistance in Chinatown. While “Chinatown 有很多 poor people. (*Chinatown has a lot of poor people*),” it is also abundant in the community cultural wealth of the neighborhood’s social networks, cultural practices, informal economies, and working-class knowledge. To channel this wealth into transformative power, it is imperative to organize collectively. “Get together 有 power 啊嚟. (*We have power when we get together*),” Pauline says. “一個東一個西, 點搵啲 power 出嚟? (*If we’re spread apart, how can we have power?*)”

Mrs. Mar emphasizes this need to organize and to hold the state accountable to the working-class, “*If we don’t demand for it, they won’t give it to us.*” In 1978, Mrs. Mar moved from working at the garment factory to running her own newspaper stand, which community members mobilized to help her obtain. Here she found subtle but powerful ways to put her politics into action. While selling newspapers, she also handed out flyers about rallies and meetings that her former organization, the all-volunteer Los Angeles chapter of Asian Americans for Equality,¹⁵⁰ organized. “爭取埋啲啲街坊啲啲福利啊. (*We fought for the well-being of the neighborhood.*)” In the late 1970s, Chinatown did not have a library, nurseries, or senior housing. Mrs. Mar mobilized immigrant residents to demand the city provide these resources. This included a protest at a public hearing held at the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors building in downtown. An official had told them “呢道我哋食 lunch 啦. 你哋冇啲度啦. 要出去, 我哋鎖門啦. (*We’re going to eat lunch now. You can’t be here. You need to get out. We’re locking the door.*)” However, hundreds of Chinatown residents, alongside allies from the Japanese American community, refused to leave until city officials met their demands for

¹⁵⁰ According to Phyllis Chiu, the Los Angeles chapter of Asian Americans for Equality started after 1975 and was active through the early 1980s.

senior housing, child care facilities, and a service center. They yelled “我哋唔出! 我哋是納稅人 . 等你哋去食返嚟. 我哋再同你講. (*We won't leave! We are taxpayers. We'll wait for you to come back here after eating. We still have things to talk about with you.*)”

Both the act of centering the seniors' narratives and the act of the seniors articulating their hopes help to actualize a collective vision of Chinatown's future. Their hopes are not simply idealistic. They are demands for accountability and community well-being. The process of naming their needs and right to shape their neighborhood influences the actions that manifest in the gardens and the streets, showing that their words have material impact. Mrs. Mar continues to actively organize today, alongside Pauline, Tam Gong Gong, Julie, and Peter, through Chinatown Community for Equitable Development. They participate in monthly meetings for the organization's collective of progressive Chinese senior leaders, the Resident Concern Group.

This space, to a great extent, mirrors what they, and many working-class senior immigrants, such as Lee Tai Tai, Ko Tai, Po Po, Teochew Auntie, Wong Baak, Wong Po Po, Pang Baak, Yu Sook, and Lim Yee already do throughout the community: build deep relationships with neighbors, share resources and information, and envision more housing, markets, and jobs. In the gardens, they grow food and preserve traditional knowledge. In the streets, they play the *erhu*, sell fruits and vegetables, and socialize with friends. They also lead protests against greedy landlords, whom Pauline and Peter emphasize we need to fight and keep accountable, talk with the press about working-class needs in the neighborhood, and outreach to neighbors about tenant rights. The seniors show us that grassroots organizing can take different forms, all of which work together to fuel the larger fight for social justice and a stronger resistance against gentrification in Chinatown.

Conclusion

The Power of Everyday Practice

Gentrification as a manifestation of neoliberalism functions to violently disrupt and displace the livelihoods of those deemed deviant in a system rooted in capitalism and white supremacy. The process of gentrification (re)produces forms of economic development and discourse that are inherently inequitable and unaccountable. Land continues to be rendered as property ripe for real estate speculation and transactional exchange rather than as communal space driven by collectivity and the production of joy. Gentrification perpetuates socioeconomic and health disparities for poor communities of color. It works to physically uproot and exclude working-class people of color, all the while figuratively erasing their narratives and experiences in historical and everyday discourse. In Chinatown, this looks like increased policing, rising evictions of commercial and residential tenants, dismantling of social networks, loss of resources and cultural institutions, and rapid privatization of housing, education, and healthcare.

Working-class senior immigrants hold the power to challenge gentrification in their everyday practice. The social networks, knowledge, cultural practices, and mutual aid they produce in sites, such as those of gardens and street vendors, provide the tools and epistemological frameworks to address the growing affordable housing crisis, widening income gap, and other issues worsened by gentrification. To focus on their community cultural wealth is not to ignore the reality of displacement and poverty happening in their lives, but to highlight their power while also confronting issues of race, class, gender, and capital and holding the state accountable for these injustices. Working-class senior immigrants' foodways are sites of resistance that embody radical potential for fundamental social change in a gentrifying Chinatown.

Contributions and Self-Critique

From the Garden to the Streets is an interdisciplinary community-based study that centers the narratives of working-class immigrants who are the most vulnerable to gentrification in Chinatown but who also hold the most potential to challenge it. The stories of fifteen seniors who live, work, socialize, and/or organize in Chinatown found in these pages add much needed perspectives to historical and contemporary discourse on the neighborhood. Their experiences reflect those of many working-class ethnic Chinese immigrants in Chinatown. However, it is important to note that they are only a handful of a larger community of elderly immigrants who make up the neighborhood. Without a doubt, there is room — and a need — for further engagement with those who are not included here. As much as this thesis calls for self-critique from others, including both drivers of gentrification and community organizers opposing gentrification, it is also open to critique. There is much more research, grassroots organizing, and policymaking to be done to ensure working-class narratives are not only centered but that they add to critical and compassionate conversations and practices devoted to actualizing equity.

This thesis calls attention to how working-class senior immigrants shape Chinatown's physical and social landscape. It offers a critical framework for how the neighborhood should be designed and built to be equitable. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, this research reveals further questions that are important to explore: How do we unpack and challenge the gentrification of working-class communities of color while deeply interrogating settler colonialism? How do the anti-capitalist politics of gardens in Chinatown relate to both indigenous foodways and agricultural resistance in black communities in the United States? How do we analyze the gentrification of Chinatown parallel to the economic growth of the neighboring ethnoburb of San Gabriel Valley and its influx of global capital? How do we

comprehensively critique and address the perpetuation of anti-blackness in Chinese American communities, particularly in relation to their aspirations for whiteness through property? There is abundant opportunity to further develop the study of issues raised in this thesis regarding informality, economic development, foodways, and land across disciplines not limited to comparative race and ethnic studies, urban planning, and public health.

The Future of Chinatown

What realities are possible if we see cities, particularly gentrifying low-income neighborhoods of color, as more than just destinations, profitable properties, or places for the consumption of cold brew, trendy foods, and aesthetic social media photo opportunities—but communities with history, tension, and cultural wealth? As developers, corporations, and local governments aim to restructure communities like Chinatown for the rich at the expense of the poor, we have a responsibility towards working-class people of color who live here. By seeing ourselves as more than just consumers but as active members in a community, we open up grassroots artistic, economic, and political possibilities to challenge the structural and political forces that make cities inequitable.

This thesis calls for both an epistemological and actual shift in decision-making processes surrounding policies, programs, and economic development so that Chinatown's working-class immigrant community is at the forefront. Their collective needs and vision of the neighborhood, rather than affluent self-interests and forces of capital,¹⁵¹ should determine how the neighborhood evolves. As illustrated in this study, the seniors already shape Chinatown's physical and social landscape formally and informally. Rather than imposing their own ideals and desires, urban planners, city officials, developers, and non-profit institutions have much to

¹⁵¹ Simon Parker, *Urban Theory and the Urban Experience: Encountering the City* (London: Routledge, 2003), 126.

learn from these marginalized communities. Developers, art gallery owners, and middle-class entrepreneurs cannot continue commodifying Chinatown's rich history and ethnic Chinese culture in the facades, marketing, and products of their projects and businesses. They also cannot continue building residential and commercial spaces that low-income residents cannot afford and access.

The working-class immigrant community must not only be comprehensively involved in proposals of residential and commercial projects, they must drive decisions about what happens to their neighborhood. Community engagement in current city planning processes are insufficient. Currently, only “owners” and “occupants” located within a 500-foot radius of proposed project sites are notified about meetings and opportunities for public comment¹⁵² despite development impacting the entirety of Chinatown and neighboring communities. Notices and meetings are, by default, in English, despite the neighborhood clearly having a population that primarily speaks languages such as Cantonese, Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Khmer, Teochew, and Toisan. It is unacceptable that developers and the city engage in the bare minimum of what they consider community engagement.

We need to think beyond market-based solutions to the affordable housing crisis and look towards economic models that are anti-capitalist, community-controlled, and equitable. Pauline believes that it is not possible for working-class residents to control what happens in Chinatown because “美國是資本主義. (*America is a capitalist society.*)” She adds, “你有錢, 係行唔通. 有錢, 佢係幫你, 但係佢幫你好小. (*You don't have money, you can't do anything. You have money, [the state] will help you, but they'll help you very little.*)” While pointing to the failures of the state, her comments also demand that we imagine the possibilities that exist outside of

¹⁵² City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning, “RADIUS MAPS REQUIREMENTS & GUIDELINES,” September 15, 2016, https://planning.lacity.org/Forms_Procedures/7826.pdf.

capitalism. We must interrogate the inequity of existing structures of neoliberal economic development and engage in practices that work in favor of working-class communities of color. This includes strengthening policies that protect tenants' rights and implementing universal rent control. It also means redirecting capital, especially capital generated within Chinatown, back into the local economy, infrastructure, and resources of the working-class neighborhood. Individuals, such as the upwardly mobile professionals and creatives, and entities, such as the Chinatown Business Improvement District, need to confront their complicity with neoliberalism and do the labor of identifying practical ways of redistributing financial capital and political power to the working-class.

While the seniors point to needs regarding commercial businesses, such as markets, restaurants, and hospitals, they also emphasize the need for low-income housing and places for communal gatherings. The private and public spaces they envision address the neighborhood's collective needs for affordable, culturally competent nutritious food, healthcare, and housing. Henri Lefebvre argues that the right to the city includes the right "to establish public spaces." These spaces are transformative in imagining and creating equitable neighborhoods for they are "the engine for a new type of sustainable economy, the fulcrum of cultural diversity, and the place where community becomes a force for social change."¹⁵³ With gentrification's hyper-privatization of land, preserving communal spaces becomes more important as a means to ensure working-class people have greater control over the development of their communities. Gardens, such as those belonging to Tam Gong Gong, Pauline, Wong Po Po, Pang Baak, Yu Sook, and Lim Yee, serve as communal spaces where seniors socialize, produce knowledge, and grow

¹⁵³ Robert Gottlieb, *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in The Global City* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), 77.

food. Their hopes, grassroots organizing, and day-to-day lives help shape — and actualize — a vision of an equitable and sustainable Chinatown.

Appendix I: Map of Chinatown (Census Tracts 2060.10, 2071.01, 2071.02, and 2071.03)





李太太 Lee Tai Tai

一九八三來美國. In 1983, I came to America.

我兩個細路仔是香港出世啦. 我的先生的家姐我申請過來. 香港全部唔使親戚啦. 全部是過來.

My two kids were born in Hong Kong. My sister-in-law applied for us to come over. I had no more relatives in Hong Kong. Everyone came here.

chinatown

我喜歡住呢度. I like living here.

我住呢道, 住好耐. 唐人街非常方便啊. 唐人街其實真的不錯. 唔是很大, 很集中. 所以我可以行路. 全部乜都有.

I've lived here for a long time. Chinatown is very convenient. It's not too big and everything is closeby, so I can walk around. It has everything:

公園 Park	華埠服務中心 Chinatown Service Center
醫生 Doctors	乜的餐廳都有 All kinds of restaurants
幼兒園 Nursery	鋪頭乜都有 All kinds of businesses
學校 School	成人日間保健中心 Adult daycare



我以前做工是 Spring 街同 Ord 街. 海城餐館對面. 我做到一九八零幾年. 我去車衫. 在家車車十幾年. 咁之後有人介紹我做服侍老人. 我退休啊. 八年, 十年. 很小錢但係我覺得很方便也是是 Chinatown (唐人街).

Back then, I worked at [a video store on] Spring and Ord across from CBS Restaurant. I worked until 1980 something. Then I worked as a seamstress. I sewed clothes at home for more than 10 years. Afterwards, someone introduced me to work caring for the elderly. I retired 8-10 years ago. I was paid little, but it was very convenient and in Chinatown.

20

很快出啊!

They grow really fast!

是隔離個度同屋, 佢有番薯. 佢個度無地方
咁佢俾個啲種嚟.

The next door neighbor - she had sweet
potato plants. She didn't have space over
there, so she planted it over here.

返回種. 插落去. 問你的媽點得啊.

Go back home and grow it. Plant them into the
ground. You can ask your mom how to do it.

食譜

Recipe

先炒點蒜頭.

Fry some garlic in a pan.

然後放蝦米或腐乳.

Add dried shrimp or fermented bean curd.

然後放番薯葉進去一起炒.

Throw in sweet potato leaves. Cook together.

太鹹拉? 可以放一點點糖來調味.

Too salty? You can add a bit of sugar for taste.



唐人街 Chinatown

I lived here for over 30 years.

唐人街方便. 对我方便, 但係对人唔方便. 泊車唔方便啊. 很麻煩. 同埋冇夜市. 門門舖冇夜市所以生意啲人難做啦.

Chinatown is very convenient. For me, it's convenient. For others, it's inconvenient. Parking cars is inconvenient. It's very troublesome. Also, there's no business at night. Stores are closed so there's no business at night. That's why it's difficult for shop owners to do work.

你睇個個 freeway 口, 幾多嗰啲 homeless. 幾慘! 很慘啊! 屋太貴啊! 有經濟唔好是難搵嘢做啊. 有啲租咁貴, 搵到唔夠俾租, 所以是很困难. 最好给一點低收入入啦. 係嗎? 如果唔係咧, 第日多啲個 homeless.

Look at the freeway entrance, there are so many homeless. It's very tragic! Rent is too expensive! We have a bad economy. It's hard to find work. With the rent so high, you won't have enough to pay for it even if you find a job. That's why it's very financially difficult. It would be best to give some [housing] to low-income people. Right? If we don't, there will be more homeless in the future.

**唐人街很貴
租啊! 一個房,
千五銀啊.**

**Chinatown's
rent is very
high! One
bedroom can
cost \$1,500.**

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