

Interrogating Ethnic Identity: Space and Community Building in Chicago's Chinatown

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This article examines the role of architectural and landscape imagery in articulating a collective identity for the ethnic community of Chicago's Chinatown, focusing on the complex and contingent character of spatial processes involved in this effort. In Chicago, the remaking of the Chinatown landscape has been inseparable from a market-driven effort to translate cultural products into consumable difference. But it has also been shaped by internal sociopolitical forces that reveal the active engagement of the ethnic group in the making of self-image and identity through the mechanism of the built environment.

Early studies of Chinatowns in North America emphasized a “natural” connection between these settlements and Chinese ethnicity. They associated the emergence of Chinatowns in North America in particular with the kinship migration network and internal ethnocentricity of Chinese immigrants.¹ Since the late 1980s, however, numerous studies in human geography, cultural anthropology, history, and urban sociology have interpreted Chinatowns not as neutral spaces of ethnicity but as distinct racial, social and cultural products of the Chinese immigrant experience. These studies have highlighted the salient role of Western institutions in shaping the space and place of Chinatown. Denaturalizing the relationship between the ethnic ghetto and ethnicity, they have emphasized external forces such as anti-Chinese laws, governmental action, and racial politics in producing Chinatowns as a space of “otherness.”²

In addition, some scholars have examined Chinatowns in the larger context of capitalism, arguing that they were formed as nodes in an interconnected system of unevenly distributed spaces of production, ranging “from worldwide networks of markets of capital, labor, and commodities to national, regional, and local markets.”³ They have further highlighted globalization as an agent of recent structural change in U.S. Chinatowns, and asserted that transnational and global connections have made them an important new nexus of capital and labor.⁴

Despite these important studies examining Chinatowns within the context of local and global socioeconomic and political processes, there remains a lack of scholarly attention to sociopolitical forces within the Chinese community in the making of the specific place identi-

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ties. This is especially true with regard to the actual space and built environment — that is, the cultural landscape. Few studies have delved into how architectural and landscape imagery has served as a kind of text encoded with the contested power relations within the ethnic community. Nor have they examined how landscapes have been used as a medium by the ethnic group to assert and negotiate its self-identity. By focusing on the complex and contingent character of spatial processes in Chicago's Chinatown, this article will attempt to fill this void. It examines the role of architectural and landscape imagery in articulating and negotiating a collective identity for the Chinese community in Chicago. And it examines how internal power relations have been signified, naturalized and constructed in the invention of place imagery for its Chinatown.

Before the 1960s the built environment of Chicago's Chinatown signified the unique cultural traditions of the city's Chinese community. The signs were subtle: only the association buildings owned by powerful *tongs* (sworn brotherhood societies) and family and district associations reflected their identity through overt signs of ethnicity. But in the 1970s new structures began to deploy essentialized representations of Chinese traditions. Orientalist architecture, such as Chinese-style gateways and pagoda-tiered restaurants, started to appear and serve as signature markers of exoticism. At the same time, in an effort to signify its lively, diverse character, the city of Chicago began to promote its Chinatown as a tourist attraction alongside more traditional sites such as the Sears Tower, Navy Pier, and McCormick Place. The imagery of Chicago's Chinatown has since been re-created mainly through the iconization of ethnicity and the spectacle of tradition. Chinese ethnic tradition in Chicago, in a sense, has thus become a commodity whose value is decided by the logic of capitalism.

The remaking of the Chinatown landscape in Chicago has been inseparable in a broader urban context from a market-driven effort to translate diverse cultural products into marketable difference. However, the way this process has also been shaped by internal forces reveals the active engagement of the ethnic group in the making of self-image and identity. More specifically, the expression of tradition in the built environment has provided a mode of dissembling that has aestheticized power and the political process of spatial reproduction.⁵ In this regard, the articulation of tradition in architectural and landscape forms has been tied to particular sociopolitical ideologies and power struggles within the community. The development of Chicago's Chinatown thus offers a case distinct, for example, from San Francisco's Chinatown, which was rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake, or New York's, which was largely shaped by transnational capital networks. An analysis of Chicago's Chinatown not only reveals the multifaceted meanings of tradition in the built environment, but also enriches discussions and representations of Chinatowns in a variety of other contexts.

CHINATOWN IN PRE-WORLD WAR II CHICAGO

Anti-Chinese sentiment played a significant role in shaping the social structure and migrant politics in all pre-World War II Chinatowns in the U.S. Chicago's Chinatown was no exception. During the late nineteenth century, the city experienced rapid growth and became one of the most important centers of manufacturing and transportation in the nation. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition signaled that, both economically and physically, Chicago had become a world-class city — a status it has maintained ever since.⁶

The first Chinese immigrant arrived in Chicago during the mid-1870s, and as the ethnic community grew, it built its first Chinatown at Clark and Madison Streets in the late 1880s. Similar to the Chinese on the West Coast, the Chinese of Chicago suffered from the effects of restrictive immigration laws, political disenfranchisement, and racial segregation.⁷ However, anti-Chinese attitudes soon also resulted in the formation of the same powerful associations that dominated political networks in other U.S. Chinatowns.⁸ In Chicago's Chinatown, On Leong Tong and Hip Sing Tong became the most dominant social and political groups.⁹

By 1912 conflict between the two associations, as well as a move to revive the downtown, led On Leong Tong to create a new Chinatown at Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road in the city's Armour Square neighborhood. Contracting for a series of ten-year building leases, it proceeded to establish this as a new hub for the city's Chinese community. The majority of buildings in the area at the time were standard Western structures, the legacy of German, Irish and Italian immigrants who had already successively occupied the district.¹⁰ Initially, therefore, the Chinese had very little cultural imprint on the built environment of the area; and with the exception of the addition of a few notable association buildings and commercial structures, its fabric would remain largely unaltered for years from the period of early settlement of European immigrants.

When the new Chinatown in Armour Square was established, On Leong Tong became its dominant social group, thoroughly controlling its economic, political, and civil life. Meanwhile, the fortunes of Hip Sing Tong, which had stayed in the older Chinatown, began to decline along with the neighborhood. To celebrate its new prosperity and power, On Leong Tong built the On Loeng Merchants Association Building on South Wentworth Avenue as its new headquarters. The building would eventually become the most predominant architectural feature of Chicago's Chinatown. Designed by the Chicago architects Christian S. Michaelsen and Sigurd A. Rognstad in 1926, it was completed in 1928 and designated a Chicago Landmark in 1988.

The On Leong Merchant Association Building was, in fact, a fairly typical structure for its time — a three-story commercial block with a steel and concrete frame, clad with brick (FIG. 1). Beyond this, however, its symmetrical form, with



FIGURE 1. *The symmetrical form of the On Leong Association Building. Photo by author, ca. 2004.*



FIGURE 2. *The local Chinese community erected the Chinese Theater and Temple for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. The building was one of the earliest structures in the United States to reflect the stylistic influence of Chinese architecture. Courtesy of the Chinese Museum Foundation/Chinese American Museum of Chicago.*

two pagoda towers, revealed the influence of the Chinese Theater built on the Midway during the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. That structure had been initiated by the local Chinese community and designed by the architectural firm of Wilson and Marble (FIG. 2).¹¹ Although the theater was demolished after the fair, it had a lasting influence on subsequent Chinatown designs. In particular, the Sing Fat and Sing Chong buildings in San Francisco and the On Leong Tong headquarters in New York adopted similar layouts with framing pagodas.

With the completion of the On Leong building, Michaelsen and Rognstad (and their successor firm) became the most popular architectural practice serving Chicago's Chinese community for the next several decades. In addition to commissions for new commercial structures in a style similar to the On Leong building, it was responsible for renovating existing buildings' storefronts and interiors.¹² The On Leong building has been considered significant within North America primarily because its architecture was thought to represent a typical "Chinese" character. Socially, however, the building was important not only because it served as headquarters of On Leong Tong, but because it functioned as a "city hall" for the enclave. During the heyday of On Leong Tong in the 1920s and 30s, the commanding presence of the building made it a symbol of wealth, power and authority.¹³

According to official record, the On Leong Association Building is the "oldest and most prominent physical symbol of Chicago's Chinese heritage."¹⁴ But it also signaled an emerging strategy of ethnic iconization that would define the identity of U.S. Chinatowns for years to come. This emphasized essentialized characteristics of Chinese archi-

ecture such as sloping glazed roofs with upturned corners, cantilevered clusters of beams (*dougong* in Chinese), carved columns, and various decorative patterns adopting the forms of animals or plants.¹⁵ Similar features may be found in San Francisco's Chinatown, which was rebuilt on an Orientalist theme after the 1906 earthquake. They were also used in Los Angeles in the 1930s by non-Chinese developers to construct a "China City" that sought to replicate a Chinese village, complete with rickshaw rides and faux-Chinese facades, after the city's old Chinatown was demolished.

Dell Upton has questioned the authenticity of these kinds of buildings in U.S. Chinatowns, arguing that they are not vernacular, since their styles were derived from high-style Chinese architecture that had little connection to the old-country lifeways of actual Chinese immigrants. He has instead defined this form of Chinese heritage as an "invented tradition" (borrowing the term from Hobsbawm and Ranger) that has been "mythicized" and "commodified" to fulfill Westerners' fantasies about the Orient.¹⁶ Upton's work shows that the production of Chinese-American culture does not simply involve a process of transmission, but a practice of re-creation.

As Lisa Lowe has suggested, the making of Asian-American culture includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented. Asian-American culture has thus emerged in relation to dominant representations that deny or subordinate Asian and Asian-American cultures as other.¹⁷ Such early efforts to exotify Chinatowns helped produce the rigidly confined Oriental "otherness" that became both a social and racial construction.

HOMELAND POLITICS AND LANDSCAPE IMAGERY IN THE 1970S

If the reality of Chinatown from 1850 to World War II was one of racial segregation and legal exclusion, the repeal of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 began a new era for Chinese immigrants. The change owed much to the structural transformation of the U.S. economy, which required reconfiguration of the nation's racial policies. To renew the domestic labor supply, some of the legal and political restrictions were lifted to Asian immigration, and the subsequent influx of new immigrant groups eventually led to a more diverse and stratified Asian community.

Shifting demographics and the adaptation of immigrant groups to American democratic ideals significantly transformed the social and political composition of Chinatown. Kinship relations fundamental to community building during the early period of Chinese immigration were gradually dissolved and replaced by political unity based on ethnicity and cultural identity. Meanwhile, a new generation of social organizations emerged, dominated by well-educated young

Chinese Americans. These groups began to compete with traditional Chinatown associations by seeking to build a democratic political structure in Chinatown and fight for inclusion and equality in a national polity. The articulation of a broad sense of Chinese identity — although emerging through internal dissension rather than consensus — became an important tool to advance the political and socio-economic rights of all Chinese immigrants and native-born Chinese Americans.

The reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Communist China in 1972 further intensified the internal struggle to construct Chinatown as a political unity. Among other things, it precipitated a series of architectural and landscape projects as a critical way to legitimate power and social control within the community. Homeland politics associated with the ongoing conflict between the Nationalist Party in Taiwan and the Communist Party in mainland China thus became a significant force in shaping the landscape of Chinatown.

Such internal struggle became most evident in 1975 with the construction of the Chinatown gateway. The structure was conceived by George Cheung, a leader within the Chinatown community, as "a symbol of Chinese culture, good will, and friendship" that would encourage visitors to learn more about Chinatown and Chinese culture.¹⁸ The design by Peter Fung, a Chinese-American architect, was likewise intended to provide a dramatic sense of entry into Chinatown and promote a pure, exotic and authentic image for the ethnic enclave (FIG. 3).

Physically, the gateway is a steel-framed, red-painted structure, 60 feet wide and 35 feet tall, spanning South Wentworth Avenue and facing Cermak Road. Its three gabled roofs are covered with glazed green tiles, with its main, central roof set higher than two smaller, side roofs to create a symmetrical, tiered appearance. The roofs are placed on top of a row of beams, an architectural feature designed to recall *dougong* (the flexible wooden bracket assembly used in traditional Chinese architecture to transfer the weight of a roof to supporting columns). Beneath the *dougong* is a panel decorated with auspicious patterns, underneath which is a large plaque inscribed with four Chinese characters: Tian Xia Wei Gong ("The World Is for All"). This proclamation of unselfish love was made famous by Sun Yat-Sen (1866–1925), a founder of the Chinese Nationalist Party, who initiated the revolution to overthrow the Qing Empire and establish the Republic of China in the early decades of the twentieth century. A similar inscription appears on the "dragon gate" in San Francisco's Chinatown, designed by Clayton Lee in 1970.

Such inscriptions are revealing of the internal politics of U.S. Chinatowns at the time. Indeed, the Nationalist government in Taiwan was a dominant power in them and funded construction of these and similar gateways. On the reverse side of the gateway, on a second plaque facing down Wentworth Avenue, is a second inscription, this one quoting



FIGURE 3. Chinatown Gateway on South Wentworth Avenue. Photo by author, ca. 2008.

Chiang Kai-Shek (1887–1975), another former leader of the Nationalist Party. His words — “Propriety, Justice, Integrity and Conscientiousness” — represent Chinese traditional values and further reiterate the community’s political affiliation.

Such inscriptions show how early Chinese migrants to the U.S. owed their allegiance to the Republic of China, established on the mainland by the Nationalist Party from 1912 to 1949, before being displaced to Taiwan by the Communists. When the United States and Communist China consolidated diplomatic relations in 1972, the Nationalist government on Taiwan pressed to continue its domination of overseas Chinese communities by increasing capital investment, intensifying media control, and even resorting to violence. This was when the Chinatown gateways in Chicago and other cities were constructed. The gateway and its embedded wordings were thus a symbolic gesture emphasizing the political power of the Nationalist Party within overseas Chinese communities.

The actual form of the gateway was derived from the free-standing *paifang*. In ancient China, *paifangs* were built as symbolic entrances to tombs, temples, palaces or cemeteries. In some cases, they might also be used to memorialize and venerate individuals of great virtue, or who had made a vital contribution to the country or local community. Usually, four columns would be used to support the structure at each end. But in the case of the Chicago gateway, there are only two columns at each end, a design feature perhaps reflecting the need to accommodate traffic on South Wentworth Avenue. The designer originally intended that two stone figures of lions, symbols of the Guardian of the Law, be placed by the gateway. But this aspect of the design has never been implemented due to a lack of funds.

Even though the gateway is relatively simple in form and decoration compared to a typical *paifang* in China — or

even to similar gateways in the Chinatowns of San Francisco or Vancouver — it has been described as “original” and “an authentic derivative of old Chinese structures.”¹⁹ Here the designation “authentic” should be seen as involving the duplication or copying of a symbolic architectural form. Any innovation to or reinvention of such a form to make it fit a new context is accepted as part of “authentic” practice, even when the meaning of the tradition it represents might be altered. Upton has thus pointed out that the rhetoric of authenticity or traditional forms involves “strategic political positions,” rather than “fixed or essential qualities.” The “authentic” tradition, in this case, serves as a category of identity that is “defined by *difference* and validated by *culture*.”²⁰ It provides an organizing tool that enables the institution of an essentialist notion of the ethnic community.

A community park dedicated to Sun Yat-Sen was another instance of the effort during these years to inscribe a particular sense of Chinese identity in Chicago. The park is located at the southern edge of Chinatown on a strip of land donated by the local development group Chinatown Redevelopment Assistance. Its construction was funded by the City of Chicago and its Community Improvement and Development Program in 1977, but it expressed an explicit view of the transnational political ties between the immigrant community and the homeland.

The park is entered through a stone arch with a cross-beam supported by two columns (FIG. 4). Inside, a statue of Dr. Sun stands atop a stone cylinder, on which a brief biography is inscribed. Underneath the statue is a rectangular pool with several small fountains. The small memorial park also includes a pavilion in Chinese traditional style and a children’s playground that helps meet the community’s need for open space. Benches and stone tables each surrounded



FIGURE 4. *The entrance to the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Park. Photo by author, ca. 2003.*

by four stools provide a setting for seniors to play chess and gather in small groups.

Overseas Chinese communities in North America and around the Pacific revered Dr. Sun as a leader of the national republican revolution. However, his political success in China was facilitated by his close ties to the Guangdong villages from which many Chinese emigrants originated. In turn, these overseas communities provided him with generous financial support. This memorial park in Chicago is thus not only a display of ethnicity, but also of enduring sociopolitical ties that reinforce certain patterns of memory.

Such projects show how Chinatown elites, including merchants and civil leaders of the Chinese community in Chicago, deployed a nationalist discourse of patriotism to tailor and institutionalize an essentialist notion of ethnic community that would facilitate a sense of local attachment and collective identity. In the U.S., systems of racial exclusion and labor exploitation meant that Chinese immigrants were largely defined as “alien,” and excluded from national representation. Chinese Americans therefore organized

themselves under a collective cultural identity that rested on transnational experience. However, after the Communist Party came to power on mainland China in 1949, political uncertainty, revolutionary social change, and shifting international geopolitics challenged Chinese Americans’ sense of the Old World.²¹

The symbolic landscape of American Chinatowns reasserted emotional ties to a homeland that was, in actuality, not the same place the original migrants had left behind. However, the creation of ethnic monuments memorializing selected political figures was a strategy local political groups could use to materialize the cultural and political imaginary, and reinforce certain political ideologies within the community. According to Lisa Lowe, conceptions of “cultural nationalism” have been opposed to assimilation by essentializing cultural identity as the “cornerstone of a cultural nationalist politics.”²² Yet, the exotic built environment of Chicago’s Chinatown produced a particular narrative of cultural nationalism that promoted only harmonious and unproblematic aspects of ethnic identity. It reduced cultural politics to the representation of a static culture that denied the complexity of national history, and stressed a singular political identity that helped consolidate the sovereignty of the dominant social groups in the community.

“GO MORE ORIENT”: CHINATOWN REVITALIZATION PLANS IN THE 1980S

Since the liberalization of immigration laws in 1965, different waves of Chinese migrants coming from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China have dramatically reconfigured the Chinese community in Chicago and fueled its growth. By 1984 about 8,000 people lived in Chicago’s Chinatown, with about 500 more arriving annually.²³ The influx placed pressure on the limited space in Chinatown, and generated economic and social problems related to housing, traffic, and community services. Most residents lived in older buildings, some of which dated to the early twentieth century. To accommodate the growing numbers, housing units there were typically divided into smaller units, forcing multiple families to share kitchens and bathrooms. Although income levels were low, the scarcity of land and housing also caused property values to soar compared to surrounding neighborhoods.

With housing space and outdoor recreational facilities inadequate and usually in poor condition, those who could afford to tended to move out of the enclave. Some moved southward and westward into Bridgeport and other nearby neighborhoods. For young Chinese professionals with adequate financial resources, the suburbs and wealthier neighborhoods in the city were also an appealing choice. But as the wealthy moved away, to be replaced by new waves of recent immigrants, Chinatown came to be seen as a vulnerable and unstable neighborhood.

In 1980, funded by the Department of Human Services under the City of Chicago's Community Development Block Grant Program, the Chinatown organization Neighborhood Redevelopment Assistance conducted a commercial revitalization study that advocated addressing this problem by enhancing the neighborhood's ethnic character. Among its findings was that "Oriental-looking shopping streets with equally Oriental-looking stores should please the patrons and increase sales."²⁴ To make the commercial areas more appealing to tourists, the study proposed a construction plan including "a giant pagoda, an Oriental-looking parking garage, Chinese 'friendship gardens,'" and ethnic decorations on everything from news shacks and telephone booths to flower planters and restaurant directories.²⁵

The symbolic pagoda was proposed for the middle of the busy intersection of Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road. This intersection was hazardous to pedestrians, and the proposal of an approximately fifteen-foot traffic island around it was also seen as creating a needed refuge for pedestrians. In order to mediate traffic congestion, the parking garage was proposed for the northeast corner of Wentworth and Cermak, a site that had originally been cleared for the construction of the Franklin extension of the Dan Ryan Expressway. Plans envisioned it as a multistory structure accommodating about 400 cars. It would also include commercial space on its ground floor and feature a roof of curved Chinese-style overhangs (FIG. 5). The study also proposed conversion of several vacant lots in the area into "mini-friendship gardens" to provide space for social gatherings.

The revitalization plan gained support from private Chinese developers, who actively sought government funds and the participation of local businesses. It was not unusual in

Chicago at the time for a partnership between government and local ethnic groups to lead to neighborhood improvement, but the plan ultimately went nowhere. The attempt nevertheless fostered a sense of public expectation and established a positive attitude toward the future development of Chinatown as an ethnic icon.

Compared to development plans for San Francisco's or New York's Chinatowns in the 1970s and 80s, the revitalization plan for Chicago's Chinatown placed more emphasis on the creation of an exotic environment than on addressing social needs.²⁶ The planning and rezoning study for San Francisco's Chinatown in 1986, for instance, emphasized historic preservation, recreational space, social services, and housing as integrated aspects of an overall community-development effort. It expressed paramount concern for the quality of the living environment available to Chinatown residents.²⁷ Likewise, the Manhattan Bridge Area Study for New York's Chinatown in 1979 addressed five main problem areas: zoning, infrastructure, social problems, housing quality, and economic base. Gentrification, insufficient social services, housing, and traffic were some of the main problems it identified with regard to Chinatown's future development.²⁸

The differences between the development plans for the Chinatowns in these three cities may be a reflection of their respective economic bases. Chicago's Chinatown relied heavily on tourism and services, while the Chinatowns in San Francisco and New York both contained significant levels of professional and light-manufacturing activity. The proposal for Chicago's Chinatown thus aimed at attracting tourists to increase business opportunities, without promoting its economy in a more sustainable and diversified way.

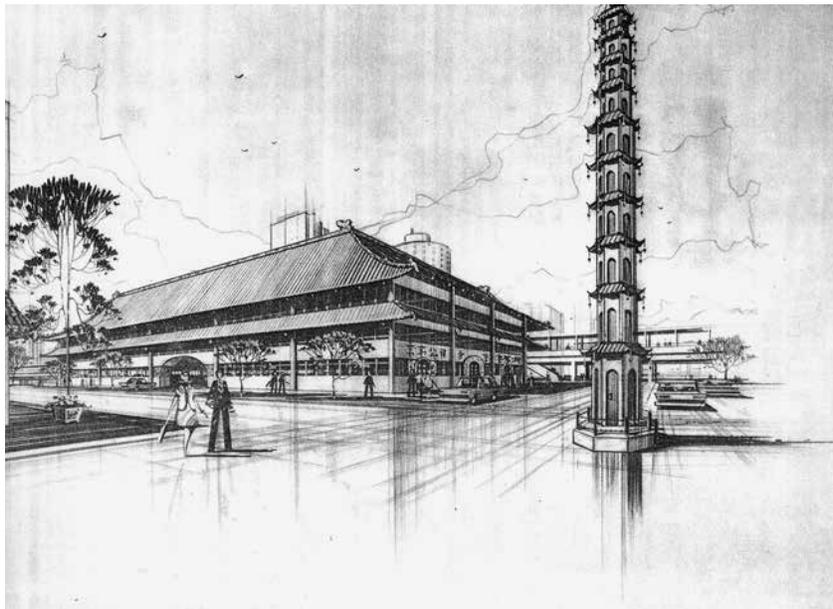


FIGURE 5. A drawing showing the Oriental design of a parking structure and pagoda at the intersection of Cermak Road and S. Wentworth Avenue. Source: City of Chicago Neighborhood Redevelopment Assistance, *An Agenda for Commercial Revitalization of Chinatown*, p.9.

RECLAIMING CULTURAL IDENTITY: THE SANTA FE RAILWAY PROJECT

During the 1970s and 80s railway tracks and expressways hampered the growth of Chicago's Chinatown on three sides, making expansion to the north the only viable option. Thus, when a 32-acre site owned by the Santa Fe Railway immediately to its north went up for sale, the community was eager to incorporate it in its future development. The site consisted largely of abandoned rail yards and service buildings, extending from Cermak Road and Archer Avenue on the south to 18th Street on the north. Although there was competition for the site from the U.S. Postal Service and the Chicago World's Fair 1992 authority, the Chinese American Development Corporation (CADC) was eventually able to purchase it for housing and commercial development in 1988.

At the time of the sale the site was economically stagnant, with dilapidated industrial structures that could not easily be readapted to new uses. But this made it an ideal location for an expansion of Chinatown, especially since the city's new McCormick Place convention and exhibition center was locat-

ed to its east. With support from city officials, the City Planning Commission and the City Council soon approved special zoning for the area. Meanwhile, the city's planning department proposed designating the area the Chinatown Basin Tax Increment Redevelopment Area, to allow the additional tax revenues generated by the redevelopment to help pay for it.²⁹

The project proceeded according to a public-private partnership pooling the efforts of the City of Chicago, the Chinese American Development Corporation, the Chinese American Development Foundation (CADF), and a group of concerned Chinese businesspeople. These parties cooperated to acquire the Santa Fe Railroad land and construct commercial, residential and parking facilities. The original proposal envisioned 150 townhouses, a 130-unit apartment building for seniors, and 60,000 square feet of space for stores and restaurants. Hoping to lure well-to-do immigrants in advance of the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the developers later revised the plan, however, to include more space for commercial and professional activities and market-priced housing, and they reduced the senior housing element to a 120-unit apartment building (FIG. 6).³⁰

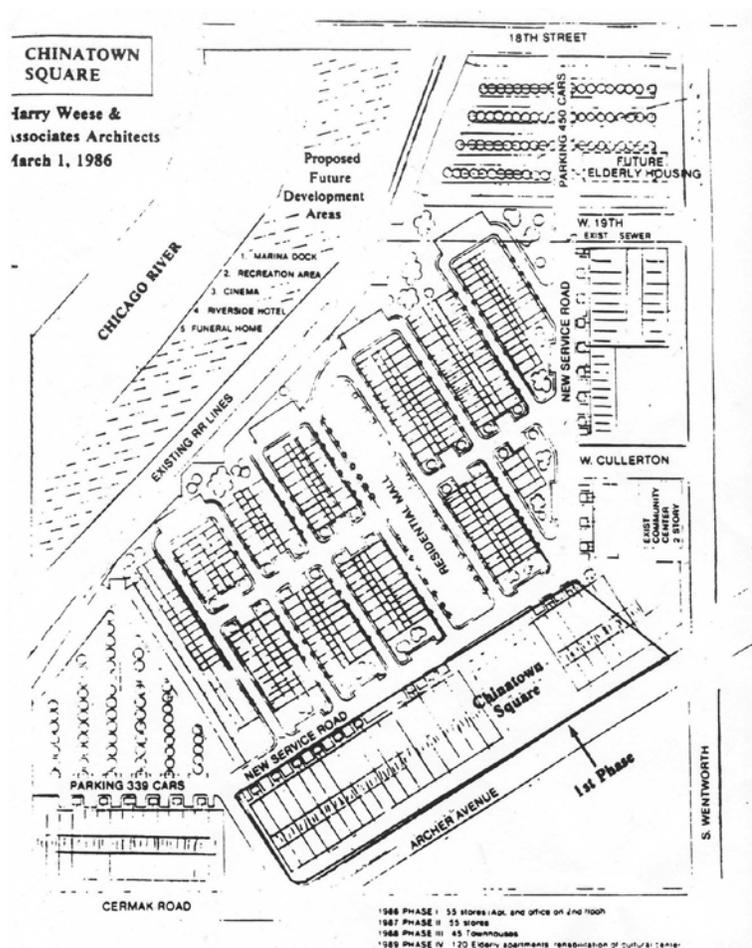


FIGURE 6. Early development plan for the Santa Fe Railway site. The commercial units of Chinatown Square constituted the first phase. Source: City of Chicago Department of Planning, Chinatown Basin Tax Increment Redevelopment Area: Redevelopment Plan and Project, 1986.

Begun in 1990, the first phase of the redevelopment involved a 200,000-sq.-ft. retail and commercial center known as Chinatown Square. To attract tourists, its architecture adopted an elaborate Oriental theme. For example, it featured a central plaza surrounded by twelve marble statues of the zodiac animals, imported from China, and two three-story pavilions with red roofs, green columns, and circular staircases leading to the top. The complex was entered from Archer Avenue through two archways, between which was an eight-foot-high wall covered by a mosaic mural, portraying two episodes in Chinese immigration history. One episode depicted the life of the early Chinese sojourners who had worked as mining and railroad laborers in the United States; the other depicted the new generation of Chinese immigrants who were gradually being integrated into mainstream society. The archways themselves were embellished with panels showing the four great inventions of ancient China: the compass, printing, gunpowder, and papermaking.

Both the mural and the gateways conveyed a strong sense of pride among Chinese immigrants toward their culture and history. Yet, unlike the old Chinatown gateway, which had singled out the lives and words of two political leaders of the Nationalist Party, the symbolic structures in Chinatown Square embraced a broader notion of “Chineseness,” one that transcended political and national boundaries. It also conveyed a new ethnic identity, grounded in the experience of Chinese immigrants as members of mainstream society and contributors to the building of the nation.

Aside from the central plaza, Chinatown Square took the form of an outdoor shopping mall with boutiques and restaurants on the ground floor and offices above. The shopping street running through the site adopted a courtyard style, with bridges spanning across at the second floor and archways located at each end (FIG. 7). Sidewalks were covered by overhanging balconies, supported by columns, while diamond-shaped windows and geometrically patterned metal screens along the stairs and balconies added a further Oriental touch.

The six-acre development of the commercial center was completed in 1992; by then, 80 percent of the stores had already been sold. The second phase of the redevelopment then focused on the construction of townhouses and the Jade Garden condominiums. Most of the townhouses were three-bedroom units with one-car garages. To accommodate the particular needs of Chinese families, some larger townhouses included detached “in-law” units designed for elderly parents who wished to live close to their children. The design and construction of the Jade Garden Apartments took account of *feng shui*, the Chinese system of philosophy and spatial configuration designed to produce harmonious living environments. In particular, it involved the relocation of a road directly across from it, since having a street point directly at the front of a building was considered inauspicious. The last phase of the development was the construction of four midrise buildings, which included condominiums, subsidized apartments for seniors, and some market-rated apartments.



FIGURE 7. The shopping street in Chinatown Square adopts a courtyard-style design. Photo by author, ca. 2007.

Despite its great impact on the social and economic life of Chinatown as a whole, the new development did not serve the interests of the low-income workers who formed a majority of the population at the time of its construction. While this sector primarily needed more affordable housing, the redevelopment aimed to attract middle- and upper-middle-class shoppers and residents. By boosting the resale values of older housing units, the new construction also signaled a new wave of restructuring and exclusion. Gentrification pressure ultimately made rental apartments in Chinatown even scarcer and allowed rents to remain high.

According to the 1990 census, 70 percent of the housing stock in Chicago's Chinatown were rental units. This figure was lower than in San Francisco's Chinatown, which had 84 percent rental units. But the rental vacancy rate in Chicago's Chinatown was only 3 percent, while in San Francisco the vacancy rate was 4 percent.³¹ In addition, from 1990 to 2000, the ratio of owner-occupied properties decreased from 66 percent to 37 percent.³² In 1988, the average home value in Chicago's Chinatown was \$171,407, while the median family

income was \$28,961.³³ According to Huping Ling, this meant that many new working-class immigrants found themselves with no choice but to remain in substandard apartments. In 2008 a new immigrant family, with a modest income based on a wage of \$7.25 per hour, had to pay a monthly rent of \$700 for a two-bedroom basement apartment.³⁴

Such statistics revealed the severe need for affordable housing in Chicago's Chinatown. But the new development did little to resolve issues such as the shortage of affordable units, lack of outdoor recreational space, and overcrowding. The poor continued to be segregated in the old core of Chinatown, while social differentiation and inequality were produced and inscribed in a new way. From the perspective of housing the poor, the development was a failure. With respect to economic diversification, however, it was a success. Organized around the maximization of consumption, it generated a new distribution of social class and economic activity, in which a greater heterogeneity in income and social status became hallmarks of an expanded Chinatown.

Railroad lands were also used as the site for a second major project that expanded the scale and profile of Chinatown in the early 1990s. This was a five-acre park north of the Santa Fe redevelopment project. Located on a strip of land on the east bank of the Chicago River, it was conceived as part of the city's plan to revitalize the riverside. Yet it and other elements of the river park system in Chicago's South Loop were also partly driven by real estate interests, whose goal was to encourage the sale of new housing and commercial properties in the area and increase property values. In the late 1980s, the Chicago Park District acquired the land for the park along the south branch of the Chicago River from Stewart Avenue on the south to 16th Street on the north, which the Burlington-Northern and Santa Fe Railway had once used as a switching yard (FIG. 8). The first phase of the project included removing debris, stone, and concrete blocks from the Chicago River and upgrading about 1,000 feet of seawall. The second phase focused on the development of the park site itself.

Designed by landscape architect Ernest Wong, the park was completed in 2000 and named after Ping Tom, the late Chinese community leader and developer who had been pivotal in the expansion of Chinatown onto the Santa Fe Railroad site. The ideas of a *feng shui* master proved inspirational to the park's design; but the key concern was to incorporate the different perspectives of community members. Some wanted a traditional design that would reflect Chinese culture, while others asked for a modern design "reflecting the exuberance and diversity of contemporary American life."³⁵ The design ultimately settled on an approach that would "establish cultural identity for the greater Chinatown community" by "developing the cultural elements of the park."³⁶

The park's design features an axial entry plaza in which four columns etched with images of dragons and a riverfront pavilion in a pagoda style celebrate the cultural identity of



FIGURE 8. Ping Tom Park is located at the northwest edge of the redevelopment site of Chinatown Square. Graphic by author, based on Google Maps.

the community.³⁷ To the north is a playground surrounded by guardrails; to the south is an open lawn decorated with groupings of large boulders. Two pathways meander across the site, ending at a memorial plaza to Ping Tom with steel benches and planting beds. At the center of the plaza, a tree stands in for the sculpture that was originally planned to mark the space.³⁸ Meanwhile, along the river, willows dot a sloped grass area in a picturesque manner. Though cut off from Chinatown by a track used by Amtrak trains and an elevated section of Chicago Transit Authority line, Ping Tom Park has become an important social space. Among other things, it hosts Chinese traditional festivals such as an annual Dragon Boat Festival and special activities including music festivals and boating and fishing events. Its symbolic program largely avoids passive cultural icons as representations of ethnic traditions. Instead, its relatively open design allows different groups to actively manipulate its spaces to express their cultural identities.

Overall, the Santa Fe project and Ping Tom Park have helped improve community amenities and the economic and social vitality of Chinatown. But they have also exacerbated a larger trend of urban gentrification by privileging the needs of well-to-do families and marginalizing the poor. Without the full participation of lower-income groups, the projects have largely served the most aggressive economic interests and catered to the needs and expectations of the Chinatown elite and city officials. Aestheticization and image-making have been central to their view of community development.

Landscape improvement has thus provided a tool for manipulating consciousness, reproducing political and racial ideology, and naturalizing power relations.

In addition, architectural and landscape imagery have been used to create an alternative form of memory and collectivity that has reinforced an institutional narrative of multiculturalism. In part this has been used to celebrate the incorporation of ethnic minorities into the nation-state. But recognition of the contribution of early Chinese migrants and memorialization of a Chinatown civic leader also reassert the cultural identity of Chinese Americans in a way that emphasizes their experience within the host country. In some ways this reflects the growing economic and political power of Communist China in the 1980s and 90s and a greater variety of geographic origin, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation within the Chinese community itself.³⁹ This condition required a cultural representation that was more diverse and more conducive to alliances. In a sense, landscape imagery has been deployed as a means of situating and narrating a new cultural identity emerging out of shifting economic and political conditions within the ethnic community itself.

REPACKAGING “CHINESENESS” IN THE GLOBAL ERA

Multiculturalism, according to Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard, “holds many implications for tourism marketing.”⁴⁰ In global cities, a packaged construction of cultural symbols articulates multiple and manufactured place identities. In the process, symbolic cultures that address ethnic identity and history are linked in a narrative that encourages the consumption of ethnic products. Underlying this process, of course, is a process of globalization that transmits cultures originating from different regions across national borders.⁴¹ Within this context, “Chineseness” has increasingly become a global brand that incorporates “both signs and symbols as well as products and services.”⁴² Meanwhile, in the Chinese diaspora, the form of Chineseness has become less bounded by geographic identity or political ideology, and more aligned with commercial interests that “ignore the question of meaning.”⁴³

A series of decorative elements installed in Chicago’s Chinatown in the past two decades exemplify such efforts to repackage Chineseness for global consumption. In 1998 the Chicago Department of Transportation launched a facelift of Chinatown’s major streets, Wentworth and Cermak. The project included improvements to sidewalks, new streetlights, and the creation of a small “town center” as a gathering space. The “town center,” at 23rd and Wentworth, took the form of a small garden decorated with stone benches and plants, with the Chinese symbol for happiness inlaid into the pavement. Perhaps because it contained too much hardscape and was located between the Chinese church and a gift shop, the space has not been used as intended; it is now used as a parking lot. The improved sidewalks, featuring new pavers and a geomet-

ric design running alongside the curb, are equally generic and unrelated to any specific characteristic of the local community.

Another key element of the effort was a twenty-foot-tall patterned column with a dragon motif erected in the median near 24th Place and Wentworth. Designer Ernest Wong explained that the column was “actually similar to a piece (I saw) in Beijing. It’s a cast-stone piece which has a dragon that is going to be wrapping around the column all the way to the top in bas relief. The dragon . . . is really the essence and the livelihood of the Chinese people.”⁴⁴

For Cermak Road, Wong envisioned a group of eighteen spheres decorating the newly constructed median in front of the Chinatown gateway. He explained that the gray orbs sitting in planters would represent the pearls in an ancient Chinese fairy tale. However, some Chinatown residents feared that the design would attract graffiti, and that the spheres would be vandalized (as had been the case with phone booths resembling Chinese pagodas that had once dotted the neighborhood). Emphasizing that members of the community should be involved in the decision-making process, the executive director of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce then proposed building a topiary garden in the median, with trees cut into the shapes of dragons and fish. His reasoning was that “the trees would be less attractive to vandals.”⁴⁵

As these debates unfolded, the plan to upgrade the median was laid aside. Nevertheless, as a link between historic Chinatown and its new expansion, the section of Cermak Road in front of the Chinatown gateway remained a focus for community concern. In 2003 the Taiwanese government funded construction of a pavilion at the intersection. And soon thereafter the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce built the “Nine Dragon Wall” next to it (FIG. 9). Both structures, located opposite the Chinatown gateway, are clear in their intention to evoke nostalgia for a generic past.



FIGURE 9. The pavilion facing the intersection of Cermak and Wentworth is surrounded by a guardrail to prevent vandalism, but also to keep visitors out. Photo by author, ca. 2007.

Pavilions such as that across from the gateway were traditionally used in Chinese gardens, on mountainsides, or at scenic spots, to offer sheltered points from which to view garden scenes or picturesque landscapes. But in Chicago, the Wentworth/Cermak pavilion is situated between a busy intersection, a parking lot, and a Chicago Transit Authority station — hardly the romantic setting that such a structure would historically be associated with. The spatial decontextualization and dislocation in effect transforms the pavilion into a sign bereft of its original signification, a form of “simulacrum” or “kitsch.”⁴⁶

The practice of kitsch architecture may also describe the Nine Dragon Wall, which mimics a wall of the same name in the royal garden — Beihai Park — in Beijing. The Chinatown version is smaller and much less exquisite than the original (FIG. 10). It is also located directly across from the exit ramp to the I-55 and I-90 expressways. This location was actually used as one of the arguments for constructing the wall: Chinatown leaders claimed it would mitigate the particularly negative *feng shui* of the site and bring fortune and prosperity to the community. They also claimed the Dragon Wall would contain a piece of brick originating from the Great Wall of China. And they argued that the number nine was prestigious, and that dragons were a symbol of the soul of all things.

In the past, because of their divine meaning, only royal families had the privilege of using dragon images. But with the collapse of the Chinese Empire, the image of the dragon has gradually evolved from a symbol of royal power and authority to a sign of Chinese national culture and identity more generally. This is especially the case when the Chinese

government has needed to construct a marketable semblance of national heritage for political purposes or to compete in global markets. Dissociated from its cultural and historic context, the original meaning of a dragon wall has thus been almost completely diluted. It is instead a mimicry, one that unsettles the relationship between place and tradition by employing a cultural symbol derived from a nationalist agenda to compete in a global web of tourist consumption. In a sense, such a practice is part of the manufacture of global cultural Chineseness.

Compared with earlier architectural and landscape projects that derived meaning from local cultural and political concerns, these more recent designs have tended to reproduce a purely commercial message. Some critics have pointed to how the relation between built form and culture is increasingly being affected by a need to manipulate images for commercial consumption.⁴⁷ In this case, the conscious desire by local forces to “Orientalize” Chinatown and mark it as a site of marketable ethnic difference has involved the manipulation of traditional forms to create spatial products specific to the locality.

It is in this sense that James Ferguson has proposed the notion of “isomorphism” of space/place/culture. He has argued that the conception of culture as a spatially bounded phenomenon is inadequate. Instead, the identity of a place must be explored within hierarchically interconnected spaces, with “its cultural construction as a community or locality.”⁴⁸ Thus, even though Chinatown appears to be deviant and inconsonant with the national space, the transformation of its built environment is testimony to the nation’s shifting socioeconomic structure and a global culture of image consumption.



FIGURE 10. *The Nine Dragon Wall in Chinatown is displayed as a representation of the dynamic character of the Chinese all over the world. Photo by author, ca. 2007.*

Nezar AlSayyad has also pointed to a decreasing congruence between tradition and place in the era of globalization, as identity and tradition are becoming “less rooted in place and more informationally based.”⁴⁹ In Ferguson’s words, “a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum” and “a consequent weakening of historicity” has created “a new depthlessness” in cultural practices.⁵⁰ Thus, in the case of Chicago’s Chinatown, instead of attempting to represent a meaningful and enduring ethnic tradition in the built environment, local agents have shifted emphasis to a process of reinterpreting, packaging and manipulating cultural tradition to encompass the politics of spatial reproduction linking local and global contexts.

BEYOND “CHINATOWN”: A TERRAIN OF CONTESTED MEANINGS

The making of ethnic landscapes in Chicago’s Chinatown manifests the relationship between space, race, heritage and power in the context of rapid urban transformation. The ethnic projects undertaken in Chinatown indicate how changing socio-political positions have affected the cultural and social meanings represented in the built environment.

As the city of Chicago has itself changed, the idea of ethnicity inherent in its neighborhoods has changed from a model of segregation and ward politics to one in which racial difference is celebrated as a mosaic, and in which identity is transformed into a spectacle that may inform urban planning and design.⁵¹ Architectural and landscape imagery has

played an important role in reinventing postwar Chinatown. This has not only brought the commodification of ethnicity, but also the consolidation of the existing political and power structures. The process of rearticulating and reproducing cultural traditions in the built environment has thus shaped and been shaped by shifts in the community’s political agenda and economic development. Stuart Hall has suggested that cultural identity is “not an essence but a positioning,” which is assumed for political reason.⁵² The case of Chicago’s Chinatown exemplifies this strategic use of specific cultural signifiers for the purpose of eliding internal difference and promoting a sense of political unity that benefits dominant groups.

Far from being a stable culture with one shared identity, Chinatown is a terrain of contested meanings, subject to pressures both from inside and outside. From early attempts to embrace homeland politics to the later celebration of Chinese-American identity and a more inclusive notion of Chineseness, architectural and spatial configurations have helped visually create the community as a preeminent symbol of ethnic culture. In a sense, ethnic culture as a “way of life” has today been transferred into the manufacture of “cultural products.” This allows a simplified ethnic identity to be forged through the less contested notion of “culture” than the more controversial arenas of politics and economy. The built environment is a cultural object that catalyzes the shift of sociopolitical modes. Thus, the study of the ethnic landscape opens a terrain on which to rethink the articulation of ethnic identity in terms of internal heterogeneities, contestations, and instability that are critically politicized in cultural forms.

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Center. The first floor nowadays houses commercial units, while the second has been renovated for offices, classrooms, and a library serving the needs of the church. On the third floor, the former ancestor shrine and meeting halls have been transformed into a Christian hall of worship. With its original storefronts, essential architectural elements, and the exterior facades remaining mostly intact, the historical integrity of the building has been well preserved. In 2007 the Pui Tak Center was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the Partners in Preservation Program to renovate the terra cotta exterior and clay tiles on the roof.

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