

The Evolution of Chinatown and the Cultural Effects of Gentrification

Yan Shi

In November 1986, D.C., with the help of sister city Beijing, erected the Chinese-style “Friendship Arch” in Chinatown, signifying the supposed new beginning for the neighborhood. According to sociologist Esther Ngan-ling Chow, the arch is meant to symbolize “the intended revitalization of the Chinatown community” (205). Furthermore, professors Leeman and Modan of George Mason University and Ohio State University claim that the Friendship Arch was “a recognition of the neighborhood’s history and culture” (344). However, history will show that the intention of keeping the neighborhood’s history and culture was all for naught, as officials and businesses sought gentrification of Chinatown in order to boost tourism. While the gentrification of Chinatown has made the area safer and more profitable to residents and businesses alike, the gentrification of the neighborhood has contributed to the decline of culture, community, and language within the area as well as the unfair displacement of its residents.

First, a distinction must be made between the word *gentrification* and the word *revitalization*. In an article from *The Examiner*, staff writer Aubrey Whelan notes, “gentrifying neighborhoods will [sic] see a demographic shift as property values rise, with wealthier white residents replacing poorer minority residents.” In contrast, revitalizing neighborhoods “take a more community-oriented approach to economic and demographic shifts.” This means that the community’s culture will remain, but it will also be diversified—unlike gentrification that can cause displacement of residents, residents will not be displaced in a neighborhood undergoing revitalization.

The history of DC’s Chinatown began in the 1880s in what is now the John Marshall Place. The formation of the District’s Chinatown was “primarily a self-defense mechanism” (Chow 192) as most Chinese people faced discrimination and racial tensions by white people. Thus, Chinatown was a safe zone for many of the residents. As the years passed, the community grew and prospered. Businesses increased in numbers, and organizations such as the On Leong Merchants Association appeared to keep the peace within Chinatown and to make sure residents were happy. However, in 1929, the federal government “forced the evacuation of Chinatown to make room for the construction of federal and district municipal buildings planned as part of the Federal Triangle Project” (Chow 195). The On Leong Merchants Association tried to find new homes in the area of present-day Chinatown. However, many white property owners were heavily against this move, so they worked with real estate agents to avoid heavy concentrations of the Chinese. As a result, their living space was reduced—thus, their capability to grow in terms of space and in population was also reduced. Nonetheless, the Chinese forged on and created a new close-knit community teeming with life and tradition in the area that is now present-day Chinatown.

Chinatown’s existence was threatened again by Washington’s plans for redevelopment in the 1970s. The District planned on creating a convention center, hotels, a metro station, and department stores to feed the tourist industry that was beginning to make its debut. As a result of the construction, several residents would have been displaced and housing would have been less affordable—Chinatown, in general, would shrink (Chow 202). Residents protested against the changes as it would undermine their community, but they had to settle under a modified agreement

that the buildings would be built farther away from the center of Chinatown. Regardless, residents were still displaced, and many (particularly the elderly) moved into the newly constructed Wah Luck House, which was built to ease the displacement of residents and to offer affordable housing. Other residents from second and third generation families and more affluent residents moved out into the suburbs (Chow 200).

Throughout the years, the construction of buildings like the Convention Center and the metro station caused severe damage. The construction, according to Chow, was bad for business. In some cases, stores and merchandise owned by the Chinese were damaged in the process of building the metro station and the Convention Center (205). In 1997, the Verizon Center was built in the center of Chinatown, and it created the same results as its predecessors, hiking up property prices to the point that business owners could not afford them. Stores were slowly closing one by one. Jing Chun Li, a resident in Chinatown, commented, “When I first came here, there were ten Chinese restaurants and two grocery stores, and they carried many things. Now there’s none. Chinatown has only the name” (qtd. in Nakamura). The closing of so many businesses created a lull, but the American stores around them picked up the slack. While business slowly picked back up, it came at the price of losing small businesses owned by Asian Americans—thus, a small portion of Chinese culture was lost.

The loss of Chinese businesses and residents resulted in a decrease in population. Chinatown was becoming smaller and smaller. David Nakamura, writer from *The Washington Post*, used the word *corner* to describe the current physical situation of Chinatown in his article “From Chinatown to Chinacornet.” While crime rates dropped and property values rose, “Chinese-owned businesses were replaced by national chains” as a result. American chain stores like Fuddrucker’s and Starbucks replaced the restaurants and the bakeries owned by Asian Americans. As businesses and families moved away, the culture and community within the area dwindled, leaving only the shell of buildings for tourists to see. Nakamura wrote his article in 2011, and residents of the Wah Luck House that he interviewed said that they were afraid that they would be forced to move out of their building after the building’s contract expired as most felt the most comfortable in DC’s Chinatown. The residents had created a micro- community within the Wah Luck House. Several of the elderly residents could not speak English very well, and displacement would put them out of their comfort zone. The people living here were a large percentage of the last few Chinese Americans living around Chinatown. While the apartment was put on the market, no one wanted to buy the building at the company’s posted price— so leases were renewed through 2015. While the residents of the Wah Luck House can rest in peace for now, when 2015 comes, the threat of displacement may arise again.

A similar situation occurred in early August. Robert Samuels of *The Washington Post*, wrote about the owner of Museum Square—another building much like the Wah Luck House—who wanted to demolish the building to build something new and more pleasing to the growing affluent population in the area. However, the demolition would have displaced at least two hundred ninety-one households, “which include[d] nearly half of the Chinese immigrant population left in and around Chinatown.” A co-owner of the building, Michele Ball, says that they were “trying to maximize the value of the property” (qtd. in Samuels). Because of the Verizon Center and the Convention Center’s construction, there has been a need to adapt to keep up with the changing economic climate. According to Ball, displacement did not matter so as long as there was a voucher

involved. Vouchers allowed for the displaced family to move into housing of their choosing, so as long as it fit the standards set (United States). Rent payment assistance would be included, but the help is often not often to offset the new costs of living in a new home and area—especially in DC. Samuels notes that many of the residents—Chinese, black, and Latino—were all frightened by the prospect of displacement. In the end, the property owners allowed the residents to stay for up to a year, giving them enough time to make their case. Nonetheless, like the Wah Luck House’s residents, the Museum Square residents may face displacement in the near future.

The Wah Luck House and the Museum Square situation had an underlying tone of the promise in revitalization, but one must recall the definitions of gentrification and revitalization. Both situations fell under the definition of the former, in which the population of less-affluent individuals would have been forced out and replaced with more affluent individuals. Displacement or lack of displacement of residents of a particular area is a key factor in determining whether or not the improvements and developments are an example of gentrification or revitalization.

Based on the history mentioned, changes in favor of profits have always been in the making, whether private or government-issued. According to writer Tricia Miller of *Roll Call*, the “last time the District made a serious effort in Chinatown was 1986. That year, the Gallery Place Metro stop was renamed Gallery Place-Chinatown and the Friendship Arch was built...” Those two events made the neighborhood “official,” in that it was recognized as a *destination*, a legitimate place. The renaming and the arch offered nothing to the Chinese community other than acknowledgement that they exist after so many years— yet, by present-day, a majority of the culture, language, and community disappeared.

While developers may have wanted to preserve the culture of Chinatown, they destroyed it by allowing the Verizon Center and the Convention Center to come to fruition. Language is a vital part to culture, so, to make up for it, they added Chinese lettering to the signs of the American chains that took the place of the small Chinese-owned businesses. The stores were required to have Chinese architecture elements in their buildings in an attempt to preserve culture, but it only served as a mock, non-genuine display when coupled with the bilingual signage, where the Chinese on the national chains’ sign do not even matter—in other words, the language is used *solely* for aesthetic purposes (Leeman and Modan 347). Leeman and Modan provided other examples, such as the Starbucks sign in Chinatown versus a Starbucks sign in China. In D.C.’s Chinatown, Starbucks is directly translated into Chinese. However, in China, the English name is used in its sign, no translation given. From this information, what conclusions can be made? The answer is simple: the signage in Chinatown is only there to “transport” tourists to an “exotic” destination. It is not genuine— culture revolves around language, and it is more helpful and more immersive to hear someone else speaking the language or to see writing that conveys an actual, meaningful message. This is especially the case for those wishing to learn the language and the culture— Chinatown can be a place where one can experience a piece of American Chinese culture without having to venture far distances.

Culture contains language, and it also contains community. Chow, at the end of her essay, “From Pennsylvania Avenue to H Street NW: The Transformation of Washington’s Chinatown,” offered an interesting perspective. She suggested that some may “feel that residential decentralization among Chinese Americans may also indicate that the community has transcended the spatial and

economic boundaries of Chinatown” (206). In regards to the spatial boundaries of Chinatown, Chinatown has always had small borders due to the actions of the white property owners in 1929. There was hardly any room for growth, and it limited the growth of the Chinese population in that area, thus people *had* to move out. In terms of the economic boundaries, Chinatown has flourished significantly after national chain stores opened up in the area, forcing Chinese-owned stores out of business, as most could not afford the property prices or the living costs. A majority of the residents (mostly second and third generation) moved out into the suburbs, but the elders stayed behind in Chinatown as it was more convenient for them. However, as the prices continue to rise in Chinatown and the need to renovate by property owners intensifies, the elders may one day face a tough decision to leave their comfort zone. While a majority consciously made the decision to move out of Chinatown, one cannot ignore the fact that many moved out due to the rising property prices that occurred after the gentrification of the neighborhood. As the Chinese continue to move out of the area, the culture will go with them. Furthermore, while the Chinese living in and outside of Chinatown can still interact with one another, there is no longer a focal point or center. As a result, there is no definite sense of a strong community, aside from the invisible ties through friendships, kinships, and so forth. Community is required for culture to flourish and grow. In other words, culture revolves around community, among other things, and without this, it is difficult to say that developers succeeded in preserving Chinatown.

The Chinese residents and business owners were not satisfied with the commoditization of the Chinese language. The letterings did the opposite of what was intended. Instead of preserving the culture, the writing turned it into a profit instead, something that was “exotic” enough to attract the tourists. The architecture gave the appearance of Chinatown, but it does not make the experience. Residents, displaced, angry, tired, wanted something more substantial. There is a lack of community in Chinatown now, and residents recognize this and want to combat it.

Despite the dwindling numbers of Chinese American residents and business owners in Chinatown, many people want to preserve the culture that has been there for so many years. Stan Lou, vice president of the D.C. chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans, comments, “Chinatown is an important touchstone to us Asian Americans. It’s a place where we can identify with our culture. In D.C., particularly in our nation’s capital, we need to figure out how we can make it more ethically appealing and preserve that history” (qtd. in Rudansky). Not only is preserving the culture important for history and education purposes, it is important to remind the youth that is connected to that culture where they come from. The dilution of the culture of Chinatown not only affects those currently living in the area, but it also affects people of Chinese descent living *around* the area—Chinatown has always been meant to be a place to feel connected, to feel a sense of belonging and community. For some, it may be a place to reconnect and to better understand the culture that they come from. At its current state, Chinatown is not something to be proud of.

Many are hoping to gain momentum from the Chinese New Year parades—they hope that that will start to bring the culture back to Washington’s Chinatown, if at least just once a year. Others have proposed a Chinatown Park, in which open-air markets would exist and Chinese cultural events could be held (Miller). However, nothing has been done yet due to money constraints and the depressing economy—many are still waiting for change. In the meantime, organizations like the Chinatown Community Cultural Center help “preserve and promote Chinatown’s cultural identity while simultaneously focusing on education and empowering immigrants in Chinatown and the

Washington D.C. area.” Their mission is to cultivate Chinatown’s culture and to enrich what still remains by offering programs and cultural classes to the community. Those of Chinese descent can come here to learn more about their culture, to learn the language, and to practice martial arts like Tai Chi.

In the end, Chinatown was gentrified rather than revitalized. Gentrification may lead to safer environments and more profits, but it does not come without consequences. While affluent people may find new homes, minority groups like the Chinese in Chinatown are displaced and must find new homes outside of their comfort zones. Revitalization would have allowed the neighborhood to flourish in a more positive way, in that residents are not forced out due to rising property costs. As a result of displacement, culture within the area will start to disappear and become merely a memory. However, through lobbying, planning, and community organizations, parts of the culture can be preserved for future generations to come.

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