

Philadelphia Chinatown's cultural image construction since the 1960s

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Author Biography

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Abstract

Philadelphia Chinatown, an immigration hub with diverse cultures, is a vibrant ethnic enclave in Pennsylvania. It has a long history of being secluded due to national sentiments as well as persecution and fighting against urban construction projects. Through the analysis of Philadelphia Chinatown's social structure and iconic features, this paper analyzes the Chinatown society's cultural image construction since the 1960s, and further discusses its changing cultural patterns in the American society. It is argued in this paper that: Philadelphia Chinatown, mainly comprised of poor peasants and wealthy merchants in an early stage, is based on commerce; its cultural image was constructed by Orientalism, stemming from both the internal organizations of the community and external society, and took roots on its commercial basis; the Chinese traditions in the Chinatown society are comparatively static, while, on the other hand, the community's culture is infiltrated by American cultures, making connections with indigenous societies.

Keywords: Philadelphia Chinatown; cultural image construction; Orientalism; the 1960s; cultural pattern; sociology of knowledge; PCDC; the Vine Street Expressway

Introduction

Philadelphia Chinatown, with a long history ranging from the mid-late 19th century to the present, is a predominantly Asian American neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Stretching from Arch Street to Vine Street, and from 11th Street to 8th Street, the neighborhood is packed with businesses representing several East Asian cultures, from Cantonese and Vietnamese to Korean and Thai (Visit Philadelphia, n.d.-a). However, this vibrant ethnic enclave located in the city center also has a long history of being secluded from surrounding neighborhoods and fighting against urban renewal projects. The multi-dimensional interactions endowed Chinatown with complex characteristics, making it a unique society in urban Philadelphia. This paper, based on the sociology of knowledge, is going to analyze Philadelphia Chinatown's cultural image construction, on a commercial basis, by the society since the 1960s, with the basis of social structure, and further discuss its changing cultural patterns in American society, through a lens of image collections and public media.

Literature Review

In the literature, there is a dividing line between American Chinatown's commercial functions and cultural roles. Many scholars choose to emphasize one of the two kinds of characters. For example, Lin Yutang (1948) in his *Chinatown Family* describes New York Chinatown as a society, and Jun Liu's (2017) thesis *Philadelphia's Chinatown: An Ethnic Enclave Economy in a Changing Landscape* takes Philadelphia Chinatown as an ethnic enclave economy and a place "revolved around the merchant class." These scholars tend to depict Chinatowns as places doing business and running commercial activities. The commerce is the dominant element. On the other hand, Kathryn E. Wilson (2015) in the work *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Structure* mentions that Philadelphia Chinatown functions within a larger regional geography as an important site of historical and cultural point of origin. From this standpoint, Chinatown's cultural functions are more often emphasized. However, fewer studies have analyzed American Chinatowns from the perspectives of societies as commercial communities also generating and serving cultural functions. One such study, a more comprehensive

evaluation, was conducted by Ching Chao Wu (1928), who, in his work *Chinatowns: A Study of Symbiosis and Assimilation*, perceives Chinatowns as not only business districts but also friendly neighborhoods and overseas Chinese homelands.

Apart from the study of Chinatown itself, some scholars study the process during which people progressively understand others. For instance, according to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman's (1966) classic *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, they believe people will "apprehend others by means of typificatory schemes in the face-to-face situation," and they also contend that "The typifications of social interaction become progressively anonymous the further away they are from the face-to-face situation". This means that when societies are secluded, the way people understand other groups may be biased toward giving them a general description.

In light of Ching Chao Wu, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckman's studies, this research, based on the sociology of knowledge, aims to conduct a case study on Philadelphia Chinatown, analyzing its cultural image construction on a commercial basis and further discussing its changing cultural patterns in American society. Considering that urban project conflicts and huge social changes mainly took place after the 1960s, this paper engages the time frame since this period.

1. Philadelphia Chinatown's social structure

1.1 The organization process

Philadelphia Chinatown's organization is always under a dynamic mechanism, showing a strong sense of fluidity. Thus, its society is also facing changes. If we want to sort out Philadelphia Chinatown's social structure, then we have to first examine its development history. Only from historical events can we clarify the whole organization's advancement. The whole process can be roughly divided into three parts: the first spans from 1870 to 1940, the second is from 1940 to 1990, and the last one starts from 1990 to present. Below, the three stages will be analyzed respectively (Wilson, 2015).

1.1.1 The period of 1870-1940

The specific origin of Philadelphia Chinatown is unclear, but early Chinese immigrants arriving in Philadelphia can be traced back to 1845, a time before the Gold Rush in California. At that time, the only reason most Chinese immigrants came to the United States was to make a fortune and build up family wealth. There were only two groups of people who searched for these opportunities — poor peasants and wealthy merchants. Then came the establishment of churches and Baptist Chinese Christians in the 1850s. Not very soon, due to the completion of the Central Continental Rail Road in 1869 and the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, in order to flee prosecutions and find a safe living environment, more overseas Chinese began to migrate from San Francisco to the central and eastern part of the United States, including Philadelphia. Initially, the Chinese set up laundries to make business, among whom was Lee Fong, who established the first laundry at 913 Race Street. From then on, the number of Chinese immigrants began to surge: by 1870, only 13 Chinese men lived in the city; by 1900, the number increased to 1177, of whom 235 lived in the Chinese community.

During this development process, the first restaurant in Chinatown, Mei-Hsiang Lou, opened on the second floor at the same location as where Lee Fong's laundry was located. There were two main reasons why Chinese immigrants chose to set up laundries and restaurants: the first reason was Chinese men could do better on these jobs than white people, who usually paid more attention to other businesses; and the second reason was, especially for running restaurants, that Chinese cuisines' nature was iconic in the native area, attracting more customers to come and consume. By the 1890s, the 900 block of Race Street had already become the Chinese center in Philadelphia. At this moment in history, the seed of a Chinatown, with lodgings, laundries, restaurants, and churches, started to take root.

A direct factor fostering the formation of the so-called "Chinatown" was the deep hatred toward Chinese men that stemmed from citizens. When Chinese immigrants first came to Philadelphia, they were actually viewed by Philadelphians — and portrayed by newspapers — as strange but industrious workers. "We do not know the actual facts respecting the movements of Chinese emigrants from the Pacific

coast to the Atlantic States," reported the business-minded North American, "but if we may judge by what we see every day in the streets of Philadelphia, it must have been considerable. These Chinese are so common a sight that no notice is taken of them" (Wilson, 2015).

However, the curiosity soon evolved into an open hostility by the 80s and 90s when the population ballooned, and American police started to arrest Chinese workers and raid establishments. The severe national sentiments, combined with cultural barriers together, forced Chinatown to become a place physically and mentally segregated from surrounding societies. Within this separated community, the nature of Asian exclusion, with exemptions for merchants, fostered the establishment of commercial partnerships in a commercial enterprise to claim eligibility for immigration and travel. During this time, for alliance purposes, houses in Philadelphia Chinatown devoted the first floor to restaurants and laundries for businesses, while fulfilled the second and third floors with a variety of functions, from boarding rooms or family living spaces to common gathering spaces for the community. The creation of these public spaces provided Chinatown residents with chances to communicate, which, in turn, strengthened community members' connections and loyalty. In short, the exterior crisis forced Chinese men to set up commercial unity and some public spaces to increase frequent in-depth interactions, and, consequently, the name "Chinatown" started to jump into people's view.

1.1.2 The period of 1940-1990

One of the global events happening during this time was World War II, which served as the turning point of Philadelphia Chinatown development. To be more specific, because of China's allyship when the US entered the war, a more positive image of the Chinese and their contribution to the final victory was engendered. Furthermore, revisions to immigration laws opened up the national gate to the Chinese, allowing them to marry and also bring their families from China. As a result, a more empathetic attitude appeared, and so did the opportunity for citizenship, new immigration, and community growth. When all these things were put together, a transformation from the old "bachelor society" of Chinatown to a totally new society, with new relationships, organizations, and spaces, took place. A large number of Chinese women and children flooded into American society

and Philadelphia Chinatown, and a family-oriented neighborhood began to rise. Apart from the reformation of Chinatown's neighborhood, more religious organizations and corporations responsible for community public affairs were established. The two local churches — Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and School and the Chinese Christian Church and Center (CCC&C), constructed separately in the 1940s and 50s, played a crucial role in providing services, preserving cultures, and improving life quality in the ignored community. They also helped new-coming immigrants as well as Chinese American youth fit into the American societies. Under these new emerging organizations' guidance, the previous commercial-dominant society was transforming into a place incorporated with more cultural elements and, at the same time, committed to community planning. Nevertheless, new threats soon approached Philadelphia Chinatown. Among them were the Vines Street Expressway, the Fashion District, the Pennsylvania Convention Center, a federal prison, a baseball stadium, and a casino.

Shortly after the end of World War II, in 1949, the city for the first time commenced widening Vine Street to facilitate traffic. The street, only one block away from where Chinatown residents lived, was to be greatly expanded from one way to ten lanes. The great harm it would bring was that the whole Chinatown community would be split into two parts, making the school and church on the northern part isolated. This urban project was the first threat to Chinatown society, and the conflicts stemmed from the street's construction would last for several decades. It ignited Chinatown residents' severe anger and stimulated their strong opposition to the urban renewal plan. In response, a non-profit organization, the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), was founded in 1966. Led by Cecilia Moy Yep, a young widow with three small children, residents decided to fight for their homes and community.

On March 27th, 1966, she gathered about 250 community members at the On Leong Merchants Association to discuss how to counter plans proposed by government agencies that would seriously impact the community. Many of these community members went on to found the preservation-focused nonprofit Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) that same year. PCDC later became the organization mainly taking charge of the needs of

urban renewal and affordable housing development in the local community, playing as the coordinator between Chinatown society and outsiders such as the government and companies. Through negotiations between city planners and Chinatown groups led by PCDC, a compromise was finally reached that compressed the Vine Street Expressway and made it a smaller one.

1.1.3 The period since 1990

Cultural constructions and public planning were continuing, but this period of time was still full of arguments and conflicts on urban renewal projects. The main institution responsible for addressing these needs, again, is the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation. In the aftermath of the spanning of the Vine, another urban construction project, the Pennsylvania Convention Center, was approved. But after razing and negotiations, the center compensated PCDC for land resources. Although residents in Chinatown failed to fight off the project, with PCDC's lead, they still made huge progress, trying to minimize the negative influence on the Chinatown community. After the construction of the Convention Center, several plans were proposed, including a plan for The Federal Bureau of Prisons in 1993, the Phillies Stadium in 2000, and the Foxwoods Casino in 2008, but they were all fought off under the perseverance of PCDC and a Chinatown coalition created through its effort.

At the time of this writing, PCDC again is leading the protest against the 76ers' arena. The reasons that community members have kept fighting against these constructions in Philadelphia Chinatown are simple: they are afraid that these urban construction projects will bring too many tourists here, so there would be traffic congestion. Besides, they also fear that the rising rents due to gentrification and severe business competitions will cause great trouble for their commercial lives. It is obvious to see that in this time span, commercial activities are still the first thing to consider in Chinatown. PCDC has been established as an institution that fights to protect economics and business; while other cultural organizations, on the one hand, provide public services to people in need, and, on the other hand, boost tourism with exotic styles.

1.2 The changing patterns

Philadelphia Chinatown was, during the first stage (1870-1940), established after Chinese businesses gathered together, becoming a cohesive commercial services region. Commercial partnerships were strengthened and community connections increased. Businessmen, along with others who were devoted to commercial services, were the dominant part of the Chinatown society. This pattern set the basis for Chinatown's ongoing development. When it came to the second stage (1940-1990), World War II became a turning point for Philadelphia Chinatown, catalyzing more friendly immigration policies toward Chinese people. More residents living in Philadelphia Chinatown started to bring their wives and children to this place, resulting in a huge transformation from a "bachelor society" to a more diversified community. Along with the new demography, more cultural, especially religious organizations flourished. They began to devote themselves to public affairs and protect the whole Chinatown community. These groups became the backbone of the whole society, and they served as a bridge connecting both the inner Chinatown community and the outer American societies.

However, urban construction projects started to bother and threaten the whole society, and the resultant conflicts would keep going until the present. The main controversial project at this period was the Vine Street Expressway, which was planned to be widened. To fight against this project and maintain Chinatown's places, the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Center (PCDC) was established in 1966 to take responsibility for all urban renewal and affordable housing affairs. Through negotiations, a compromise made the street smaller and narrower. The dominant theme during the third stage (since 1990) was fighting off the upcoming urban renewal projects. PCDC also led other protests against other schemes, among which three were successfully resisted and one failed to oppose but compensation was gained. This institution has become the new bridge connecting both sides of the Chinatown society, along with previous cultural and religious groups.

2. Chinatown's social functions

2.1 The immigration hub

In the early years, Philadelphia Chinatown was constructed by Chinese immigrants. It is the first "ethnic neighborhood" in American culture—that is, the first urban landscapes to be identified and commodified as ethnic—and a prototype for later ethnic enclaves and today's destination neighborhoods (Wilson, 2015). After hatred deepened and national sentiments were evoked, from the early Gold Rush period to the later Philadelphia native hostility era, Chinese immigrants gathered in Chinatown to avoid persecution and oppression. Because of these ethnic conflicts, the Chinatown Chinese workers lived in was naturally perceived as an exotic, picturesque urban quarter on the one hand, and a site of racial pollution that had to be policed and surveilled on the other. Their boundaries then were policed and managed through harassment, stigmatization, and surveillance (Wilson, 2015). The deep gap and cultural barrier further made Chinatown become the hub for Chinese immigrants to search for safety and rights.

2.2 The transfer station

Considering Philadelphia Chinatown's location and its position in Chinese immigrants' development course, it is a place where overseas Chinese, when coming to the US, first migrated into and then, after accumulating enough wealth and experiences, moved out. Long-term US residents primarily ran their businesses in this enclave, and then, with their enriched resources and experiences, entered the urban center or moved to the suburban area to search for more opportunities and enjoy a high-quality life. Other residents of Chinatown were short-term lodgers; for those out of work or coming from or going to China, the neighborhood was an important way station. For example, laundrymen routinely sold their laundries before departing for China, and the association's common rooms provided temporary living quarters and served as an official address while their paperwork was being processed (Wilson, 2015). Chinatown was more like a foothold, with strong spatial mobility of Chinese migrations.

2.3 The commercial alliance

As the solid basis and the original factor for Philadelphia Chinatown's establishment, commerce was the "engine" of the operation of the whole society. Serving as the core purpose, businesses in Chinatown attracted Chinese immigrants and then, in turn, made a contribution to its continual flourishing. In the early age, within the separated Chinatown community, the nature of Asian exclusion, with exemptions for merchants, fostered the creation of a *woi/hui*, or traditional guild partnership (literally meaning "get together" or "put together") associated with an extended clan, provided a collective loan fund as well as a way of establishing partnerships in a commercial enterprise to claim eligibility for immigration and travel (Wilson, 2015). In addition, Chinatown was home to mutually beneficial associations that worked to maintain order, protest abuse of Chinese "treaty rights," arbitrate disputes, certify documents and deeds, do charitable work, maintain a cemetery, and serve as a reception committee for foreign dignitaries (Wilson, 2015). As the gentrification process became more obvious, tourism started to rise, and at the same time, residents of low economic status were compelled to other places. Under this circumstance, companies began to compete with other out-group businesses with their natural advantage of exotic features from Chinatown.

3. Chinatown's cultural image construction

From the previous analysis, it is clear to see that Philadelphia Chinatown, as a special ethnic enclave, developed commercially on a large scale. At the same time, with the rise of oppression and blockage, Chinatown began to be isolated from the surrounding environment, finally becoming a separate realm. In the aftermath of barrier construction, Chinatown had been covered with a veil of mystery. As a world apart, Chinatown represented an imaginative geography and history that helped "the mind to intensify its own sense of self by dramatizing the difference and distance between what is close to it and what is far away," which is a common feature of Orientalism (Robert, 1999). From this feature, residents, along with Chinatown itself, successfully constructed the "Other". Deeply rooted in the background of previous trades between Philadelphia

and Chinese ports and the exhibitions of Chinese art and culture, Orientalism was heavily relied on by Chinatown merchants at that time to survive through changing times. By perpetuating an image of the society as a place "in the past", they were able to boost tourism and gain profits from the hands of foreigners.

Thus, stimulated by "a dynamic interplay between attribution from without and self-representation from within", and further strengthened by a commercial inner-motivation from Chinatown merchants, Chinatown's creation presents "an entity interactively co-constituted by Chinese and non-Chinese Philadelphians" (Wilson, 2015).

3.1 Interior factors

3.1.1 Restaurants

From the establishment of Philadelphia Chinatown, restaurants have already been important organizations in society, making profits for Chinatown residents, and, at the same time, attracting tourists to come and visit. According to the cuisines' geographical categories, restaurants can be classified into two groups: on one hand, there are restaurants providing Chinese traditional dishes; while on the other hand, there are restaurants making other Asian-type cuisines. Two kinds of foods both comprised the Philadelphia Chinatown's cooking culture, helping it construct a unique cultural appearance.

3.1.1.1 Diversify Chinese cuisines

As early as 1955, slightly earlier than the 60s, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported a new image of the neighborhood: "The restaurants in Chinatown have a different look. Oriental writing, pictures and lanterns are suddenly around. The place is ever so slightly beginning to look like Chinatown again" (Wilson, 2015). From then on, Chinese restaurants began to jump into people's sights, starting to display an exotic picture. For instance, Sang Kee Peking Duck House, located at 238 North 9th Street, was in business since 1980 and now has become a cornerstone of the community. The classic dish — pecking duck — poses strong connections to Beijing, and also adds Chinese elements to the restaurants within the neighborhood (Wiegand, 1993). Besides, many other restaurants established one after the other offer diverse tastes, ranging from Hong Kong to Cantonese, Fujianese, Sichuan, and Taiwanese (Visit Philadelphia, 2022).

These dishes altogether constitute the vibrant Chinese restaurant community in Chinatown, setting up the flag of traditional Chinese food. Many non-Chinese citizens were deeply attracted by these stores, not only for having meals, but also for fulfilling their curiosity of this special food culture hub. In their eyes, and of course, in Chinese residents' eyes, the foods fully represented the mysterious Eastern culture. As a result, Chinese restaurants, with the entire Chinatown society, were perceived as the "Other" and put into the oriental category.

3.1.1.2 The mixture with other Asian cuisines

Besides dominant Chinese restaurants, food stores serving cuisines from other Asian countries co-exist. More favors of Korean, Vietnamese, Singaporean, Indonesian, Malaysian and Burmese cultures also constitute a special entity. They make contributions to the local cuisine diversity, while also serving as a foil to restaurants with Chinese traditions.

A typical example is the Vietnam Restaurant, which opened in 1984. After fleeing the communist oppression with the whole family in 1977, the founder of this restaurant, Benny Lai, migrated to Philadelphia and founded this place five years later (Wiegand, 2002). The New York Times in its "Travel" column once described this restaurant as "one of the leaders in Southeast Asian infiltration of Chinatown", and the Ticket wrote that its dishes as "a cross between Thai and Chinese". Even a newspaper report set the title "Vietnam Restaurant adds spice to the new Chinatown". From these newsletters, the Vietnam Restaurant set up an image of a cross-culture meal service. On the one hand, it represents typical Southeast Asian cuisines; on the other hand, it combines the foods from this region with Chinese traditional flavors. This kind of cultural contrast, also a connection, helps Chinatown to generate a more impressive Chinese theme and construct a cultural image different from other American societies.

3.1.2 Public affairs

Philadelphia Chinatown's public affairs include both traditional festivals and protests. Philadelphia Chinatown had a long historical tradition of public involvement since the early 20th century (Lin, 1948; Wilson, 2015).

Since the 1960s, even though traditional holidays have not undergone a huge change, protests, due to the increasing number of urban renewal projects and the establishment of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), have surged. Through the strong character of self-presentation in these affairs, the "Other" image has been manually constructed.

PCDC takes responsibility for the planning of most holiday festivals and protests, mainly including the Chinese New Year, the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Chinatown Summer Festival, and marches to fight against urban renewal projects ever since the expansion of Vine Street Expressway. Along with this community-led institution, several other organizations such as the catholic churches and Asian American United (AAU) also play an important role in taking part in Chinatown's public affairs. Festivals directly endow Chinatown with an image as a place representing China and the Eastern culture; on the other hand, protests, serving a function like what Asian cuisines contribute to Chinatown's food culture, construct Chinatown's figure through creating a severe division between two societies separated by conflicts.

3.1.2.1 Festivals

Until now, the most iconic public expression of Chinese identity was the Chinese New Year celebration held each year. Back in the early 1900s, this festival had already attracted people's attention:

Midnight will usher in the Chinese New Year. The new republic will be four years old, and the music of automatic pianos will mingle with the tom-tom and the Chinese flute, thus bringing the past and present together. Chinatown is in picturesque array for the occasion. Dragon flags, varicolored pennants fly with those of the United States, while thousands of lanterns help to emphasize the spirit (Wilson, 2015).

Even though the festival appeared far earlier than our discussion time scope beginning in the 1940s, these traditions carried down to the present, which still could be found in Chinese New Year celebrations.

Aside from traditional Chinese activities, the festival also included other forms of presentations. For example, in 1948's annual Chinese New Year celebration, an orchestra had been invited, and a dance

performance was carried out in the Holy Redeemer auditorium. Another example is more recently, taking place in 2012. PCDC launched a Chinatown Flower Market at the Tenth Street Plaza, providing families with fresh flowers, lanterns, and other supplies for annual celebrations (Wilson, 2015). Nowadays, the festival still hits the title of local newspapers and is widely reported. The Philadelphia Inquirer lists nine events in 2024's New Year, among which are the dumpling market event, parades, and other activities (Qureshi, 2024). Chinese New Year solidified the role of Chinatown in providing ethnic specialty to Philadelphia and an exotic spectacle for native residents.

Other cultural presentations include the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Lantern Festival, and the Chinatown Summer Festival mentioned above. The first Mid-Autumn Festival was held at Holy Redeemer in 1996. AAU mainly took responsibility for the celebration, renting a little stage and decorating the churchyard with lanterns. The creation of this festival has a very clear purpose: to promote Chinatown community unity through cultural reclamation; to promote pride in Chinese culture and community; to engage various sectors of the community in support for a community-wide celebration; and to promote intergenerational cooperation (Wilson, 2015). The intention clearly demonstrates Chinatown's efforts to manually strengthen its cultural construction. For each annual celebration, Chinatown residents would flood into the main street to take part in numerous festivities.

Then comes the other two festivals. The Mid-Autumn Festival and the Chinatown Summer Festival usually include professional artists to participate in annual activities. Specifically, professional face changers, dumpling makers, and folk dancers usually took part in the Mid-Autumn Festival. Audiences could also experience traditional arts with folk artists, and were able to devote themselves to diversified entertainments. The Chinatown Summer Festival, organized and presented by PCDC, introduced, and invited pop singers, dancers, and music bands to give performances during the celebration. Compared with previous traditional activities, these more modern celebration styles bring Chinatown a more cultural diversification feature, which deepens the communication and connection with surrounding communities. They together leave the public a new impression of Chinatown — a distant but vibrant testament of the Chinese realm.

3.1.2.2 Protests

Philadelphia Chinatown is renowned for its long protest history. Beginning at the end of the 1940s with the Vine Street Expansion approved, residents living in Chinatown protested and tried to fight off every renewal plan. During the long-term resistance, PCDC played as the main leader representing the whole Chinatown society to negotiate with city planners, and some other organizations such as AAU also made a great contribution to those resistances. Specifically, during the protest against the Vine Street Expressway expansion, posters with mandarins and dragon patterns were put up, and the Chinese original newspaper Yellow Seeds was founded and published.

In the later protests against the Phillies Stadium and the Fox Casino, protesters wore T-shirts that proclaimed “No Stadium & Casino in Chinatown”, with bright red Chinese calligraphies corresponding to the stadium and dark black ones related to the casino. Furthermore, even marches organized by AAU were also launched to combat the casino. In the first case, a May march in 2000 called “The Stadium Out of Chinatown” was launched. The elders in the community, who predominantly spoke Cantonese or Mandarin, and the younger generations, who predominantly spoke English, came together to oppose the stadium. The elders suggested a strike across all of Chinatown, shutting down each business, so everyone could march to City Hall in opposition to the stadium (Wilson, 2015; Lo & Mikati, 2023). In the second case, on June 25, 2009, a crowd gathered outside 718 Market Street in downtown Philadelphia to witness the “Anti-Casino Circus,” a protest performance mounted against a Foxwoods Casino proposed for the northwest corner of Eighth and Market Streets (Wilson, 2015). For months, hundreds of Chinatown community members staged protests, collected petition signatures, and marched to City Hall hearings.

Recently, during the combat against 76er's new basketball arena project, the same resistance appeared again. Flyers and posters claiming to protect Chinatown and fight for the stadium were put on the walls of almost every street, and T-shirts were stamped with the patterns like the former versions applied in the previous protests. Both posters and T-shirts printed propagation languages in blight red and dark black, with “ARENA” scrawled over “casino” and “stadium” (Lo & Mikati, 2023).

Through progressive public expressions and large-scale resultant influences, residents in Chinatown built up a resilience and cultural-oriented character. They, together playing as the role of “Other” from the public view, devoted themselves to social affairs and left outsiders an image of groups of people who chose to fight for their identity and cultural landscape.

3.2 Exterior Factors

3.2.1 News narratives

Media reports, mainly newspapers, have made a great contribution to Chinatown’s landscape feature formation in terms of cultural image construction. They reported exotic activities as well as great changes happening in Philadelphia Chinatown. Their discussions about Chinatown further helped the community gain more attention from the public view. Among those contents, on a macro level, their emphasis on Chinatown’s historical and cultural value as an ethnic neighborhood in American societies played an important role in building up an image of Orientalism.

Closely checking reports from mainstream newspapers and public radios about Philadelphia Chinatown, an obvious “reviving the Chinatown” narrative is naturally present. Some of the reports portrayed groups of Chinese people as “heroes going to save Chinatown”. As an early case, in 1986, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported the ideas and thoughts of a Peking architect, Liu Kaiji, a future faculty in the architecture school of the University of Pennsylvania. To be more specific, Liu “was very fond of the buildings of Chinatown”, but was “disturbed that they have been covered with garish signs and fake bits and pieces of traditional Chinese architecture. Due to his dissatisfaction with the gateway on 10th Street at Arch, the Inquirer further depicted his effort to place “another gate, a metal one whose form superimposes traditional Western and Chinese forms” (Hine, 1986).

In recent decades, more such heroic news has been reported by popular newspapers such as the New York Times and also the Philadelphia Inquirer. In 2016, 2022, and 2023 respectively, the New York Times wrote three articles telling the stories of a photographer, some civic groups with their leaders, and a younger generation of Asian Americans. The photographer recorded the community in Seattle

Chinatown, the civic groups were in New York Chinatown, while the group of young Asian Americans were from Manhattan Chinatown. Although the three stories did not take place in Philadelphia, considering their cultural connection and geographic locations, the reports and discussions about these three places still provided valuable insight.

In the first story about a photographer named Wong, his persisting photographing beginning in the 1970s included “images of community activism, local businesses and organizations, political leaders, children playing, celebratory rituals and, on a more personal level, reminiscences about his family and student life”. By recoding residents’ lives, the image of Chinatown as a gateway for Chinese immigrants to take a foothold and prepare for future development was greatly enriched, qualified with the cultural and historical sanctuaries. Mr. Wong’s personal contributions made Seattle Chinatown “speak to the cultural nuances, complexity and necessity of Chinatown, well beyond the touristic fascination with swirling paper dragons, countless restaurants and trinket shops”.

Unlike the first story, which narrated a story of enriching Chinatown’s culture and endowing it with more humanistic features, the latter two stories focused more on groups of people’s experience of rescuing the Chinatown community and helping with its future development. Specifically, the second story told the Lee Family Association’s story in New York Chinatown, along with issues of recent years’ affordable housing challenges. As one of the oldest civic groups of Manhattan Chinatown, the family association kept providing aid to Chinese immigrants and, recently, they were addressing the urban housing problem in order to make the community remain. The third story was about the young Asian American fighting to keep the history and culture of the Manhattan neighborhood alive — and for the very idea of what an ethnic enclave can be (Berger, 2016; Chen, Chen & Lin, 2024; Mishan & Chow, 2023).

Apart from heroic stories narrated by newspapers, the other forms of news from distinctive indigenous cultures were widely reported as well. Back in 1980, Chinatown had already been listed by the Philadelphia Inquirer as a place “offer pagoda-style architecture, Oriental populace and ethnic restaurants” (Farmer, 1980). In 1993, an incident was reported in

which “eight Chinatown restaurant owners have been cited recently for not maintaining their Peking ducks at the proper temperatures”. This led to an argument between the restaurant owners with the local health department inspectors (Wiegand, 1993). Although this news could be largely classified as negative, it was still printed in the popular newspaper and gained the public’s attention to the traditional Peking duck in Chinatown. Then in 2009, the newspaper wrote an article titled as an invitation, introducing readers to the open-make night “Bringing Down the Beast: Struggle and Resistance.” The activity was open to people from all different backgrounds, hoping to “encourage new voices and bring new voices to our community.” By inviting different people from different racial backgrounds and establishing cross-cultural relationships, the convention tended to respond to racial tensions and build up a hub for pure arts (Pompilio, 2009). Ten years later, the Chinese Cultural Center, a place that “stood near the heart of a battle over the fate and future of Chinatown” was posed with the threat of demolition. As a cultural center that symbolized the secret and mysterious Philadelphia Chinatown, its significance had greatly surpassed the accommodation usage. Considering “how curious tourists would become if they were driving across the Benjamin Franklin Bridge and saw a red tile Chinese roof rising above the trees somewhere west of Franklin Square,” this place was given a high historical value by the public and regarded as a real estate.

However, the upcoming demolition fate created a kind of urgency, generating a sense that precious historical interests were about to disappear (Gammage, 2019). As the historical preservation threat approached, Philadelphia Chinatown was enlisted on the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s annual list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places for 2023 (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2023). This emergency attracted the public attention, and at the same time, a report from the “BPS: Why?” series mentioned this crisis, and pointed out Chinatown’s historical and cultural values: “We need to do this phase one emergency stabilization as soon as possible.” The escalated issue reflected wide social concerns, provoking residents to stand up and fight for their own right, as many news agencies reported. As the production of preservation was considered urgent, an oral history project was launched by AAU in 2024. The movement became the news in the *Inquirer*. The project plastered 14 posters on the exterior walls,

telling local residents’ stories about Chinatown and the significance of Chinatown for them. In their eyes, this was Philadelphia Chinatown. “By showing the people who make up the neighborhood, the project creators hope that ‘Our Chinatown’ will prompt people to recognize the importance of Chinatown to many community members, and those who would be impacted by the proposed arena,” wrote the *Inquirer*’s journalist (Mikati, 2024).

3.2.2 Tourisms

Tourism has been a part of the Chinatown scene and economy since the late nineteenth century. Chinatown residents and business people are sanguine or at least practical about tourism, recognizing the important role that it plays in their local micro-economy (Wilson, 2015). Some Chinatown residents saw tourism as an efficient way of helping the business of the community, from the Chinese Friendship Gate renovation to the landscape improvements. In fact, it can be perceived as the external side of Chinatown’s self-expression. On the other hand, tourism, in turn, catalyzes and strengthens Chinatown’s cultural and historical image. In other words, the so-called “outsiders” were inversely sculpturing an “Other”.

3.2.2.1 The Chinatown Friendship Gate

The most iconic symbol of Philadelphia Chinatown is the Friendship Gate. Designed in a traditional style of the Qing Dynasty, the gate is the portal of the Chinatown society. Put forth by Chinese architect Soong and PCDC, the gate was erected in 1984 and got its tiles from Philadelphia’s sister city — Tianjin, China. It represented the relationship between Philadelphia and Tianjin and a tribute to the contributions of the Philadelphia Chinese community. Considering its cultural value and the potential tourism profits could bring, city representatives gave full support to the construction of the gate rather than considering the society’s housing problems (Visit Philadelphia, n.d.-b). The reason is simple: it was an answer to draw people to Chinatown. The Friendship Gate was just the method city people were looking for to put Chinatown in a positive light. In this way, the gate came to define Philadelphia Chinatown, giving outsiders a sketch of a traditional Chinese community. Because of its high identifiability, the Friendship Gate is usually used as the representation of Philadelphia Chinatown on postcards, posters, newspapers, and

tourism websites. Over time, the gate has become the exclusive symbol of Chinatown in tourist brochures and is the most popular landmark of the neighborhood.

3.2.2.2 Mural arts

Philadelphia Chinatown has two well-renowned mural artworks — “History of Chinatown” and “The Past Supporting The Future”. “History of Chinatown” was commissioned for Chinatown’s 125th anniversary. It portrays the community history from the arrival of the early laundrymen to the fight against urban renewal projects in the 1960s and 70s (Wilson, 2012); the latter one, “The Past Supporting The Future”, was a showcase of diverse Asian cultures in Philadelphia and the reflection of Asian American Pacific Islander people’s experience in the city, tracing back Chinatown’s past and looking ahead its bright future (Crimmins, 2023). As testaments of Chinatown’s history and cross-cultural communications within Asian communities, the two immense creations have become the landmarks of Philadelphia Chinatown, and become the destination of every traveler to the community. Unlike the Chinese Cultural Center with the jade-colored, glazed-tile roof, which emphasized a secret and mysterious Chinatown, the two murals told Chinatown’s past utilizing transformative motifs combined together from the top to the bottom, generating a mobile picture of the old history. Since the creation of public art must go along with specific purposes, the murals as local landmarks were highly likely dedicated to displaying themselves to outsiders. Even though the artworks were originally created to remind Chinatown residents of their lineage and the community’s experience, this kind of artistic expression inevitably has an effect of “seeking to leverage public interest in Chinese culture into investment in Chinatown” (Gammage, 2019), a commercial purpose mentioned in the Chinese Cultural Center.

4. Chinatown’s cultural patterns

4.1 The Chinese tradition preservation

Since the formation of Philadelphia Chinatown, Chinese cultural patterns had already been deeply rooted in residents’ identities and the whole society’s cultural image, which was, more specifically, a traditional southeastern culture near the coast with

strong commercial elements. This place was their foothold when migrating from southeast China, and was also their long-term residence at the early stage of Chinatown development. With a severe anti-Chinese atmosphere outside the society, the ethnic enclave was secluded from the surrounding American mainstream society, conserving its own culture brought from the motherland with little change. At the same time, in order to gain equal rights and resist persecution, civic groups were widely established based on lineage, geography, and industry. An iconic characteristic of the early immigrants was that most of them arrived in the US in search of opportunities to make a fortune and accumulate wealth. In light of this background, commercial groups and associations comprised the main body of the whole Chinatown society, while merchants and poor people dreaming of good fortunes were the basic demographic group in the community. Thus, Philadelphia Chinatown as a place dominated by commercial organizations continued the economic-oriented basis when separated from neighborhoods. Philadelphia Chinatown, in a broad sense, could be perceived as a society based on commercial purposes and corresponding activities.

Later on, with immigrants and the society’s development, more cultural elements were introduced into the community. Due to the Orientalism of the public, Chinatown had been long regarded as a place distant and mysterious, full of myths and legends. This was the time it started to construct a cultural image and be seen as the “Other”. As more Asian immigrants moved into Chinatown, they also brought diverse cultures to this ethnic enclave. Restaurants providing cuisines with different styles appeared, and traditional holidays generated from more countries also took root. At this period, the commercial element was not the only thing transplanted into Philadelphia Chinatown, but vibrant cultures were translated from the motherland. They served as the appearance, or so-called “cover”, above the commercial base, and started to take root on it and sprout. However, since these traditions flourished through the success of older generations and their connections with the homeland versions were weakened, Chinatown’s traditional side remains almost unchanged, undergoing through few iterations.

Since the 1960s, surging urban renewal projects continually posed threats to Philadelphia Chinatown, creating a context with frequent social

interactions and conflicts. The external risks stimulated more protests and thus strengthened the Chinatown community's image, showcasing a spirit of full resilience and dedication to cultural protection. This, along with many exterior news propagandas and tourism promotions, further shaped Chinatown society as an exotic cultural hub, in need of public care and collective aid in historical preservations. One interesting thing is, except for new propaganda, movements of protests and tourism promotions were both backed by certain kinds of economic motivations: the purpose of protests against urban projects was to alleviate competitions and reduce housing prices; on the other hand, the goal of promoting tourism by constructing iconic features was to attract travelers and boost the local economy. Therefore, even during this speeding period of cultural image construction, the deeper motivation was still correlated with commerce and economy. Chinese traditions were carried forward and raised public awareness, but, due to the force of Orientalism, the original cultures had to follow their lineage and align with the former version, which means that the Chinese part still experienced few transformations.

4.2 The American culture incorporation

With a comparatively static Chinese tradition on one side, Philadelphia Chinatown continues to incorporate American culture into the community, establishing a connection with local societies. The most obvious testament is the American flags hanging above the streets. Starting from the entrance of Chinatown and going deep inside, these flags fly in rows between buildings. The national flags directly decorate the society as an American one.

Other evidences of the cultural infiltration are hidden inside the community, which is hard to identify from a glance of two. They have to be found by delving into Chinatown's cultural history. As mentioned previously, Philadelphia Chinatown has a solid commercial basis and its backbone is economy. From the early commercial alliances solely between Chinese immigrants, other organizations from American society moved into this place. One example is the Police and Fire Federal Credit Union located at 901 Arch Street. It is regulated under the National Credit Union Administration, a government-backed insurer of US credit unions. American banks like this have opened their branches in Chinatown, making

the American banking systems mix with Chinatown's Chinese commercial organizations. In the aftermath of the diverse cuisines' rise in Chinatown, with several decades of development, foods in Chinatown have already evolved some modern American styles, such as bubble tea. On the one hand, the foods keep being influenced by American dishes; on the other hand, concerning customers' preferences, an American-oriented style has to be created to fit into the public taste.

Then urban renewal projects were proposed in the 1960s, and resultant protests appeared. This unique way of participating in public affairs demonstrates a strong American style itself. Going back to southeast China, there is no custom of protest or marches. As Chinatown citizens involve themselves in these protests in Philadelphia, they have already gotten used to local public traditions. Meanwhile, holidays also reveal a sign of cultural incorporation. Take the Chinatown Summer Festival as an example. PCDC invited black singers and multi-racial bands to give performances on the celebration day of the festival, showcasing multi-dimensional communication through music. The same case is the mural art "The Past Supporting The Future". The depiction of diverse Asian American Pacific Islander people makes the art naturally project cultural inclusion, making connections with surrounding Asian groups. We cannot conclude for sure whether these efforts were made to boost the community's tourism, but all these aspects certainly indicate an open Chinatown society, blending part of American cultures and also establishing tolerant relationships with other societal groups.

The last demonstration of cultural communication is interesting, which is related to the image portrayed in Philadelphia's news reports. From the 1960s to the present, Philadelphia Chinatown has always been the subject at the center of news discussions. With a variety of topics from travel to culture, and then to historical preservation, the news successfully create an object of Chinatown embedded into the American public narrative. In this way, Philadelphia Chinatown is transformed into a group connecting with the mentality and spirits of Americans, especially Philadelphians, perceived the same as other political leaders, commercial elites, and sports stars. It can be said that news reports using media narratives help Philadelphia Chinatown fit into mainstream native cultures.

Conclusions

Philadelphia Chinatown was initially constructed as an immigration hub with dominant commercial elements, and later developed into a vibrant ethnic enclave with constructed cultural features. The 1960s was a catalyst speeding the whole process, when urban renewal projects as threats strengthened the interactions between the Chinatown society and surrounding communities.

Firstly, Philadelphia Chinatown was essentially a place for commercial activities. Most early immigrants arriving in Philadelphia Chinatown were merchants and poor peasants from the southeastern coast of China. They came to Philadelphia Chinatown mainly to search for chances to make a fortune and accumulate wealth. Due to growing national sentiments and oppression from American society, commercial partnerships were formed to protect and fight for Chinese immigrants' own rights. This firm commercial tradition set as the basis of Philadelphia Chinatown's social structure from its origin until now.

Secondly, Philadelphia Chinatown's cultural image construction was mainly influenced by Orientalism. Its feature as the "Other" was constructed both by factors from the society itself and factors outside the society. Interior factors include the restaurants and public affairs, and the exterior factors involve media narratives and tourism. Restaurants make Philadelphia Chinatown a place with iconic traditional features, while public affairs take a step further, and construct the image of a group that has incomparable resilience and will fight for its traditional culture. On the other hand, for the external factors, news narratives portrayed Chinatown as a historical testament with vibrant cultures which is under the threat of disappearance. Tourisms, however, not only emphasize its role in shaping an Oriental image of the community but also dialectically explain its reverse effect on Chinatown's economic development. From this point, the cultural image construction has been connected with Chinatown's commercial essence.

Thirdly, Philadelphia Chinatown sets a solid commercial basis and cultivates cultures on it. Furthermore, Chinatown preserves traditional Chinese cultures and, at the same time, incorporates

American cultures. Commercial activities are still the most important affairs in Philadelphia Chinatown, and the cultures constructed on the economic base mainly serve this original force. The Chinese traditional cultures were transplanted into Philadelphia Chinatown from China and kept comparatively static, with few iterations. The American cultures, even though without valid explanations, infiltrate into Chinatown society, forming a tight connection with the cultures and societies.

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