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Making the Exotic Familiar: Representing Chinese Culture in Chicago’s Chinatown

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Research Question
How does Chicago’s Chinatown represent Chinese culture to the wider public and how is Chicago’s Chinatown changing with changes in U.S. immigration policies?

Background

Chicago is a “city of neighborhoods” and Chinatown is officially recognized as one of the 77 neighborhoods. The neighborhood is contained by physical barriers on all four sides. The business center runs along two main streets (Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Avenue) that are considered “Old Chinatown” and an outdoor mall and adjacent indoor mall that are considered “New Chinatown.” The older residential areas is west and south of the business center, with newer housing north of the mall.

Despite the physical barriers, Chicago’s Chinatown is growing. While Chinatowns across the U.S. are facing gentrification and disappearing, Chicago’s Chinatown seems to be the exception (Lutton 2019). The population in Chinatown is estimated to be 89% Chinese and the number of Chinese people in surrounding neighborhoods is growing. Chinatown attracts a large number of visitors and is considered a major tourist destination in Chicago.

Methodology

I used anthropological methods of field research to collect data, including mapping, in-depth interviews (conducted remotely), and observation. I also used public census data and archival materials.

I analyzed my data using De Leon’s concept of the “hybrid collect” to understand the human and non-human (i.e., urban landscape, public policies, etc) actors at work in Chinatown.

Findings

Chicago’s Chinatown brings in visitors from across the city, and from across the world. People come to Chicago’s Chinatown for the Chinese restaurants, bakeries, and gift shops, but even more, they come to experience “authentic” Chinese culture. The architecture, language, smells, and local residents, give visitors a safe and easy way to explore a culture different from their own. What they don’t see is how the residents of Chinatown work to create that image as a way to give visitors an authentic Chinese experience and brings income into the neighborhood, while maintaining an exclusive Chinese community.

Language

Chinese language marks the cultural boundaries of the Chinatown community. Outsiders see Chinese characters as part of the authentic Chinese experience, and do not seem to notice that the language also deliberately excludes non-Chinese people, making it difficult for someone who doesn’t read or speak Chinese to find local housing or employment or use local services.

Restaurant Cuisine and Décor

Chinatown attracts visitors with a high density of restaurants offering “authentic” Chinese food. Until recently, most were locally owned, which helps to maintain local boundaries, keeping jobs and money in the community. As new waves of immigrants arrive, they bring new foods, and more recently, restaurant concepts, that keep visitors coming back with new, and possibly even more exotic, Chinese experiences.

I observed changes in the types of restaurants and businesses that are opening in Chinatown, and renovations to existing restaurants, that suggest that these businesses may no longer serve as local boundaries for Chinatown. This may be due to recent immigration trends bringing wealthy Chinese and Koreans to Chicago both as business owners and consumers.

More Chinatown restaurants that are not Chinese but “Asian,” are small franchises with locations in other parts of Chicago, the suburbs, and even other cities, and several big chains, all of them Asian. More Chinese restaurants in nearby neighborhoods with cheaper rent replacing “conventional” Chinese decor with more trendy or “modern” styles to attract younger, hipper visitors, including Chinese students and young professionals.

Local Advocacy

While new immigrants may be changing the “face” of Chinatown, local advocacy organizations are working to strengthen the community and improve daily life for the residents of Chinatown by bringing City of Chicago facilities to the neighborhood and fighting to preserve low-income housing and jobs for new immigrants without resources.

Implications

I have spent time in Chinatown all of my life, but it was not until I started this research that I understood the difference between visiting Chinatown and being part of the Chinatown community. Through my research, I saw more clearly the differences between resident and visitor, and implications for the growth of Chinatown in Chicago.

It is frequently noted that Chicago’s Chinatown is the only Chinatown in the U.S. that is growing, but most reports do not look closer at how it is growing. I identified two key factors:

1. Business growth is coming from current immigration trends. As wealthy Chinese and Korean immigrants establish Asian restaurant franchises that take money and possibly jobs away from the local community.

2. Local residents and activists are advocating for city resources and services, such as the park and libraries, and social services agencies. They want to make sure that new immigrants who do not have the English language or job skills to work outside of Chinatown, have a community that will provide for them and protect them from anti-Asian racism and discrimination.

References

I want to thank the summer research fund for supporting this research. Professor DeKart inspired this project in her Intro to Anthro Class and has mentored me through this work. The staff at the Chinese American Museum of Chicago generously shared time and resources with me.