

Who's Chinatown, Whose Chinatown?  
Visions of Urban Progress in Los Angeles  
Chinatown, 1970-2020

Thesis by  
Abigail Yuan-Shan Jiang (姜沅珊)

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The Caltech logo, featuring the word "Caltech" in a bold, orange, sans-serif font, centered within a light orange rectangular background.

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Abigail Yuan-Shan Jiang  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8003-8380

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the dynamics of urban development in Los Angeles (LA) Chinatown since the 1970s until present day. The historical narrative is driven by broad demographic shifts across LA County, alongside municipal and community politics that shape the material and cultural demands behind neighborhood change. Through this narrative, I challenge the traditional framings of resident versus business interests in Chinatowns, and instead highlight the complicated and often competing visions of progress throughout the community. I argue that “the youths” and “the elders” serve as key figures in this history: first, as dynamic actors and activists directly engaged in the process of development, and second, as subjects of discourse that actors mobilize towards different goals of development. Finally, I illuminate tensions between organizing as a representative of a community and organizing in solidarity towards the tangible needs of a community.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
Abbreviations and Google Map.....	vi
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: The Teen Post, Cathay Manor, and Community-Driven Advocacy (1973 - 1988).....	5
Chapter 2: Suburban Chinatown, Castelar School, and Demographic Change (1983 - 1996).....	24
Chapter 3: Business Improvement and Bringing Back the Youth (1990 - 2013) .....	34
Chapter 4: Wal-Mart and Competing Ideas of Development (2012 - 2013).....	52
Chapter 5: The CCED and Reshaping Visions of the Future (2019 - Present).....	61
Conclusion: Organizing in Solidarity and at the Margins.....	68
Bibliography .....	73

## Abbreviations and Google Map

### **Abbreviations**

CCBA: Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association

CCC: Chinese Chamber of Commerce

CSC: Chinatown Service Center

CCOA: Chinese Committee on Aging

CRA: Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles

HUD: US Department of Housing & Urban Development

PAC: Project Area Committee (Chinatown's citizen advisory group to the CRA)

OSCH: Organization for Senior Citizens Housing

AAE: Asian Americans for Equality

CPOC: Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee

SGV: San Gabriel Valley

LAPD: Los Angeles Police Department

LACBC: LA Chinatown Business Council, which manages the BID

BID: Chinatown Business Improvement District

CCED: Chinatown Community for Equitable Development

SEACA: Southeast Asian Community Alliance

**Google Map:** <https://bit.ly/jiang-lachinatown>

This Google Map provides locations for the various businesses, organizations, and sites mentioned throughout each chapter of this thesis to contextualize LA Chinatown as a physical space within Los Angeles and LA County.

## Introduction

In Spring 2022, I attended a guided walking tour of Los Angeles Chinatown, hosted by the local grassroots organization the Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED). Young CCED organizers pointed out many different sites where senior residents were displaced by multi-use developments for new businesses, luxury condos, and office spaces. These organizers also emphasized how LA Chinatown lacked enough affordable housing units, despite the shockingly low incomes throughout the neighborhood. I was disturbed and compelled by their declaration: Chinatown was not an equitable place for its own community. The CCED's narratives about the ongoing harms of urban development struck a chord with me. I felt that I could locate myself with their activism, with their battle to advocate for the tangible needs of the community. Yet, as a second generation Chinese American with no direct connection to LA Chinatown (or any Chinatown for that matter), it seemed bizarre that I felt a sense of responsibility to help this community that I could not claim to represent.

As the walking tour concluded, the CCED called out local Chinatown leaders for their failures to serve the community by actively harming elderly tenants or funding abusive security patrols. The CCED's vision for Chinatown's future was fundamentally different from these failed leaders, who appeared to advocate for neighborhood capital development rather than the livelihoods of current residents. Yet, these failed leaders included people with generations of family from LA Chinatown, who grew up in the neighborhood, and built their lives around the community. In contrast, the CCED included people like me - college students who lived outside of Chinatown, or young professionals working in tech, and even people who were not Asian American. What does it mean for groups like the CCED, who may not represent any cross-section of LA Chinatown, to organize counter to individuals who are arguably more representative of the community?

My thesis exploration was motivated by this tension between organizing as a representative of a community, versus organizing in solidarity with a community that may not be yours to represent. It seemed that groups like CCED and these harmful local leaders had completely different understandings of Chinatown's identity, and what they wanted Chinatown to look like. *Whose Chinatown is it? Who is Chinatown for?* These questions necessitated an understanding of the actors

themselves - their relationships to Chinatown, who they considered a part of Chinatown, and who they envisioned as part of Chinatown's future. To unpack this tension about organizing and these questions about whose and who's, I wanted to understand the histories of organizing around urban development in this neighborhood, and how competing visions of LA Chinatown's progress might contextualize the CCED's activism for equity in opposition to the damages done by community representatives.

Scholars across urban studies, sociology, Asian American studies, and history have broadly understood urban development in Chinatowns through conflicts between resident interests and business interests. Existing literature typically frames "traditional Chinatowns" as neighborhoods that were established for working-class residents with limited social and political rights.<sup>1</sup> US historians illustrate how over the course of the 20th century, cities started to treat Chinatowns (and other ethnic enclaves) as places with potential economic utility, while simultaneously seeking to maintain these neighborhoods' "cultural authenticity".<sup>2</sup> Urban studies scholars and sociologists connect these municipal desires for multiculturalism with the rise of cultural commodification, describing how Chinatowns have morphed into commercial spaces that serve as "unique cultural assets".<sup>3</sup> This process of gentrification is understood to increase the political capital of business and commercial interests, while decreasing the power of neighborhood residents.<sup>4</sup> Sociologists and Asian American Studies scholars highlight how changing immigration patterns and migration within the US drastically impact Chinatowns' ethnic and class demographics, leading to further conflicts regarding neighborhood development between working-class residents and wealthy business elites.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Liu and Geron, "Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice"; Guan and Knottnerus, "Chinatown Under Siege: Community Protest and Structural Ritualization Theory."

<sup>2</sup> Vitiello and Blickenderfer, "The Planned Destruction of Chinatowns in the United States and Canada since c.1900"; Josi Ward, "Dreams of Oriental Romance."

<sup>3</sup> Knapp and Vojnovic, "Rethinking the Growth Machine"; Santos, Belhassen, and Caton, "Reimagining Chinatown"; Pottie-Sherman, "Vancouver's Chinatown Night Market"; Kyan, "Electric Pagodas and Hyphenate Gates."

<sup>4</sup> Lin, "Los Angeles Chinatown," 20; Acolin and Vitiello, "Who Owns Chinatown"; Hom, "Symbols of Gentrification?"

<sup>5</sup> Massey and Denton, "The Dimensions of Residential Segregation"; Hom, "Revitalizing Chinatown for a New Generation"; Luk and Phan, "Ethnic Enclave Reconfiguration"; Li, "Beyond Chinatown, beyond Enclave: Reconceptualizing Contemporary Chinese Settlements in the United States"; Lin and Robinson, "Spatial Disparities in the Expansion of the Chinese Ethnoburb of Los Angeles."



Relying upon dichotomies in this well-established resident versus business framework to understand LA Chinatown's development may oversimplify complex dynamics about representation and community progress. These complex dynamics can be explored in a historical narrative through two key questions. First, *who* are the actors in urban development? How are they connected to Chinatown (if at all)? Second, *how* do these actors advance different visions of community change in Chinatown? How do actors make a compelling case for the types of development they want to see, what organizing methods do they use, and how are these actions influenced by their relationships to Chinatown? The history of development in LA Chinatown is further complicated by its position in the shadow of the San Gabriel Valley, where "suburban Chinatowns" like Monterey Park are populated by Chinese Americans and their businesses, yet are not considered *the* Chinatown of Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup>

I argue that in LA Chinatown, the youths and the elders serve as generative windows to observe neighborhood development and notions of community progress. This window is particularly useful starting in the 1970s, when immigration-related demographic changes and funding for urban development projects dramatically accelerated across Los Angeles. Both the youth and the elders are dynamic actors and activists who directly engage with the process of development. At the same time, concepts of "youths", "elders", and the cultural "legacies" that supposedly connect these two groups are mobilized by different actors to rationalize different goals for neighborhood change. These actors include local Chinese elites, small business owners, community activists, and city representatives among others. As an example, recent youth-led grassroots demands to "protect our elders" in the wake of anti-Asian violence demonstrate how youth actors mobilize the concept of the elderly in their discourse to advocate for community safety measures.

In this thesis, I intertwine a sequence of historical narratives to explore the complicated and often competing visions of urban development within LA Chinatown. I follow stories about tangible community resources like service centers, housing, schools, and businesses, alongside the people and organizations that advocate for these resources. Throughout these narratives, both the youth and the elderly serve as actors and as subjects of discourse. I mirror ethnographic approaches by

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<sup>6</sup> Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California*.

highlighting the voices of these actors, allowing them to speak their own motivations for their visions of development in Chinatown. I aim to illustrate these actors' relationships (or lack thereof) to LA Chinatown and illuminate their distinct notions of progress and visions for Chinatown's future. Ultimately, I return to the questions of "whose Chinatown" and "who's Chinatown" to unpack these tensions between organizing as a representative and organizing in solidarity with a community.

The first half of this thesis draws upon newspaper clippings, organizational meeting minutes, and personal correspondence from The Huntington Library's Hong Family Papers, an archival collection from a family of prominent Chinese American community leaders with rich connections to LA Chinatown. The latter half of my thesis integrates online archives of periodicals such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and community-run publications such as *Gum Saan Journal* by the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California. At the end of the thesis, local journalism alongside interviews and social media posts become central to understanding actors' behaviors and perspectives in the contemporary moment.

## Chapter 1: The Teen Post, Cathay Manor, and Community-Driven Advocacy (1973 - 1988)

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, LA Chinatown faced a variety of demographic changes due to new immigration patterns across the US. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (also known as the Hart-Celler Act), which opened the door to an influx of Chinese immigrants to the West Coast. Many of these new arrivals flocked to LA Chinatown because of its pre-existing infrastructure to support immigrants and their families. Family-based community organizations such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) provided relocation support, advocated for civil and legal rights, and maintained connections with residents' relatives back in China. Other long-standing organizations like the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC) provided financial services to new businesses. The CCC even hosted vibrant cultural events such as the annual Golden Dragon Parade on Lunar New Year, which served as a community celebration and popular tourist attraction.<sup>7</sup> The neighborhood's self-organized social services and economic resources were crucial to welcoming new Chinese residents into Los Angeles.

Despite LA Chinatown's thriving social and commercial scene, people in and outside of the community started to raise concerns about cultural and material conditions in the neighborhood. In 1973, a staff writer at the *LA Herald Examiner* interviewed an "elderly, bearded Chinese man" who seemed an embodiment of community wisdom. While soaking up the Southern California sun on his doorstep, the old man lamented:

My family has been in California since the Gold Rush days. I'm sorry to say our youths are changing... They are not showing proper respect for their elders. And that isn't the way I was raised or my father or grandfathers. I'm afraid that when proper respect for the family is lost, respect for laws and the community will suffer. Well, I probably won't be around to see it and for that I am most grateful.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> LA Evening Herald and Express, "LA Chinese Celebrate New Year."

<sup>8</sup> Schrader, "Chinatown's Problems Growing with Population, Lack of Jobs."

This elderly man described a deep concern for the future of LA Chinatown, suggesting that the community would struggle to carry on if the youth did not maintain the traditional cultural value of respecting their ancestors. However, the young people's behaviors actually reflected increasing economic scarcity in Chinatown, rooted in changing demographics within the community.

Between the passage of Hart-Cellar and the elderly man's interview in 1973, the population of LA Chinatown experienced a rapid growth. The arrival of "New Chinese" strained the local job market, leading to unemployment across the neighborhood. A local teenager complained to the same *Examiner* reporter that "there ain't anything to do around here. I can't get a job that'll pay anything... the New Chinese have pushed wages way down."<sup>9</sup> Even a white businessman noticed that Chinatown was "busting [at] its seams", with "not much work here for the New Chinese and tension [building] up between old timers and the new arrivals."<sup>10</sup> May Chan, a local counselor, recent UCLA graduate, and high school teacher in Pasadena noted that many of the "new children" could not speak English as well. This language barrier prevented these new immigrants from seeking employment outside of Chinatown. As the neighborhood filled with "New Chinese", these problematic youth were often not even the direct descendants of any of the elderly.

In the face of these anxieties about Chinatown's future, community members established new neighborhood organizations to address material challenges facing the youth. In 1971, a group of students started the Teen Post, a vital community center that hosted a variety of educational and extracurricular programs.<sup>11</sup> One of the key founders of the Teen Post was Gong Toy, who was widely known as Don Toy.<sup>12</sup> Toy grew up in the heart of LA Chinatown as the son of two first-generation, Cantonese-speaking Chinese parents. Alongside his college-age peers, Toy was galvanized to host "positive community activities" at the Teen Post after realizing the importance of his parents' Chinese culture to Chinatown's future:

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<sup>9</sup> Schrader.

<sup>10</sup> Schrader.

<sup>11</sup> Cho and California, *Chinatown and China City in Los Angeles*.

<sup>12</sup> Toy, "Preservation Acts."

When I was growing up, I always had a rebellious personality. I always felt that we should question and try to understand things better. The difference with me was that I never knew how to be ashamed of my first-generation Chinese parents... I started to analyze and I wanted to integrate the Chinese culture into American society. I felt that we have such a rich Chinese culture, that without understanding it we lose a lot... That's one of the big reasons why I think we need to continue educating new immigrant and third- and fourth-generation Chinese about our culture and its influence in the traditional arts... [Having a project like a Chinese cultural and community center] can give people a sense of pride, a sense of community, a sense of identity.<sup>13</sup>

Much like the elderly bearded man, Toy expressed a similar desire to maintain cultural values to protect the integrity of the community. Toy mobilized both youth and elders in his language to advocate for shared community centers, suggesting that older generations needed to pass down their traditions to the younger generations to ensure the survival of Chinatown. Toy was also key to directly mobilizing the youth and elder populations within the community. As a lead organizer at the Teen Post, Toy invited senior citizens to teach classes on lion dancing, Chinese guitar, and opera, and he recruited young people to attend these courses and organize group outings on their own.<sup>14</sup>

Within years of establishment, hundreds of youths visited the Teen Post each summer.<sup>15</sup> Besides Toy, other leaders and activists established new groups like the Chinatown Service Center (CSC) and CCBA's Welfare Committee in these same years. These groups bolstered efforts to "counsel many newly arrived Chinese" and local youth with employment training through temporary jobs, such as cleaning graffiti and preparing meals for elders.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to these community activists' ingenuity and savvy understanding of neighborhood politics, they simultaneously addressed economic strains and cultural concerns about youth misbehavior by engaging with both the young and the old through these service centers and organizations. Through his work at the Teen Post, Toy illustrated his commitment to younger generations needed to advance the future of Chinatown, while also framing the older, established residents as necessary to educate these youths.

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<sup>13</sup> Toy.

<sup>14</sup> Toy.

<sup>15</sup> Schrader, "Chinatown's Problems Growing with Population, Lack of Jobs."

<sup>16</sup> Chinatown Service Center, "History | Chinatown Service Center | Los Angeles"; Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, "羅省中華會館 - Welfare Committee of Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association."

However, the youth were not the only population of concern in LA Chinatown during this time. Since Hart-Cellar prioritized more “highly skilled” immigrants and those with existing family in the US, the “New Chinese” were on average wealthier in comparison to Chinatown’s existing population.<sup>17</sup> Low-income residents were slowly priced out of rental units in the neighborhood. By the end of the 1970s, working-class senior citizens had very limited access to affordable housing, placing many elders in a highly precarious position. Unlike the issue of youth misbehavior, Chinatown community members could not address these issues of senior housing on their own. The neighborhood did not have enough private capital to independently fund the construction of new apartments, and creating new community service centers would not resolve this scarcity. As a result, community members turned to the City of LA’s resources to address this issue of senior housing.

One city agency that was invested in Chinatown’s senior housing dilemma was the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA). Established in 1948, the CRA focused on “revitalizing economically depressed areas of LA”, particularly “older neighborhoods through historic preservation and new development”.<sup>18</sup> Although the CRA initiated urban development projects throughout the 1950s and 1960s, their activities accelerated throughout the 1970s. President Ronald Reagan’s new federal policies and California’s passage of Proposition 13 both reduced local tax revenues, so redevelopment efforts became increasingly alluring tools to stimulate the Los Angeles economy in this decade.<sup>19</sup> To supplement this declining tax base, cities across the US looked towards private investment capital instead, seeking entrepreneurial methods to capitalize upon different aspects of their cities.<sup>20</sup> In Los Angeles, Mayor Tom Bradley and other city administrators hoped to capitalize upon the city’s multiculturalism to transform Los Angeles into the “capital of the Pacific Rim” that would bridge between the US, Latin America, and Asia.<sup>21</sup> Bradley’s vision of Los Angeles as a global and multicultural hub made Chinatown a prime opportunity for the CRA. By revitalizing

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<sup>17</sup> Buckelew, “Chinatown Faces Sudden Growing Pains.”

<sup>18</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, “A Glimpse at the Community Redevelopment Agency”; Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, “Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles Reports and Publications.”

<sup>19</sup> Marks, “Shifting Ground.”

<sup>20</sup> Harvey, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism”; Davis, *City of Quartz*.

<sup>21</sup> Glick, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958-1977*.

Chinatown through development projects, the CRA could reinvigorate the local economy, and simultaneously demonstrate the city's commitment to cultural preservation of the Pacific in front of an international audience. As a result, LA Chinatown (and other ethnic neighborhoods) were incorporated into Los Angeles' evolution as an urban "growth machine" to attract capital through redevelopment.<sup>22</sup>

The CRA was interested in Chinatown as a project site, and Chinatown community members were also interested in working with the CRA. First and foremost, one of CRA's top priorities was to "build housing for all income levels" across the city.<sup>23</sup> The CRA was Los Angeles' direct municipal connection with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the HUD could help subsidize affordable rents to low-income elderly through the federal Section 8 program.<sup>24</sup> On top of this, the CRA also seemed to prioritize community engagement through citizen advisory boards across the city. Through a Chinatown Project Area Committee (PAC), local community members representing "residents, property owners, and businessmen in the area" would serve as the "formal means through which project residents participate at all stages in the formulation of an urban renewal plan within their neighborhood."<sup>25</sup> By forming a CRA-affiliated PAC, Chinatown finally had an opportunity to advocate for itself at the municipal level.

In many ways, a collaboration between the CRA and Chinatown seemed like a perfect fit. Chinatown was a neighborhood rich with cultural history, and CRA's goal of "historic preservation" was of interest to both community members and the city alike.<sup>26</sup> Chinatown residents were also demanding big-ticket items like affordable housing for senior citizens. Such a large-scale project would be difficult to accomplish through Chinatown's own resources. With the community's voices represented via the PAC alongside funding from the CRA and HUD, there was hope that Chinatown

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<sup>22</sup> Molotch, "The City as a Growth Machine"; Davis, "'Chinatown', Part Two?"; Lin, "Los Angeles Chinatown," 200.

<sup>23</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "Chinatown Redevelopment Project"; Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "Chinatown - Project Area Overview."

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), "Housing Choice Voucher Program Section 8," 8.

<sup>25</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "A Glimpse at the Community Redevelopment Agency."

<sup>26</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "Chinatown Redevelopment Project"; Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "Chinatown - Project Area Overview."

would be able to fulfill the needs of its seniors. Under the leadership of Ed Helfeld, a Harvard-educated city planner who served as CRA administrator, the CRA indeed initiated plans for Chinatown's redevelopment and PAC formation in 1977.<sup>27</sup> In addition to senior housing, the CRA also hoped to use Chinatown as a space for capital investment through construction of new housing units, business spaces, and improved transportation infrastructure.<sup>28</sup>

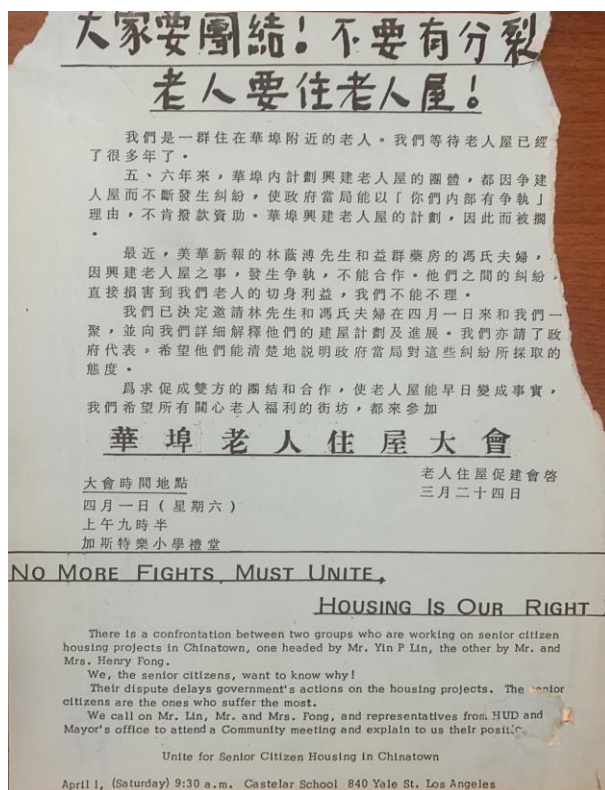


Figure 1. Dual-language bulletin from Chinatown senior citizens demanding unity around senior housing in 1977.<sup>29</sup>

However, with or without the CRA's help, senior residents in Chinatown were already organizing on their own. The stakes regarding affordable housing were high, and they wanted to see immediate action from institutions like the HUD who held immense power over the community's future. By

<sup>27</sup> Harvard Graduate School of Design, "In Memoriam."

<sup>28</sup> Asian Americans for Equality, "Community Meeting on Chinatown Redevelopment Plans Brochure."

<sup>29</sup> Chinatown senior citizens, "'No More Fights, Must Unite, Housing Is Our Right!' Flier."



March of 1977, a group of seniors had self-organized to demand a new housing complex for elderly residents. “No more fights, must unite, housing is our right!”<sup>30</sup> These senior citizens distributed a dual-language public bulletin, calling upon community leaders, local HUD representatives, and their neighbors to attend a community-wide meeting at Castelar Elementary School in Chinatown. Although two separate locations for a new senior housing complex had already been proposed by different private sponsors from Chinatown, these seniors expressed long-standing frustrations at the lack of action within the community. They mobilized their own identity as elders to emphasize the urgency of their demands: “The senior citizens are the ones who suffer the most.”<sup>31</sup>

In January of 1978, more than 300 Chinatown community members finally gathered to elect 25 representatives to the CRA-affiliated PAC.<sup>32</sup> Spokespeople from well-established community organizations and institutions like the CCBA, CSC, and Chinese Confucius Temple, alongside tenants and businesspeople all volunteered their time on the PAC.<sup>33</sup> Among these representatives was David Lee who served as the Chair of the PAC.<sup>34</sup> Lee represented business interests as former president of the CCC and owner of “General Lee’s”, a beloved restaurant that served Chinatown residents and the likes of Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland.<sup>35</sup> Lee’s family was Cantonese and hailed from Guangdong (Canton), a province from which the majority of LA Chinatown’s population originated up until the 1940s.<sup>36</sup> Another key member of the PAC was Teen Post founder and young community activist Don Toy. Toy officially represented the “residential tenants” of Chinatown, despite his dual-role as leader of a youth-serving organization.<sup>37</sup> According to correspondence sent to CRA administrator Helfeld, the PAC’s membership was “truly representative and a cross section

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<sup>30</sup> Chinatown senior citizens.

<sup>31</sup> Chinatown senior citizens.

<sup>32</sup> Asian Americans for Equality, “Community Meeting on Chinatown Redevelopment Plans Brochure.”

<sup>33</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee, “Meeting Minutes of PAC Joint Meeting: Land Use Subcommittee and Senior Citizen/Low-Moderate Income Housing Subcommittee.”

<sup>34</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee, “Project Area Committee of CRA Meeting Minutes.”

<sup>35</sup> Leovy, “David Lee Dies at 95; Ran Popular General Lee’s Restaurant in Chinatown”; Buckelew, “Chinatown Faces Sudden Growing Pains.”

<sup>36</sup> Lee, David Lee, Southern California Oral History Project Transcript Summary.

<sup>37</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee, “Chinatown PAC Redevelopment Newsletter.”

of the community.”<sup>38</sup> In reality, middle-aged people and Chinatown’s elites comprised most of the PAC.<sup>39</sup> These elites included local Chinese property owners who managed buildings, or people like Lee whose families lived in Chinatown long enough to accumulate some wealth. But Chinatown’s elites were small fish in comparison to the white elites of LA, who owned entire real estate empires or managed national franchises. At the very least, PAC provided Chinatown with a chair at the table in its own development issues, rather than private white investors with no connection to Chinatown dictating the neighborhood’s future.

Although these PAC representatives perhaps were not fully representative of everyone in Chinatown, they were long-standing community members who clearly recognized the vocal and urgent demands of Chinatown’s senior citizens. A PAC-organized neighborhood survey on the “needs of the Chinatown community” reflected these demands, with senior citizen housing and affordable/low cost housing rising to the top of voters’ lists.<sup>40</sup> In a Spring 1978 committee meeting, Don Toy boldly moved that senior citizen housing be the PAC’s “primary project and concern”.<sup>41</sup> A local reverend seconded this motion, and Chairperson Lee echoed the importance of supporting these elderly tenants. By declaring senior housing as their main priority, Toy and the PAC demonstrated that communicating support for seniors was central to their vision of progress in Chinatown.

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<sup>38</sup> “Memorandum to Mr. Ed Helfeld of the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles: “Retrospective Evaluation of Redevelopment Activity in Chinatown”.”

<sup>39</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee, “Project Area Committee of CRA Meeting Minutes.”

<sup>40</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee.

<sup>41</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee.



*Figure 2. CRA proposed redevelopment map for Chinatown in the 1970s, annotated with the two proposed senior housing sites by Mr. Lin and Mr. and Mrs. Henry Fong. A different site at current-day Cathay Manor is also labeled.<sup>42</sup>*

In the following months, the PAC initiated numerous meetings with HUD representatives, CRA legal counsel, and architectural firms to make progress on this senior housing project. The main issue of debate was the location of the potential construction site. Per the public bulletin from senior citizens in 1977, two private sponsors had already proposed different sites in Chinatown. The first site on Bunker Hill Avenue, between Sunset Boulevard and the Hollywood Freeway, was sponsored by Mr. Yin Po Lin and the Chinese Senior Citizens Society.<sup>43</sup> Lin managed the local Mei Hua Newspaper, and he also served as the Vice President of the Chinese Committee on Aging (CCOA).<sup>44</sup> The second site at the intersection of Adobe Street and College Street was sponsored by Mr. Henry

<sup>42</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "CRA Map of Chinatown."

<sup>43</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee, "Meeting Minutes of PAC Joint Meeting: Land Use Subcommittee and Senior Citizen/Low-Moderate Income Housing Subcommittee."

<sup>44</sup> Chinatown senior citizens, "'No More Fights, Must Unite, Housing Is Our Right!' Flier."

Fong and his wife, who ran Yi Qun Pharmacy in Chinatown.<sup>45</sup> To the frustration of the PAC and community members, both officials and architects met each of these proposed sites with resistance. According to HUD district representative Emil Reiner, “the sites that have been presented to HUD are NO GOOD! Don’t find a site and insist on this being the site when people at HUD say it is not going to be the site!”<sup>46</sup> Sidney Levee, a local architect experienced with HUD’s senior citizen housing projects, was adamant that both Mr. Lin and Mr. and Mrs. Fong’s proposed locations were plagued by “Noise, Air Pollution, and Visual Blight”. Indeed, both sites were located within a block of a highway. Levee also commented that “hypothetically, within Chinatown there might be six square blocks that might be ‘normally acceptable’ under HUD guidelines.”<sup>47</sup> Yet these six marginally acceptable blocks of Chinatown were already occupied by other buildings. If Chinatown was already constrained in a tiny space with land and resource scarcity, how could the community ever find a suitable location for senior citizen housing? PAC members adjourned this meeting without a clear path forward.

Ongoing conflicts regarding the lack of suitable building locations were not the only tensions that the PAC faced. Although Chinatown residents across the board were eager to construct this senior housing complex, multiple community groups opposed the CRA’s involvement in the project. While the HUD quarreled with PAC members at weekly meetings, the Organization for Senior Citizens Housing (OSCH) distributed a set of bright yellow bulletins to declare their stance on redevelopment in Chinatown:

Senior citizens housing and low cost housing must be built before any one single existing housing is torn down for redevelopment. All tenants affected by this Redevelopment Project must be relocated within the Chinatown area. . . We strongly support other service-orientated [sic] programs, like the building of library, child care center, parks, cultural centers, and others.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Chinatown senior citizens.

<sup>46</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee, “Meeting Minutes of PAC Joint Meeting: Land Use Subcommittee and Senior Citizen/Low-Moderate Income Housing Subcommittee.”

<sup>47</sup> Chinatown Project Area Committee.

<sup>48</sup> Organization for Senior Citizens Housing, “Organization for Senior Citizens Housing in Chinatown Flier.”

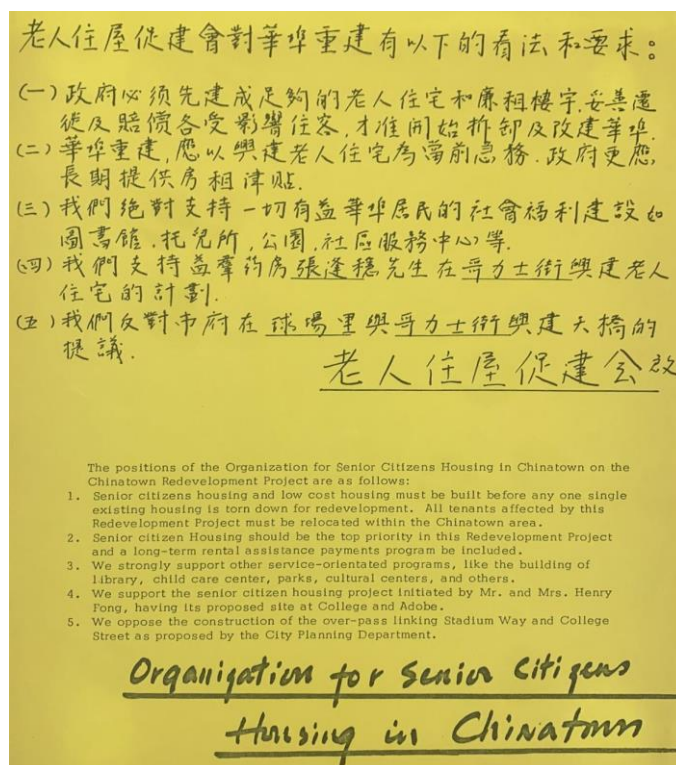


Figure 3. Bulletin from the Organization for Senior Citizens Housing in Chinatown, 1977-78.<sup>49</sup>

Even though not made explicit, the language used on the OSCH's bulletin suggests the organization was likely composed of senior citizens themselves. OSCH shared the same priorities for low-cost senior housing as the PAC, and even encouraged cultural programs through services similar to the Teen Post. However, they also expressed subtle concerns regarding potential ramifications of tenant displacement by pursuing redevelopment through the CRA. The OSCH wanted a guarantee that the existing residents would not face undue burdens of being forcibly moved outside the neighborhood during the senior housing construction process, and it was not clear to OSCH if CRA-affiliated redevelopment could provide this guarantee. The OSCH also declared opposition to city-sponsored highway construction that would cut through Chinatown, further amplifying their hesitations to work alongside a municipal agency like the CRA.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Organization for Senior Citizens Housing.

<sup>50</sup> Organization for Senior Citizens Housing.

These material anxieties regarding tenant displacement were echoed by other groups like Asian Americans for Equality (AAE) and the Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee (CPOC).<sup>51</sup> Originally founded in New York City's Chinatown, the AAE was part of a nation-wide campaign to advocate for equal employment opportunities and union contracts, affordable housing and tenants' rights, and Asian Americans' civil rights in face of multiple instances of police brutality.<sup>52</sup> Three months after formation of the PAC, AAE's local base in LA Chinatown publicly shared concerns about the city's "MASTER PLAN" to revitalize the neighborhood.<sup>53</sup> According to the AAE, the CRA could approve redevelopment projects independent of the PAC and turn neighborhoods into "commercial tourist centers" at the expense of tenants. Such a city-run redevelopment plan would not "address the needs of the community, nor [would] it treat the community as one for people who live and work in Chinatown".<sup>54</sup> The AAE's concerns reflected anxieties not only about tenant rights and the proliferation of capital investment in Chinatown, but also about the PAC's relationship with the city. Would the CRA actually respect the demands of community representatives, or would they step above the PAC to enact whatever projects the city wanted?

Although a seemingly ephemeral group that did not reappear in later discussions, CPOC was even more outspoken than AAE. Within a couple of months, CPOC distributed double-sided, A4-sized, dual-language fliers titled "BEWARE of REDEVELOPMENT!" throughout the neighborhood.<sup>55</sup> CPOC claimed that the city's plans to construct a luxury hotel, condos, and commercial projects in addition to senior housing were "no different from the history of destruction of the Chinese community in LA, which has caused the dispersal of residents and small businesses all around the city."<sup>56</sup> CPOC presented this displacement of tenants as an "OLD STORY", calling upon their

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<sup>51</sup> Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee, "Beware of Redevelopment Flier."

<sup>52</sup> "Our History | Asian Americans for Equality."

<sup>53</sup> Asian Americans for Equality, "Community Meeting on Chinatown Redevelopment Plans Brochure."

<sup>54</sup> Asian Americans for Equality.

<sup>55</sup> Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee, "Beware of Redevelopment Flier."

<sup>56</sup> Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee.

neighbors to “prepare and organize against the attacks which the Community Plan and Redevelopment can unleash”.<sup>57</sup> They concluded in dramatic fashion:

We believe Chinatown should be maintained as a community which preserves our common culture, language, and traditions. We cannot rely on the CRA-initiated community committees, such as the PAC, which doesn’t really have the power to implement any of its own community plans; nor can we rely on lawyers or politicians to carry out the fight. ONLY WITH THE STRENGTH AND DETERMINATION OF THE PEOPLE CAN WE WIN OUR DEMANDS!!!<sup>58</sup>

Through their memoranda, CPOC expressed concerns that city redevelopment could destroy Chinatown’s heritage. CPOC also used the language of culture, language, and tradition in their critique of pro-growth urban development schemes. However, unlike PAC member Toy who used similar language regarding culture in his desires to help youth through education by seniors, CPOC did not see collaboration with the City of LA as a useful path forward because of previous traumas that Chinatown faced during urban development projects.

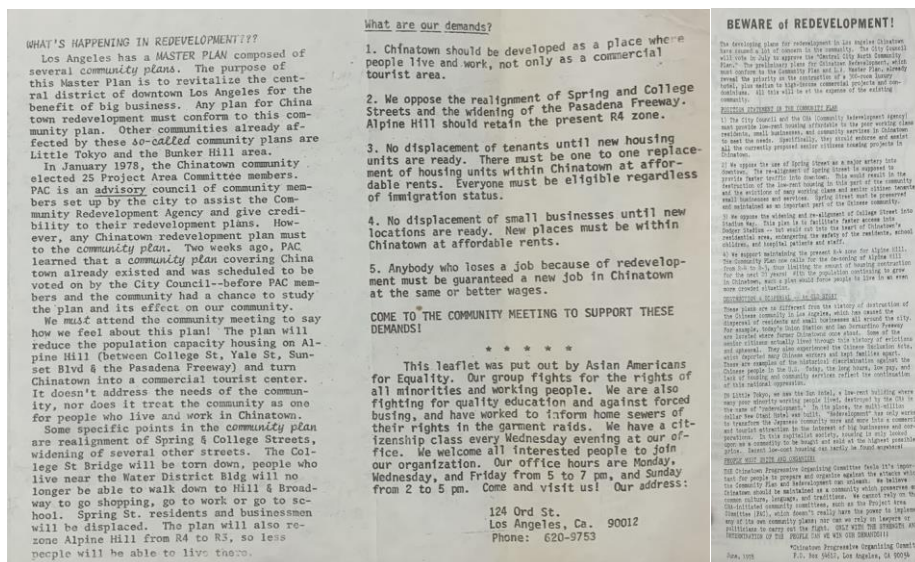


Figure 4. Left: Pamphlet from the AAE, calling for a community meeting on Chinatown redevelopment plans. Right: “BEWARE of REDEVELOPMENT” flier from CPOC.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee.

<sup>58</sup> Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee.

<sup>59</sup> Asian Americans for Equality, “Community Meeting on Chinatown Redevelopment Plans Brochure”; Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee, “Beware of Redevelopment Flier.”

OSCH, AAE, and CPOC's grim assessments about their community's future were grounded in LA Chinatown's harrowing history of displacement. CPOC's so-called "OLD STORY" of community dispersal could refer to a couple of historical events. In 1870, many of the Chinese in Los Angeles lived on a small alley referred to as "Calle de Los Negros". Soon after the Chinese Massacre of 1871, the City of LA completely demolished Calle de Los Negros and residents were forced to move.<sup>60</sup> By 1900, Chinese had settled a couple of blocks away in "Old Chinatown", but due to California Alien Land Laws which barred leasing and ownership of land by Asian immigrants and their American-born children, external developers had complete control over the fate of Old Chinatown. In the early 1930s, the entirety of Old Chinatown was razed by the City of LA to make way for Union Station, and the Chinatown community had no voice or representation in this development project.<sup>61</sup> Instead, the discourse regarding Union Station's placement was dominated by white Los Angeles elites Harry Chandler and William Randolph Hearst, known for their ownership of gigantic media companies of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Examiner*, as well as their immense wealth and political capital in the city.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to Chinatown community elites Mr. Lin and Mr. and Mrs. Fong who proposed the two senior housing sites, Chandler and Hearst had no connection or stake in the future of Chinatown. Ultimately, Angelenos voted to construct Union Station and displace more than 3,000 residents of Old Chinatown, including PAC Chair David Lee who was a child at the time. Chinatown's residents were scattered across the city until community leaders rallied to construct "New Chinatown".<sup>63</sup>

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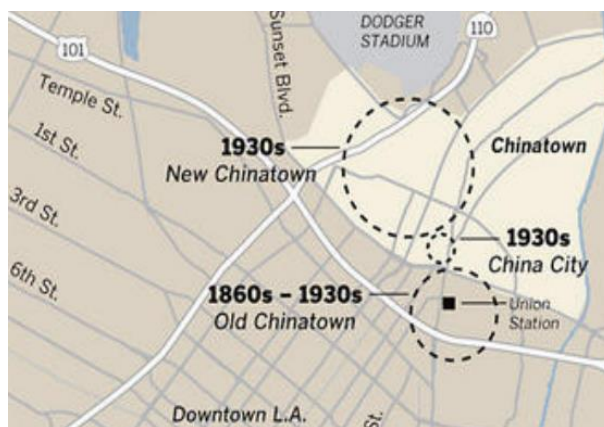
<sup>60</sup> Newmark, "Calle de Los Negros and the Chinese Massacre of 1871."

<sup>61</sup> The only remaining piece of Old Chinatown was the Garnier Building, a site which the Chinese American Museum occupies today.

<sup>62</sup> Chandler and Hearst battled over whether or not Union Station should be placed on top of Chinatown, with Chandler advocating "yes" because Chinatown was seen as disposable, and Hearst advocating "no" because Chinatown was seen as a distasteful ethnic location. See Axelrod, *Inventing Autopia*.

<sup>63</sup> Wallace, "Remembering Old Chinatown"; Josi Ward, "'Dreams of Oriental Romance.'"





*Figure 5. Adapted map illustrating the locations of Old Chinatown, New Chinatown, Union Station, as well as China City, a “Hollywoodized” attraction owned by a white Los Angeles socialite that attempted to “recreate the feel of a small Chinese village” by borrowing film set replicas and hiring Chinese to greet tourists and perform operas and plays.<sup>64</sup>*

In the late 1970s, these (not-so-distant) memories of LA Chinatown’s forced displacements informed protests against CRA-sponsored development. Progressive organizers from OSCH, AAE, and CPOC were right to fear that city involvement could destroy the neighborhood and displace entire swaths of the community, particularly if the community could not voice its concerns throughout the development process. However, by the time of the PAC’s arrival, it seemed that the city was more concerned with local representation in urban development projects, and development in Chinatown was no longer dominated by external white elites. In contrast to the 1930s, the Chinatown community had a seat at the table in their own future. With energized leaders from younger generations like Don Toy at the helm of the PAC, community members and local organizations persisted in their demands to construct senior housing in the community. Throughout the beginning of the 1980s, the PAC continued to work with the CRA, seeking out compromises with both the city and federal HUD officials to make the senior housing project a reality.

<sup>64</sup> Historic Preservation Fund, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, “Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement, Context: Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, 1850-1980”; Gow, “Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles.”

Finally, in 1984, the decade-long battle for affordable senior housing was met with the construction of Cathay Manor at 600 N. Broadway. This grand 16-story housing complex was built at the South end of Chinatown, finished with emerald gates that “add a Chinese touch to the building”.<sup>65</sup> Although neither of the project sites proposed by Mr. Lin and Mr. and Mrs. Fong were ultimately chosen for the senior housing project, Cathay Manor was ironically built just over a city block away from the Santa Ana Freeway, in a location not so different from the two original sites. Most of Cathay Manor’s \$30 million project costs were federally funded by the HUD, and Section 8 vouchers were successfully secured for the building. This collaboration between neighborhood, city, and federal organizations made it possible for low-income seniors to live in Cathay Manor without significant rent burden.<sup>66</sup>



*Figure 6. Image of Cathay Manor in 2022, taken from N Broadway.*<sup>67</sup>

As elderly residents moved into Cathay Manor’s 270 one-bedroom units, both the Chinatown community and the city fervently praised the new development. Former PAC Chair David Lee

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<sup>65</sup> Holley, “Chinatown’s Cathay Manor Offers Housing, a Sense of Belonging.”

<sup>66</sup> Sheets, “Feds Urged to Reject Plan to Sell Troubled Chinatown Building for Low-Income Seniors.”

<sup>67</sup> Shyong, “Column.”

reminisced upon his years of neighborhood advocacy: “That’s something nobody believed would happen - the senior citizen home. They said, ‘Oh, you don’t have a chance.’ But it happened.”<sup>68</sup> According to Lee, Cathay Manor was the “first big project of this type in Los Angeles for a Chinese ethnic group”.<sup>69</sup> The *LA Times* published a glowing profile of the building and its residents, describing Cathay Manor as a “Pleasant, Safe and Clean” location where seniors could practice *tai chi chuan* in the courtyard, share piping hot meals with neighbors, and easily access community services through the Senior Citizen Service Center located on the first floor of the building. Seniors in Cathay Manor had an abundance of material resources and cultural enrichment available just within the building, and their future was finally protected. Cathay Manor boomed in popularity, gathering a waiting list for more than 2,300 hopeful tenants within a year of opening.<sup>70</sup>

Cathay Manor was not only a success for the senior residents themselves; Cathay Manor also served as a beacon of hope for effective advocacy in neighborhood development, led from beginning to end by Chinatown community members themselves. The building was even managed by the Chinese Committee On Aging (CCOA), a local Chinatown organization that transferred its leadership from site proposer Mr. Lin onto PAC member and Teen Post founder Don Toy. Toy’s coworkers at the CCOA praised Cathay Manor as a project that demonstrated how “Chinatown’s grass-roots organizations can work with the federal government to meet the needs of senior citizens.”<sup>71</sup> The shared excitement around Cathay Manor’s arrival reflected how both Chinatown community members, including PAC members and the seniors themselves, and even the broader public, like the *LA Times*, each perceived that securing space for elders was an essential part of the neighborhood’s development. This process of development also illustrated a vision of progress driven by community-based organizing from representatives like Don Toy, and by collaboration with city and federal agencies like the CRA and HUD.

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<sup>68</sup> Holley, “Chinatown’s Cathay Manor Offers Housing, a Sense of Belonging.”

<sup>69</sup> Holley.

<sup>70</sup> Holley.

<sup>71</sup> Holley.

However, the community and public excitement around Cathay Manor was short-lived. Less than four years after Cathay Manor's grand opening in 1984, residents reported a plethora of maintenance issues. Broken elevators, lack of security, and restricted access to common areas were at the top of these tenants' complaints.<sup>72</sup> On Tuesday, September 27th, 1988, a group of 200 senior citizens staged a protest in LA Chinatown. These protestors gathered around 600 N. Broadway to voice frustrations with management in their recently constructed building: "They just talk, talk, talk. They say they fix. They talk fix. They don't fix good."<sup>73</sup>

These seniors lamented that building manager and well-known community advocate Don Toy was not accountable to addressing problems with the apartment complex. As these protestors marched around hoisting carefully lettered signs, local journalists reached out to the CCOA Housing Corporation, which was corporatized as a non-profit to manage the building. Reporters also contacted Barker Management Incorporated, an external Anaheim-based company that signed on as co-managers of the apartment complex.<sup>74</sup> Both the Barker president and Toy admitted that there were issues with the elevator. However, Barker blamed the elevator's designer, and Toy seemed to feign disbelief: "I'm surprised because all these things we have resolved, or are in the process of resolving."<sup>75</sup>

Despite Toy's vocal advocacy for seniors' demands through his pivotal role on the PAC, these egregious complaints made it clear that Toy's priorities were not actually aligned with the seniors' material conditions by the end of the 1980s. As a young organizer leading the Teen Post, Toy mobilized notions of heritage from the elders and preservation of old community traditions to temporarily alleviate cultural and economic anxieties of both seniors and youth. And as a resident of LA Chinatown who was raised in the community by immigrant parents, Toy was not only a prime representative of the community, but presumably also felt a personal stake in Chinatown's future. So why did the story of Cathay Manor conclude with Toy actively harming these elderly residents?

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<sup>72</sup> Spano, "Chinatown Seniors in Housing Protest March."

<sup>73</sup> Spano.

<sup>74</sup> Huang, "Red Flags Raised Over Potential Sale Of Troubled Chinatown Housing Complex."

<sup>75</sup> Spano, "Chinatown Seniors in Housing Protest March."

The story of Teen Post and Cathay Manor illustrates a particular vision of “whose Chinatown” and “who is Chinatown” through Don Toy’s discourse and actions. Initially, Toy’s motion via the PAC to make senior housing a priority seems to indicate his inherent value of the seniors. However, Toy’s actions at Cathay Manor suggest that his value of the elderly was not necessarily a value for their livelihoods. Toy’s vision depicts a future Chinatown that is intended for the younger generations, and where the role of the seniors was simply as a vessel to pass on their heritage and traditions to the youth.

Toy’s failure to ultimately serve the residents of Cathay Manor also illustrates many limits that constrained LA Chinatown’s development efforts in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although the community had a seat at the table via the PAC to discuss neighborhood development, this representation did not actually reflect the direct voices of grassroots organizers with concerns about displacement, nor did this representation reflect the direct voices of senior residents who were now facing dire conditions in Cathay Manor. Additionally, there was no accountability after the construction of Cathay Manor. Toy’s notion of progress in Chinatown involved collaboration with the city, and Los Angeles was ultimately seeking capital investment as a growth machine. Building senior housing was simply one method towards bringing capital, and once the building was constructed, the well-being of the actual seniors under CCOA’s private management was of no material interest to the City of LA. Cathay Manor’s long waiting list also indicated how single-issue efforts could not address the fundamental structural issues like unemployment and lack of land in LA Chinatown, leaving behind many other senior residents still in search of affordable housing. In this era of accelerating urban growth, private management of public services, and economic precarity for both young and old, attempts to seek community-based representation through groups like the PAC were not enough to achieve material changes for people who needed resources the most.

## Chapter 2: Suburban Chinatown, Castelar School, and Demographic Change (1983 - 1996)

In 1983, a year before Cathay Manor opened its doors to senior residents, social worker Lily Lee Chen was elected as the first female Chinese American mayor in the US.<sup>76</sup> Chen's nine-and-a-half-month tenure began in the city of Monterey Park, just ten minutes East of LA Chinatown along the I-10 highway. Known affectionately as the "first suburban Chinatown", Monterey Park was home to a booming Chinese American population in neighborhoods previously composed of white and Latinx residents.<sup>77</sup>

The movement and rapid growth of Chinese communities in LA County drastically changed suburbs up and down the San Gabriel Valley (SGV), including Monterey Park, Alhambra, San Gabriel, Rosemead, and Hacienda Heights.<sup>78</sup> In the late 70s and throughout the 80s, geopolitical tensions in Asia prompted many well-educated and relatively affluent migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and eventually mainland China to seek new futures in the US. Many of these Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking immigrants moved directly to the SGV.<sup>79</sup> By 1987, Asian residents accounted for more than 40% of Monterey Park and eventually reached more than 57% by 1991, the highest of any city in the US at the time.<sup>80</sup>

However, geopolitical factors and desires for a quiet, suburban lifestyle alone could not explain the extreme demographic shifts in Monterey Park. In fact, the meteoric rise of Monterey Park's Chinese community was highly engineered by Frederic "Fred" Hsieh, a young realtor who single handedly ushered in hordes of immigrants to the SGV. In 1977, Hsieh invited almost two dozen city leaders in Monterey Park - all of whom were white - to a traditional Chinese meal. After conversations over

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<sup>76</sup> Arax, "Lily Lee Chen"; Yang, "Lily Lee Chen, Mayor of Monterey Park | The Huntington."

<sup>77</sup> Ling, "Voices of the SGV - Transitions in the SGV."

<sup>78</sup> Seo, "Sun Down for Chinatown? Faded Glory."

<sup>79</sup> Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California*; Ling, "Voices of the SGV - Transitions in the SGV"; Arax, "Monterey Park."

<sup>80</sup> Klein, "Cultural Diversity Springs From Asian Influx"; Berthelsen, "Frederic Hsieh Is Dead at 54; Made Asian-American Suburb - The New York Times."

fragrant plates of food and steaming hot tea, Monterey Park city planner Harold Fiebelkorn recalled in a scathing tone:

[Hsieh] told us the reason why he was buying up so much property in town was that Monterey Park was going to become the next Chinatown. He said it would become a mecca for Chinese... Everyone in the room thought the guy was blowing smoke. Then when I got home I thought, what gall. What ineffable gall. He was going to come into my living room and change around my furniture?<sup>81</sup>

Despite Fiebelkorn's skepticism, Hsieh was widely successful at "changing around the furniture" of Monterey Park. Fred Hsieh was born in Guilin, China, grew up in Hong Kong, and immigrated to the US for his college degree in civil engineering. Hsieh briefly lived in LA Chinatown while working as a city engineer, but he discovered a passion for real estate after buying and renting out apartments to pay his own mortgage.<sup>82</sup>

While observing the geopolitical shifts in his homeland, Hsieh anticipated a new wave of immigration of Chinese to the US throughout the 1980s. Although LA Chinatown managed to deal with the influx of "New Chinese" in the 1970s, Hsieh was quick to realize that Chinatown's measly couple of blocks simply did not have the residential capacity for an impending population boom. However, Monterey Park's proximity to Chinatown and its location in the seemingly unending sprawl of the SGV would be a perfect place to expand the Chinese American community. Hsieh distributed advertisements through magazines and newspapers in Hong Kong and Taiwan, encouraging people to take a risk and move out to Southern California.<sup>83</sup> In contrast to the "crowded and unattractive" nature of LA Chinatown, Hsieh sold Monterey Park as the "Chinese Beverly Hills".<sup>84</sup> His efforts were a resounding success. Hsieh made a fortune for himself, transforming the sleepy bedroom community of Monterey Park into a cultural and economic stronghold.<sup>85</sup> Asian

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<sup>81</sup> Arax, "Monterey Park."

<sup>82</sup> Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California*.

<sup>83</sup> Klein, "Cultural Diversity Springs From Asian Influx."

<sup>84</sup> Berthelsen, "Frederic Hsieh Is Dead at 54; Made Asian-American Suburb - The New York Times"; Oliver, "Developer Who Saw Monterey Park as 'Chinese Beverly Hills' Dies - Los Angeles Times"; SFGATE, "Frederic Hsieh."

<sup>85</sup> Mathews, "L.A.'S Atlantic Boulevard: Ethnic Slice of the Future"; Ling, "Voices of the SGV - Transitions in the SGV."

supermarkets in pagoda-style shopping centers completely replaced previous grocery stores like Safeway.<sup>86</sup> New community members started banks, law firms, dress shops, and restaurants, filling the streets with signs in Cantonese and Mandarin.<sup>87</sup>



*Figure 7. Fred Hsieh in front of his realty company in 1983.*<sup>88</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and early 90s, crowds of tourists from Taiwan and Indonesia even visited Monterey Park, describing this “Little Taipei” as cleaner and more peaceful than the real Taipei in Taiwan.<sup>89</sup> Charles Choy Wong, a professor of sociology at California State University, commented on the rise of Monterey Park in 1987:

Monterey Park is very important to the Chinese self-image. It represents a new plateau in the experience of Chinese in America. It represents power and prestige. The first generation no

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<sup>86</sup> Arax, “Monterey Park.”

<sup>87</sup> Seo, “Sun Down for Chinatown? Faded Glory.”

<sup>88</sup> Associated Press, “Fred Hsieh.”

<sup>89</sup> Hung, “Transnational and Local-Focus Ethnic Networks”; Hudson, “If It’s Tuesday It Must Be ‘Little Taipei,’ to City’s Ire.”



longer has to bust its butt in the urban ghetto. They are affluent and well educated and can immediately skip that step by moving to Monterey Park.<sup>90</sup>

For the newly arrived Chinese immigrants with just enough wealth to avoid Los Angeles city proper and move further inland, Monterey Park provided a shining opportunity to bypass living in LA Chinatown. Instead of fighting for rental apartments in Chinatown, these immigrants could jumpstart their futures in a neighborhood with plenty of single-family homes to go around.<sup>91</sup>

The rise of Monterey Park sparked a variety of anxieties in LA Chinatown, and local businesses were some of the first actors to notice material changes. Until the early 1970s, Chinese living “as far as San Diego” would drive all the way to LA Chinatown to “stock up on Chinese food supplies.”<sup>92</sup> But the arrival of culturally relevant businesses to the SGV meant that suburban residents no longer needed to visit Chinatown for specialty items. The Chan Family who owned Phoenix Bakery, a Chinatown institution famous for delicious almond cookies and Fresh Strawberry Whipped Cream Cakes since its inception in 1938, was acutely aware of Chinatown’s decreasing relevance in Los Angeles County.<sup>93</sup>

We believe our product is superior, but is ours so much better that if you live in the San Gabriel Valley you are willing to drive half an hour to come to Chinatown when you have a bakery five minutes away? It used to be that Chinatown was the only place you could find certain items, but now you can get a Chinese dinner just as good, if not better, in San Gabriel.<sup>94</sup>

Residents in LA Chinatown made similar conclusions as the Chans: the SGV provided material and cultural resources that were just as good, if not better than those in LA Chinatown. Families living in Chinatown began to pack up their bags and move into the SGV, seeking a cheaper real estate market to finally buy a home. These families also sought out opportunities for their children to attend

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<sup>90</sup> Arax, “Monterey Park.”

<sup>91</sup> Historic Preservation Fund, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, “Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement, Context: Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, 1850-1980.”

<sup>92</sup> Ling, “Voices of the SGV - Transitions in the SGV.”

<sup>93</sup> Ohanesian, “How Phoenix Bakery (And Its Famous Strawberry Cake) Survived 80-Plus Years in Chinatown”; Thomas, “80 Years of the Sweet Life at Chinatown’s Phoenix Bakery”; Phoenix Bakery, “History - Phoenix Bakery.”

<sup>94</sup> Seo, “Sun Down for Chinatown? Faded Glory.”

good schools and have enough space to run around in lush parks and backyards.<sup>95</sup> By the end of the 1980s, Chinatown had emptied itself of many Chinese American families and their young children, leaving behind poorer residents who did not have sufficient resources to out-migrate from the neighborhood.

While Monterey Park and the rest of the SGV blossomed due to the boom in Asian immigration, LA Chinatown struggled to manage another wave of newcomers.<sup>96</sup> Alongside the out-migration of Chinese families, many new immigrants from Vietnam, as well as Cambodia and Thailand arrived in Chinatown seeking refuge from US-driven political conflict abroad.<sup>97</sup> These Southeast Asian immigrants were not only less wealthy than their counterparts arriving in the SGV from Hong Kong and Taiwan, they were also less wealthy compared to Chinatown's "New Chinese" of the early 1970s. To make a living, the new residents sold products on the street and sidewalks of Chinatown, haggling with passersby for the best prices.<sup>98</sup> By the mid-1980s, Vietnamese residents owned almost half of Chinatown's businesses, and established shop owners in Chinatown felt outcompeted by these SE Asian entrepreneurs.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to rising competition between businesses, Chinatown also faced critical communication barriers within the neighborhood. Long-time Chinatown community members, many of whom spoke Cantonese like the generations of Chinatown residents before them, reported that they could not

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<sup>95</sup> Tcheng and Freridge, San Gabriel.

<sup>96</sup> Admittedly, the rapid redevelopment of Monterey Park into a Chinese American suburb was not without its conflicts. New Chinese residents faced animosities from older white residents, which resulted in highly contested campaigns to declare English as the official language, ban Chinese books in the public library, and prohibit raising of the Taiwan flag. Much like Chinatown, elderly residents in Monterey Park also had similar demands for senior housing projects. In 1988, a coalition of Taiwanese organizations accused the Monterey Park City Council of racism after rejecting a Taiwanese-funded senior housing complex. Around 400 protestors gathered around the City Hall, with signs proclaiming "U.S. Was Built by Immigrants" and "End Monterey Park Apartheid." See Ward, "Racism Charged Over Monterey Park Vote"; Klein, "Cultural Diversity Springs From Asian Influx."

<sup>97</sup> Keynan, "1990s: The Golden Decade: Chinatown Los Angeles: Revitalized Community Rises From Shock Waves of Change."

<sup>98</sup> Shyong, "Chinatown's Swap Meets Once Opened a Door to the American Dream. Now, Their Future Is Uncertain."

<sup>99</sup> Lai and Jeung, "Guilds, Unions, and Garment Factories"; Historic Preservation Fund, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, "Los Angeles Citywide Historic Context Statement, Context: Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, 1850-1980."

understand any of the written Vietnamese signs posted above the latest shops and restaurants.<sup>100</sup> Some elderly Cantonese residents even shunned SE Asian-owned grocery stores, complaining that “Chinatown is no longer Chinese.”<sup>101</sup> An *LA Times* reporter noticed tensions between community members as well, describing Chinatown as a “community divided”, with neighbors who “ply their wares on the same streets yet remain miles apart in language and tradition.”<sup>102</sup> John Fong Chin, a gift shop owner who grew up in LA Chinatown speaking Cantonese with all his neighbors, tried to explain his growing frustrations: “A lot of people don’t understand. A lot of people think Asians are Asians.”<sup>103</sup>

Chin recognized that to outsiders, Chinatown’s SE Asian residents might be expected to assimilate into the community without a hitch, especially given that service centers across the neighborhood were intended to help new immigrants transition to life in the US. However, without speaking the same language or sharing the same cultural traditions, different groups of Chinatown residents shared little in common besides their identity as immigrants or as part of a diaspora. Besides the discrepancies between Cantonese and Vietnamese languages, many of the recently arrived immigrants could not speak English either. As a result, these SE Asians did not feel comfortable engaging with associations that operated in English like the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC), which was also a central part of Chinatown’s self-organization since CCC’s inception in 1955.<sup>104</sup> Instead, they formed their own organizations like the Teo Chew Association, a social service agency specifically serving new SE Asian immigrants.

Established residents’ concerns about community strain and fracture were amplified at Castelar Elementary School, the second oldest school in the LA Unified School District.<sup>105</sup> Located at the heart of Chinatown, Castelar School was at the front line of rapid changes in Chinatown’s

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<sup>100</sup> Torres, “The Great Wall of Chinatown”; Keynan, “1990s: The Golden Decade: Chinatown Los Angeles: Revitalized Community Rises From Shock Waves of Change.”

<sup>101</sup> Torres, “The Great Wall of Chinatown.”

<sup>102</sup> Torres.

<sup>103</sup> Torres.

<sup>104</sup> Even today, the vast majority of Asians on CCC’s Board of Directors appear to have last names that are not from SE Asian languages. See Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCCLA), “Historic Milestones.”

<sup>105</sup> Castelar School Staff, “Short History of Castelar School.”

demographics.<sup>106</sup> Starting in the 1975 school year, Castelar’s enrollment of Asian students skyrocketed. The size of the school nearly doubled within a decade.<sup>107</sup> Most of Castelar’s new students were children of the SE Asian refugees, and a significant number of SE Asian refugee children even transferred to Castelar from schools elsewhere in the country.<sup>108</sup> Castelar’s principal at the time recalls that their need for classroom space was “so critical” that a new teacher “had to use a small conference room as a teaching station.”<sup>109</sup> To serve the diversifying Asian student population alongside Latinx students who already attended the school, Castelar rapidly hired a fleet of new teachers trained in multiple languages between Vietnamese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Spanish.<sup>110</sup> Bilingual education programs and evening English classes for adults became a staple part of the school’s services.<sup>111</sup>

Despite how quickly Castelar School adjusted its language programming, there was still prejudice and cultural dissonance that staff could not directly solve. Students’ parents were overheard commenting about the new immigrant children, with snide remarks like “Why are these people so dirty? Don’t their parents teach them anything?”<sup>112</sup> Even teachers themselves struggled to manage their own expectations of new students. Dr. Gay Yuen, a Chinatown resident, former Castelar teacher, Professor of Education at California State University LA, and leader in various local Chinatown organizations recalled:

As teachers, we knew that developmentally, first-graders do not lie and do not steal. But we caught these little refugee girls stuffing crayons in their underwear. We teachers huddled, “Why do they do this?” The Spanish language teachers would talk about refugee children from El Salvador or rural areas who did not know their colors in any language or who never held a pencil or used scissors. I made a snobby comment in a meeting, “Well, you are never going to find Asian children like that.” If the kids came from Korea or Hong Kong or Japan,

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<sup>106</sup> Chun-Hoon and Louie, “Castelar School: A Community Principal’s Perspective.”

<sup>107</sup> Yuen, *The Story of Castelar: 130 Years*.

<sup>108</sup> Chun-Hoon and Louie, “Castelar School: A Community Principal’s Perspective.”

<sup>109</sup> Chun-Hoon and Louie; Castelar School Staff, “Short History of Castelar School.”

<sup>110</sup> Wong, *The Story of Castelar: 130 Years*.

<sup>111</sup> Chiu, *The Story of Castelar: 130 Years*; Soldate, *The Story of Castelar: 130 Years*; Castelar School Staff, “Short History of Castelar School.”

<sup>112</sup> Yuen, *The Story of Castelar: 130 Years*.

they were at grade level in their own country. I had to eat my words. These Southeast Asian kids or rural Chinese kids that were coming never went to school in their lives!<sup>113</sup>

Dr. Yuen's expectation for all Asian children to be well-behaved was undermined by the fact that these new immigrants had such disparate backgrounds in comparison to Chinatown's existing population. However, purported cultural differences were not an appropriate explanation for these children stealing. Rather, many of these new immigrants came from poverty-stricken and war-torn circumstances, and no amount of cultural education could resolve the legitimate economic anxieties that may have compelled these young children to steal.

Phyllis Chiu, a Castelar teacher who spoke Cantonese and some Mandarin and Spanish, also expressed similar worries about the children "acting up" and not having sufficient community resources:

If I had known more, I would've gotten more services for the refugees. There was this little Vietnamese-speaking girl who was drawing some sexually explicit pictures. I thought it was weird, but I didn't know how to communicate and reach her. I now think she saw too much at refugee camps. There were a lot of kids that had been harmed or scarred. There were kids that were hiding under tables when they heard a loud noise. There were kids that would be running around and shooting at each other instead of working at their desks. The kids were acting out in very inappropriate ways. We had not seen this with the Hong Kong immigrant kids. The Hong Kong kids didn't speak English, but they had gone to normal schools and they knew what schools were about. That was really different from [the Southeast Asian] kids who had never gone to school.<sup>114</sup>

Teachers like Ms. Chiu did their best to manage linguistic barriers in the classroom, but they did not have appropriate tools to address the traumas that new students arrived with throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the elderly residents' complaints about youth misbehavior in the 1970s, passing down cultural traditions to the SE Asian kids would not help alleviate any concerns that Dr. Yuen or Ms. Chiu expressed. Classroom tools could not address these problems because they were not cultural problems, they were material issues of poverty and scarcity of resources for these new immigrants.

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<sup>113</sup> Yuen.

<sup>114</sup> Chiu, *The Story of Castelar: 130 Years*.



*Figure 8. Mayor Tom Bradley visiting Castelar School in 1974. Back row, L to R: Consul General of the Republic of China (name not known), Dr. William Chun-Hoon (principal of Castelar), unidentified, Mayor Bradley, Bill Hall.<sup>115</sup>*

The root causes of these anxieties about the newly arrived children were grounded in substantive economic concerns about the declining quality of life in Chinatown, as well as (arguably prejudiced) cultural concerns that Chinatown was losing its identity of “Chinese-ness”. First, Chinatown lacked sufficient resources to accommodate more immigrants and ensure the neighborhood would thrive. Limited residential and retail space meant that more established Chinatown residents and legacy business owners were in direct competition with these SE Asian families seeking places to live and ways to make a living. The SE Asian families could not bring investment or wealth to the neighborhood like the well-educated and wealthy immigrants moving to the SGV either. Second, the Cantonese elders and even young teachers in the community had a sense that Chinatown’s new residents were “not Chinese enough”, and maybe even “not Asian enough”. Besides the fact that existing Chinatown residents and new arrivals spoke completely different languages, these existing

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<sup>115</sup> “Mayor Bradley Visiting Castelar School.”

residents also framed the misbehaviors of young SE Asian children in comparison to the (relatively) well-behaved “Hong Kong immigrant kids” who arrived in Chinatown throughout the 1970s. As SE Asians moved into Chinatown, families from Hong Kong immigrated directly to the SGV. Many Chinese families with sufficient wealth also ex-migrated from Chinatown to the suburbs. Chinatown community members were simultaneously concerned about the arrival of new families and their young children, as well as the exodus of old families and their young children - but these old families were perceived as culturally integrated, better behaved, and ultimately “more Chinese” than the new. If Monterey Park was the new “suburban Chinatown” with the right kinds of Chinese families, what did that mean for the identity of actual LA Chinatown? Who did LA Chinatown want to live in their neighborhood, and who did LA Chinatown want to run their businesses?

As Chinatown locals and community leaders contended with rapid changes in their community, this question of who Chinatown was intended for persisted into the following decades. LA Chinatown’s leaders sought to save Chinatown's future by bringing back the “right kinds” of people. These people not only included Chinese families, but also Chinese and non-Chinese youth, entrepreneurs, and new investors who would revitalize a dying neighborhood through their wealth.

### Chapter 3: Business Improvement and Bringing Back the Youth (1990 - 2013)

In 1985, former PAC Chair David Lee served the very last meal at General Lee's restaurant. The landmark Cantonese eatery founded by Lee's grandfather operated for nearly 100 years, and the family business even withstood the forced displacement from Old to New Chinatown. However, Lee was convinced to shut down his restaurant, citing a sharp drop "among its mostly Anglo clientele" in the 1980s.<sup>116</sup> Instead of attempting to carry on the family business, Lee's nephew pivoted to a more lucrative career, managing imports from Hong Kong and China as an international trade specialist.<sup>117</sup> General Lee's storefront, just two blocks North of Cathay Manor, was left vacant for over a decade.

Throughout the late 80s and early 90s, many other historic institutions of LA Chinatown suffered the same fate as General Lee's.<sup>118</sup> Tourist activity was at an all-time low, forcing restaurants and other stores that catered to non-Chinese crowds, like General Lee's, to close. Few of the younger generations were willing to manage these family-owned businesses through these economically challenging times. By 1996, one-fourth of the neighborhood's business district went into foreclosure, with another fourth on the verge of foreclosure within the year.<sup>119</sup> With fewer and fewer active businesses, Chinatown began to look like a ghost town with almost no traffic in the evenings.<sup>120</sup> The remaining shop owners were acutely aware: "People used to walk in Chinatown until 6 or 6:30 p.m. Now, there's hardly any foot traffic after 5 o'clock... Chinatown is dying."<sup>121</sup>

As families with young children continued to move out of LA Chinatown and into the SGV through the 90s, people in their 20s began to leave Chinatown as well. In addition to moving to the SGV, these younger generations also spread into nearby neighborhoods like Lincoln Heights and Echo

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<sup>116</sup> Seo, "Sun Down for Chinatown? Faded Glory."

<sup>117</sup> Holley, "Landmark Chinatown Restaurant to Hang Up Chopsticks."

<sup>118</sup> Torres, "The Great Wall of Chinatown."

<sup>119</sup> Torres.

<sup>120</sup> Mai and Chen, "The State of Chinatown Los Angeles"; Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District.

<sup>121</sup> Torres, "The Great Wall of Chinatown."



Park, partially motivated by the lack of residential space within Chinatown.<sup>122</sup> Others left Los Angeles County entirely, moving to the Bay Area or even across the country to pursue college educations.<sup>123</sup> Instead of returning to Chinatown after college, these young professionals moved on in search of better paying jobs elsewhere.

By the early 1990s, Chinatown seemed a shell of its former vibrant self with rampant business closures and ongoing youth exodus. Local shop owners became extremely concerned about revitalizing neighborhood activity. Many business owners and community leaders believed that Chinatown was no longer an attractive tourist destination due to two key issues that drove away visitors. While recounting why he shut down General Lee's, Lee was adamant that "I think the biggest problem is parking--that broke the camel's back."<sup>124</sup> Other old-timer merchants agreed, insisting that "all the improvement plans in the world won't help unless the city provides parking in Chinatown."<sup>125</sup> If Chinatown simply had new parking lots, then this issue of tourist parking could be easy to address - but Chinatown was already constrained by a lack of land. Sufficient open space was available just East of Spring Street, except that the nearby Men's Central Jail was undergoing a major expansion which community members protested and failed to stop in 1989.<sup>126</sup>

The other key issue driving away tourism seemed even more difficult to address: visitors perceived Chinatown as dangerous and crime-ridden. In the wake of the killing of a young Black girl, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean store owner in 1991, and the subsequent 1992 Los Angeles riots in response to the acquittal of the four LA Police Department (LAPD) officers who beat Rodney King, concerns about crime and unrest throughout Los Angeles were already escalated.<sup>127</sup> In the aftermath of riots, Asian ethnic enclaves like Chinatown were conflated with Koreatown, amplifying perceptions of

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<sup>122</sup> Wong, Chinatown Service Center; Keynan, "1990s: The Golden Decade: Chinatown Los Angeles: Revitalized Community Rises From Shock Waves of Change."

<sup>123</sup> Shyong, "Chinatown's Swap Meets Once Opened a Door to the American Dream. Now, Their Future Is Uncertain."

<sup>124</sup> Holley, "Landmark Chinatown Restaurant to Hang Up Chopsticks."

<sup>125</sup> Kang and Gee, "Reinventing Chinatown"; Pool, "A Timeless Tradition in Center of Change"; Wong, Chinatown Service Center; Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District.

<sup>126</sup> McMillan and Merina, "Neighborhood Groups Oppose Jail Expansion"; LA Times, "200 Rally Against Jail Expansion Plan"; Simon, "Supervisors OK Major Expansion of Downtown Jail Over Protests."

<sup>127</sup> Krbechek and Bates, "When LA Erupted In Anger."

Chinatown as an unsafe neighborhood. Wally Quon, co-owner of Chinatown's Grand Star restaurant that he managed alongside his brother Frank "Sinatra" Quan, recalled that outsiders had unrealistic perceptions of their neighborhood: "Since the riots, all over the world people think we're shooting each other like the Old West. But that's not true. Chinatown is safe."<sup>128</sup> LAPD's Central Division Office agreed with Quon's assessment that Chinatown was a "low-crime area", but statistics were not enough to convince visitors to spend their time in Chinatown.<sup>129</sup> With families and young professionals leaving Chinatown en masse, and no visitors to sustain any of the businesses, what was left of LA Chinatown in by 1990?

The CRA (LA Community Redevelopment Agency) was acutely aware of Chinatown's decline, but the CRA had to maintain a public image of this neighborhood where they had invested decades of funding. Feigning as if they were still riding the temporary high of Cathay Manor's construction, the CRA worked with the CCC (Chinatown Chamber of Commerce) to release a public brochure, praising Chinatown as a "vibrant center of commerce" and "popular tourist spot":

[Chinatown's] diversity, its aura, its wealth of culture and color, command appreciation from tourists and residents alike... United by a common Chinese ancestry, residents here have a proud and diverse heritage brought from distant Asian shores and a reputation for taking care of their own. Chinatown is the site of a successful redevelopment project, a grassroots public improvement effort that has retained and enhanced commerce, tourism, community services, quality housing and beautification programs for nearly 15 years. Today, Chinatown remains a jewel in the crown of LA... ancient and revered in tradition... yet sparking and aglow in the promise of tomorrow.<sup>130</sup>

Despite the brochure's many flatteries, the CRA's depiction was more aspirational than reflective of reality. Tourists avoided Chinatown, residents were leaving Chinatown, long-standing Cantonese residents had a distaste for the new Vietnamese residents, and Cathay Manor was falling apart. Chinatown could only hope to have a "promise of tomorrow".

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<sup>128</sup> Lemons, "Lounging at the Grand Star"; Seo, "Sun Down for Chinatown? Faded Glory."

<sup>129</sup> Seo, "Sun Down for Chinatown? Faded Glory."

<sup>130</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles and LA Chinese Chamber of Commerce, "'Los Angeles Chinatown: An Adventure of Urban Delights...' Brochure."



Figure 9. “Los Angeles Chinatown: An adventure of urban delights...” brochure jointly released by the CRA and CCC in 1993.<sup>131</sup>

Within a couple of years, the CRA rapidly expanded its redevelopment budget in Chinatown, not only in response to community complaints as the CRA might claim, but also in an attempt to assuage negative public perceptions of LA’s cultural destinations.<sup>132</sup> In 1992, the CRA proposed a budget expansion from just under \$60 million up to \$300 million in Chinatown, with half of the budget allocated towards affordable housing.<sup>133</sup> After the city-wide riots, the CRA also allocated emergency grants to rebuild small businesses and homes.<sup>134</sup> By the end of 1996, the CRA had started a small

<sup>131</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles and LA Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

<sup>132</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, “CRA News, Quarterly Review of Programs, Projects, and Upcoming Events, “Chinatown Revisited.””

<sup>133</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles.

<sup>134</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, “Chinatown Redevelopment Project Newsletter,” 199.

business loan program to “improve building facades and interiors,” and hosted an anti-graffiti mural program to clean up the neighborhood’s appearance as well.<sup>135</sup>

The CRA also recognized and worked to address two key complaints regarding parking availability and perceptions of public safety expressed by Chinatown community members. In collaboration with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the CRA moved forward with construction plans for an elevated Metro station at Alameda and College (the site of the current-day Chinatown stop on the Gold Line). This station would open new space for retail development, and allow visitors to explore Chinatown without needing to park their cars.<sup>136</sup> In 1994, the community also celebrated the opening of the Chinatown Community Police Service Center, an effort 10 years in the making from the Chinatown Public Safety Association who were “local merchants and residents seeking to build a bilingual crime-reporting center and public safety facility for their community”.<sup>137</sup> Members of the association hoped to train “a band of uniformed volunteers” to patrol Chinatown’s streets around the clock, with “flashlights, walkie-talkies and a mobile phone to make 911 calls” and serve as the “eyes and ears” of the LAPD.<sup>138</sup> The plethora of new initiatives to address building occupancy, lack of parking, crime and safety, and overall aesthetic appearances appeared extremely productive. According to the CRA, ongoing citizen collaboration via the PAC (Chinatown’s Project Area Committee), which was now Chaired by Don Toy, made these projects possible: “It’s a formula that’s working in Chinatown, everywhere.”<sup>139</sup>

Despite the rapid acceleration of city-supported neighborhood improvement projects across Chinatown, local business owners were not satisfied with the pace of community change. Tourists were not returning quick enough, and projects like the Metro station were still under construction. As the turn of the millennium rolled around, business owners’ concerns about Chinatown’s future

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<sup>135</sup> Torres, “The Great Wall of Chinatown.”

<sup>136</sup> Li, “Chinatown: Study Backs Merits of Light-Rail Station.”

<sup>137</sup> Li, “CHINATOWN”; Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, “CRA News, Quarterly Review of Programs, Projects, and Upcoming Events, ‘Chinatown Revisited.’”

<sup>138</sup> Li, “CHINATOWN.”

<sup>139</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, “CRA News, Quarterly Review of Programs, Projects, and Upcoming Events, ‘Chinatown Revisited.’”

reached a boiling point: “If we don’t do something now, Chinatown will become [a] dead town.”  
 “This is our last chance... If we don’t take control of our own destiny now, we will lose Chinatown.”<sup>140</sup>



*Figure 10. Ronald Reagan (third from the right) next to You Chung Hong (fourth from the right) in 1966.*<sup>141</sup>

In 1999, these Chinatown community members decided to take the neighborhood’s destiny into their own hands. In affiliation with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (CCC), a group of business and property owners self-organized the LA Chinatown Business Council (LACBC), a non-profit organization whose primary goal was to create a Business Improvement District (BID) in Chinatown. A BID would effectively levy a local tax on property owners to fund a variety of neighborhood services, and the proposed purpose of the LACBC-managed BID was to make Chinatown “safer, cleaner and more attractive to residents and visitors.”<sup>142</sup> However, the LACBC’s proposal in LA Chinatown was not unique. BIDs across Los Angeles (and across the US) were

<sup>140</sup> Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

<sup>141</sup> “Ronald Reagan with Y.C. Hong et Al.”

<sup>142</sup> Lin, “Los Angeles Chinatown”; Kang, “Chinatown Leaders Push Revitalization Plan, Local Levy for Beautification.”

established by local economic elites throughout the 2000s, particularly in face of the public sectors' decreasing capacities to address neighborhood-specific challenges.<sup>143</sup> BIDs were viewed as a legitimate avenue for local business leaders to “guide neighborhood change”, and folks in LA Chinatown understood this prime opportunity to influence Chinatown’s future.<sup>144</sup>

The LACBC’s founders included architect Roger Hong, son of You Chung Hong who was the first Chinese American to pass the California bar exam and a national authority on Chinese immigration.<sup>145</sup> In addition to having met with the wife of Chiang Kai-Shek and then-governor Ronald Reagan (and a vocal supporter of Reagan’s gubernatorial campaign), You Chung Hong was also instrumental in designing New Chinatown after Chinatown’s displacement by Union Station in the 1930s.<sup>146</sup> As the son of one of Chinatown’s revered leaders, Roger Hong had a “deep appreciation of the neighborhood’s history”, and he was on a “quest to bring Chinatown back to prominence” through the BID.<sup>147</sup> Hong believed that Chinatown needed to undergo another evolution:

We felt that the children who left Chinatown would come back if things were more trendy. Chinatown doesn’t have to perpetuate an identity of being a self-protective enclave. They have to change. There’s no need for Chinatowns anymore. It’s not a place just for the underprivileged anymore.<sup>148</sup>

At the heart of Hong’s insistence on neighborhood revitalization was a changing understanding of *who* exactly Chinatown was made for. Instead of serving the “underprivileged”, working class immigrants that arrived in Chinatown seeking legal and financial support alongside a sense of community, Hong believed that Chinatown needed to redirect its purpose to bring back younger generations, who were needed to ensure the community had a future. He wanted store owners to

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<sup>143</sup> Lee, “The Formation of Business Improvement Districts in Low-Income Immigrant Neighborhoods of Los Angeles.”

<sup>144</sup> Knapp and Vojnovic, “Rethinking the Growth Machine”; Thomas, “80 Years of the Sweet Life at Chinatown’s Phoenix Bakery”; MacDonald, Stokes, and Bluthenthal, “The Role of Community Context in Business District Revitalization Strategies.”

<sup>145</sup> Pierson, “Roger Hong, 65; Landlord Tried to Rejuvenate Chinatown by Luring Young, Creative Tenants”; The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens, “Y. C. Hong.”

<sup>146</sup> Riggott, “Living – and Protecting – the American Dream”; Ha, “Y.C. Hong - A Biography.”

<sup>147</sup> Pierson, “Roger Hong, 65; Landlord Tried to Rejuvenate Chinatown by Luring Young, Creative Tenants.”

<sup>148</sup> Pierson, “A City’s Chinese Passage.”

“modernize” and bring in “trendy” and “creative” shops and businesses, with the hopes that pandering to hipsters and cool youth would help Chinatown stay alive.<sup>149</sup> Despite seeming somewhat modern, Hong’s perspective was not so far from the views of New Chinatown founders. New Chinatown was carefully designed with inviting oriental aesthetics that founders hoped would draw in tourists from across Los Angeles and beyond, and this aesthetic is easily observed when strolling through the colorful pagoda-lined Central Plaza designed that has lasted from 1938 until today. But in many ways, Hong’s job to save Chinatown was much more difficult in the 2000s: Hong not only wanted Chinatown to maintain relevance in LA, but he also needed to bring back younger residents who previously left the neighborhood to ensure Chinatown could survive as a population rather than die out with the aging seniors who were left behind.<sup>150</sup>



*Figure 11. LA Chinatown’s Central Plaza circa 1960 (left) and in 2018 (right).<sup>151</sup>*

In addition to Hong, the newly formed business council also included George Yu, a first-generation immigrant who arrived from Taiwan in 1969 when he was nine years old.<sup>152</sup> Until his late 20s, Yu worked in construction throughout Chinatown, where he witnessed a vibrant nightlife at General Lee’s, the Quon family’s Grand Star restaurant, and even Chinatown’s punk-rock scene that drew in

<sup>149</sup> Pierson, “Roger Hong, 65; Landlord Tried to Rejuvenate Chinatown by Luring Young, Creative Tenants.”

<sup>150</sup> Pierson.

<sup>151</sup> “New Chinatown, Los Angeles, California”; “Experiencing Los Angeles.”

<sup>152</sup> Hallock, “George Yu Hungers to Bring New Restaurants to Chinatown.”

outsiders - all up until the 1980s, when “other districts [across LA] started competing as night life” and “real Chinese food alternatives” rose to prominence in the SGV.<sup>153</sup> After construction work, Yu turned to property management and “tenant improvement work” with various plaza and housing complexes.<sup>154</sup> Much like Roger Hong, Yu shared the philosophy that Chinatown needed fundamental changes in its business sector and the population to rejuvenate the neighborhood:

To revitalize Chinatown, you must make Chinatown clean and safe. And you need to bring back the families... When we set out as the Chinatown Business Improvement Council, I said from the beginning that our target audience is not the Chinatown Chinese. We must even reach further than the 626 [SGV] Chinese. We must reach out to the 10 million plus of Los Angeles County... We have to make Chinatown relevant to all of Los Angeles or our own kids will never come back to this community.<sup>155</sup>

Yu’s vision for Chinatown was not just of a tourist haven. He believed that Chinatown’s own youth were key to the community’s future, and he wanted to bring back the young professionals and children who previously left in search of better pastures. However, to convince these youth to return, Yu was adamant that Chinatown had to be an attractive place for the entire public. Having directly experienced the neighborhood’s stagnation throughout his life, Yu did not have faith in previous methods like community representation via the PAC to revitalize Chinatown as a desirable space. Instead of city-managed methods, Yu believed that their council’s self-organized private approach to redevelopment was the best way forward: “I’m anti-bureaucracy. I’m almost an anarchist. I hate what our public sector has become. It’s become ‘why you can’t do that.’ Instead, I want to get things done.”<sup>156</sup>

Starting in Spring of 2000, Hong, Yu, and the rest of the LACBC started petitioning to officially establish the Chinatown BID. A majority of votes from the 192 property owners in Chinatown was needed for the BID to pass the ballot. Following the tactics of activist organizations decades before, the council circulated bilingual petitions throughout the neighborhood, declaring the BID’s aims to manage “sidewalk sweeping, private security patrol, tree and shrubbery planting, and other measures

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<sup>153</sup> Hallock; Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District; Le, “The Chinatown Punk Wars.”

<sup>154</sup> Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District.

<sup>155</sup> Yu.

<sup>156</sup> Yu.



to beautify and to promote Chinatown as a tourist destination.”<sup>157</sup> These BID programs would require \$1.2 million every year, to be funded by Chinatown property owners themselves through annual special assessment payments.<sup>158</sup> By this time, the council had already established some community trust with their “Clean & Safe” program, which was privately funded by white investors like Kim Benjamin (who also led the LACBC), a couple of individual businesses, as well as the local Cathay Bank.<sup>159</sup> The BID installed 50 trash cans along Chinatown’s streets and alleys, with local reporters citing that the community became “visibly cleaner”.<sup>160</sup> But even with the council’s existing legitimacy backed by the weight of Roger Hong’s father’s accomplishments, property owners were not all easily persuaded to pay these fees. Some were hesitant due to past inaction regarding neighborhood redevelopment, and the family associations who owned buildings for noncommercial purposes were especially skeptical. It did not help that Roger Hong could not speak Chinese.<sup>161</sup>

At this critical moment, other leaders stepped up to voice their support for establishing the BID. Roland Soo Hoo, son of engineer Peter Soo Hoo Sr. who led the construction of New Chinatown, reassured community members that previous revitalization efforts “did not take off because they did not have politically savvy and well-connected people in the campaign”, unlike this new BID council which had the “strength of people, money, and connections”.<sup>162</sup> Soo Hoo referred to these new people as “high rollers” who had vested interests to “look after their investments”.<sup>163</sup> Such investors included Steve Riboli, a winery owner who recently purchased the historic Capitol Milling building next to the proposed Metro station and wanted to redevelop the space into artists’ lofts and telecommunications offices. Riboli indeed declared his support for the BID, defending that

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<sup>157</sup> Kang, “Chinatown Leaders Push Revitalization Plan, Local Levy for Beautification”; Kang, “Business Improvement Zone to Be Created in Chinatown.”

<sup>158</sup> Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

<sup>159</sup> Kang and Gee.

<sup>160</sup> Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District; Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

<sup>161</sup> Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

<sup>162</sup> Kang, “Chinatown Leaders Push Revitalization Plan, Local Levy for Beautification”; Los Angeles Business Journal, “Chinatown - Likely Passage of Bid Could Bring Benefits to Chinatown.”

<sup>163</sup> Kang, “Chinatown Leaders Push Revitalization Plan, Local Levy for Beautification”; Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

“Chinatown is an important fixture in our culture--and it must be maintained.”<sup>164</sup> Even LA City Council member and Latino community activist Mike Hernandez, whose district included Chinatown, declared his support for the BID proposal: “A lot of small businesses in Chinatown will benefit because [visitors] will have a better impression of Chinatown... What’s good for Chinatown would be good for the rest of the city.”<sup>165</sup> Much like the CRA, Riboli and Hernandez understood Chinatown as a space with economic and cultural utility that would maintain LA’s identity as a multicultural city. However, these investors and local leaders saw privately-run projects under the BID, rather than publicly managed development under the CRA, as the best path forward for the Chinatown community.

Just months later in August 2000, the council’s ballot passed 56-43. LA Chinatown became the first Chinatown in the nation to approve a BID, which would last 10 years in the neighborhood.<sup>166</sup> In his role as Executive Director of the LACBC, George Yu effectively became the main contact person for the BID. Many business owners were ecstatic with the ballot, declaring “finally, I see light at the end of the tunnel”.<sup>167</sup>

As the BID ballot passed, CRA and Hernandez’s office unveiled a majestic Gateway to Chinatown Monument right next to Cathay Manor.<sup>168</sup> It seemed as if the monument’s two majestic dragons breathed a new fire into the neighborhood. But instead of the CRA’s projects, it was the BID’s advertising that made all the difference, infusing “new energy, commitment, and vision into the neighborhood.”<sup>169</sup> Spurred by low rental prices and large-scale local investments from BID-affiliated white investors like Benjamin and Riboli, young art dealers started to open contemporary galleries and exhibition spaces in Chinatown. These galleries filled the empty buildings along Chung

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<sup>164</sup> Kang, “Chinatown Leaders Push Revitalization Plan, Local Levy for Beautification.”

<sup>165</sup> Ramos, “Council Race--It’s a Matter of Emphasis”; Kang, “Chinatown Leaders Push Revitalization Plan, Local Levy for Beautification.”

<sup>166</sup> Kang, “Business Improvement Zone to Be Created in Chinatown.”

<sup>167</sup> Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

<sup>168</sup> Wedlan, “Gate Takes Wing From a Dream”; Espinosa, “L.A.’s Chinatown.”

<sup>169</sup> Kang and Gee, “Reinventing Chinatown.”

King Road that were long vacated by traditional gift shops.<sup>170</sup> In an interview with *The New York Times*, a gallery owner from Sydney, Australia explained that “he chose Chung King Road because the collision of young artists and elderly Chinese is ‘so poignant, so exciting.’”<sup>171</sup> Other new shop owners declared their commitment to make Chinatown an “international mecca for the international art scene... I want LA [Chinatown] to be a 24-hour community.”<sup>172</sup> The *LA Times*’ art writer even referred to Chinatown as “The New Hot Spot.”<sup>173</sup> Riding on the coattails of recently released box office hit *Rush Hour* featuring Jackie Chan, which was filmed in Chinatown restaurant Foo Chow, Chinatown’s role as a center for Los Angeles’ arts culture continued to expand.<sup>174</sup> Even director Quentin Tarantino expressed his interest in purchasing the historic King Hing Theatre to show Asian films.<sup>175</sup> By the mid-2000s, weekend evenings in LA Chinatown were a bustling affair, with “fashionably dressed visitors” visiting “one of the most talked-about contemporary art scenes in the world.”<sup>176</sup>



Figure 12. A postcard featuring Chung King Road lined with new art galleries in 2013.<sup>177</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Muchnic, “Chinatown”; Lin, “Los Angeles Chinatown.”

<sup>171</sup> Anderton, “OUT THERE; Chinatown Reborn As a Bohemian Outpost.”

<sup>172</sup> Anderton.

<sup>173</sup> Muchnic, “Chinatown.”

<sup>174</sup> Thomas, “Chan, Tucker Keep Things Moving in Lively ‘Rush Hour.’”

<sup>175</sup> Kelly, “Chinatown Awaits Gold Rush”; Counter, “Los Angeles Theatres.”

<sup>176</sup> Pierson, “A City’s Chinese Passage”; Harvey, “Like a Magic Candle, Los Angeles’s Chinatown Relights.”

<sup>177</sup> Pham 2013 <https://pixels.com/featured/los-angeles-chinatown-plaza-jamie-pham.html>



*Figure 13. Left: The Lee Family in front of the original Man Jen Low (renamed to General Lee's) restaurant in Old Chinatown, established in 1880. Right: Downstairs bar in General Lee's cocktail house, which remains in LA Chinatown today.<sup>178</sup>*

The long-awaited Metro station was finally completed in mid-2003, allowing riders on the Gold Line to stop directly in Chinatown. Given the previous failure of the Blue Line to rejuvenate working-class neighborhoods in South LA, BID council members including George Yu recognized that simply bringing visitors to the neighborhood was not enough. A former LA City Council member even commented that the light-rail gave Chinatown “a wonderful excuse to pull itself together,” but the real “test is whether Chinatown can keep building the momentum.”<sup>179</sup> LACBC members recognized this challenge, and took it upon themselves to “greet riders at the station, handing out maps and restaurant guides.”<sup>180</sup> A BID-sponsored guidebook featured a self-led walking tour, where visitors stopped by old family association buildings, sites associated with historic leaders You Chung Hong and Peter Soo Hoo, filming locations for various Hollywood movies, new art galleries, the Grand Star restaurant that was converted into a “hip jazz club”, and even General Lee's that was recently reopened as a trendy cocktail bar.<sup>181</sup> Yu was extremely proud to show off “the architecture,

<sup>178</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.generallees.com/>

<sup>179</sup> Kelly, “Chinatown Awaits Gold Rush.”

<sup>180</sup> Kelly.

<sup>181</sup> [Angels Walk LA - Self-Guided Historic Trails, “Angels Walk Chinatown”](#); The guidebook was written in part by well-known author Lisa See, who wrote *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-*

the fragrances, the sounds” of Chinatown, proclaiming that “these are all things you will not see in suburbia.”<sup>182</sup>

With the arrival of the Gold Line, the BID expanded its programs to further incentivize visitor spending in Chinatown. In 2004, they started a Holiday Shopping Promotion and began hosting “Chinatown Summer Nights,” inviting local businesses to participate in an evening “block party.”<sup>183</sup> The BID hosted food trucks, arts and crafts workshops, dances and performances, and brought together local restaurants and shops to help Angelenos “discover the energy and magic of LA’s hidden urban treasure” and “re-brand Chinatown as an exciting hotspot... especially after dark.”<sup>184</sup> The BID even collaborated with the UCLA Center for Community Partnerships for “Art & Discovery” events, where visitors attended art installations, went on a shopping expedition, and enjoyed afternoon tea in this “neighborhood brimming with history.”<sup>185</sup>

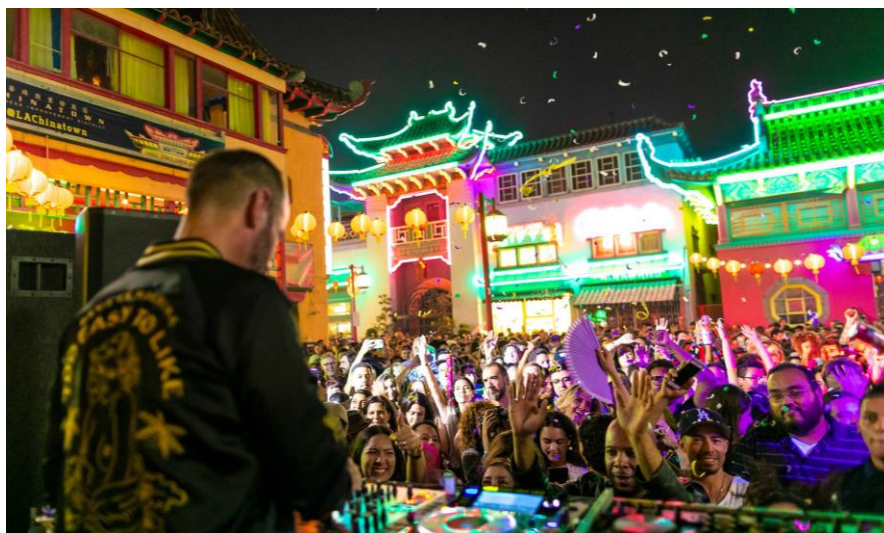


Figure 14. Chinatown Summer Nights co-hosted by the BID and local radio station KCRW, circa 2020.<sup>186</sup>

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*American Family*. See is one-eighth Chinese, and her book which in part chronicles the story of her paternal great grandfather, who was once the richest man in LA Chinatown. See South Florida Sun Sentinel, “Author Q&A:”

<sup>182</sup> Kelly, “Chinatown Awaits Gold Rush.”

<sup>183</sup> Chinatown Business Improvement District, “BID Holiday Shopping Promotion.”

<sup>184</sup> Community Arts Resources LA, “CARS | Chinatown Summer Nights”; Chinatown Business Improvement District, “Chinatown Summer Nights.”

<sup>185</sup> Chinatown Business Improvement District, “Art & Discovery in Chinatown by LA Commons and BID.”

<sup>186</sup> <https://www.timeout.com/los-angeles/music/kcrw-summer-nights>

The BID also made significant investments in local safety patrols, dedicating at least a quarter of its budget towards hiring private security officers.<sup>187</sup> These officers donned red shirts and hi-vis uniforms, biking along Chinatown's streets throughout the day to police the neighborhood.<sup>188</sup> According to Yu, daily graffiti incidents were easily addressed by private security, illustrating the successes of the BID:

Nowadays, if you want something done in Chinatown, you call us. You don't call the City, you don't call the police, you call us. We were called the Business Improvement District, but the correct term is "Community Benefits District." Even the [Family] Associations, Castelar School, Alpine Recreation [Youth Center], and the Library call us... With hard work and consensus building, we've gotten to this point.<sup>189</sup>

Besides these service centers, community members were similarly appreciative of the BID's programs to revamp the neighborhood. Vicky Wong, the Youth Program Director at the CSC (Chinatown Service Center), recounted her experiences working with teenagers in the community:

With the BID, we see more visitors coming into Chinatown. Our kids go volunteer for BID events. Chinatown is now really crowded with outside visitors. Ten or fifteen years ago, Chinatown was dead; there were no events. Now, more people know about Chinatown. I used to hear, "Don't go to Chinatown because it's dangerous. There are [youth] gangs." It's changing right now.<sup>190</sup>

The BID's promotional programs not only reinvigorated tourism, these programs also assuaged long-standing neighborhood anxieties about misbehaved youth by providing volunteer opportunities to keep kids busy. Throughout the 2000s, the BID established itself as a transformational force in Chinatown, shaping the neighborhood into an attractive center for entertainment and cultural immersion, and providing community centers with public services as well.

In 2011, the CRA was officially dissolved under the federal Budget Act.<sup>191</sup> However, even without the presence of the CRA, Chinatown's development was managed by the BID, which maintained

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<sup>187</sup> Chinatown Business Improvement District, "Proposed Market Budget for BID."

<sup>188</sup> Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District.

<sup>189</sup> Yu.

<sup>190</sup> Wong, Chinatown Service Center.

<sup>191</sup> Los Angeles Business Journal, "Governor Brown Forms Board to Dismantle L.A.'s CRA."



the CRA's pro-growth agenda through capital investment. As the BID was renewed for another decade, Chinatown's rejuvenated cultural scene continued to attract young visitors and entrepreneurs to the neighborhood.<sup>192</sup> Of particular note was celebrity chef Roy Choi, who grew up throughout LA County and was credited with starting the "food truck craze" across the city.<sup>193</sup> In the same year that LA Chinatown's iconic Bruce Lee statue was unveiled at a Summer Nights event, Choi moved his sit-down restaurant Chego! into Chinatown's Far East Plaza.<sup>194</sup> In a media interview, Choi explained his decision to bring his "pan-Asian rice bowl" eatery to Chinatown:

[George Yu], the director of development at Chinatown had been hitting me up for a long time... Serendipitously, the Chinatown space came up. I had lunch at the [Far East] plaza and I felt something very strong, so I said, "Let's do it." I was hypnotized. I wasn't thinking of what impact it would have. In all the time I spent in Chinatown as a kid to now, there aren't many businesses besides Chinese, Vietnamese or first generation. I thought that this was a chance to move forward in a different direction, while honoring and representing our parents who immigrated here. Kogi [food truck] has fed a lot of people but a lot of people in Chinatown weren't eating my food. I'm bringing food to a new people.<sup>195</sup>

As Choi mentioned to an *LA Times* reporter, "It's a huge deal to come back [to Chinatown] as an adult."<sup>196</sup> The arrival of Chego! was not only a signpost that Chinatown's new business scene was thriving. Choi's move also indicated that the BID's vision to bring upwardly mobile youth from the second and third generations back to Chinatown was finally being realized. In early 2015, Pulitzer-prize winning food critic Jonathan Gold published a piece on Chinatown's emergence as "LA's hottest restaurant destination", crediting Choi with the "culinary upswing" in a neighborhood housing "affluent condo-dwellers, post-collegians in their first apartments, and low-income seniors".<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Lagmay and Wolcott, "Letter to City Council, Proposed Greater Chinatown Business Improvement District."

<sup>193</sup> Los Angeles Downtown News, "Roy Choi's Chego! Opening May 4 in Chinatown."

<sup>194</sup> Nordyke, "Bruce Lee Statue Unveiled in L.A.'s Chinatown"; Shyong, "Bruce Lee Statue to Be Unveiled in Chinatown Tonight"; Chego! left its Chinatown location in March 2019 and has yet to reopen elsewhere. However, Choi's original food truck business Kogi is still active today, serving Korean BBQ tacos out of a fleet of trucks across LA County. See Elliott, "Roy Choi to Close Chinatown Rice Bowl Favorite Chego next Month."

<sup>195</sup> Time Out Los Angeles, "Time Out with Kogi's Roy Choi."

<sup>196</sup> Hallock, "George Yu Hungers to Bring New Restaurants to Chinatown."

<sup>197</sup> Gold, "Chinatown Emerging as L.A.'s Hottest Restaurant Destination."



Figure 15. Far East Plaza (left), which was home to Chego! (right) from 2013 to 2019.<sup>198</sup>

Although the BID's efforts did not necessarily recover all the families that left Chinatown in the 1970s and 1980s, they undoubtedly raised an entrepreneurial spirit that brought even non-Chinese visitors, businesses, and eventually tenants to a neighborhood that seemed on the brink of extinction. Through the BID, the LACBC members executed their vision of Chinatown as a thriving place for young folks across LA. Community leaders like Yu and Hong saw people from their own generation and younger generations as the future of LA Chinatown, and they fervently believed that business rejuvenation was the optimal way to bring these youth back. From this perspective, the BID was extremely successful. The new art galleries, fusion restaurants, and increased security measures made the neighborhood a “hipster haven” and “cool” destination for tourists seeking an interesting cultural destination or exciting nightlife.<sup>199</sup> In the shadow of the SGV, Chinatown was relevant again, with a unique role that Monterey Park could not emulate. By the mid-2010s, the BID operated as *the* development organization in LA Chinatown, seeming to build upon a legacy of Chinatown's self-organized governance and service organizations.<sup>200</sup> As the CRA vanished, the neighborhood was finally gaining independence from municipal forces and moved beyond structures like the PAC. Instead, Chinatown proved it could independently overcome problems through youth-centered

<sup>198</sup> Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven”; Gold, “Chinatown Emerging as L.A.’s Hottest Restaurant Destination.”

<sup>199</sup> Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven.”

<sup>200</sup> Hom, “Revitalizing Chinatown for a New Generation.”



business improvement led by community members like Yu, who grew up in Chinatown and worked the neighborhood for many decades.<sup>201</sup> Yet, the BID's management still shared a similar vision of progress as CRA-led efforts by bringing in capital through entrepreneurship and investment to protect Chinatown's future in LA's growth machine.

However, not all residents in Chinatown were comfortable with the neighborhood's BID-sponsored changes. Sherwood Lee, a Chinese American resident whose grandfather helped develop Chung King Road, commented on the recent development projects: "This is very positive, but the only drawback is that Chinatown may lose its flavor through all these other businesses coming in."<sup>202</sup> Like the elderly community members in the 1970s, established residents like Lee were anxious about Chinatown's loss of authentic culture. This time, their concerns were not about youth gangs and misbehavior, but rather prompted by new businesses run by many young non-resident and white owners. These concerns about cultural preservation only accelerated as white residents and young professionals began to move into more expensive rental properties like newly constructed condos and luxury apartments, signaling a gradual gentrification of the neighborhood.<sup>203</sup> Who was this business development for: Chinatown's current residents, or the hypothetical future residents that the BID aspired to attract? With more and more entrepreneurs entering Chinatown, these tensions between young and old, between new and established businesses and residents accelerated. Chinatown's heated debates concerning a Wal-Mart supermarket would complicate these tensions, once again raising questions about representation and organizing around the elderly members of the community.

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<sup>201</sup> Li, "Business Improvement Districts and Gentrification in Ethnic Enclaves Through Social Media."

<sup>202</sup> Anderton, "OUT THERE; Chinatown Reborn As a Bohemian Outpost."

<sup>203</sup> Lin, "Los Angeles Chinatown."

## Chapter 4: Wal-Mart and Competing Ideas of Development (2012 - 2013)

In 2012, as chef Roy Choi planned his restaurant's move to Far East Plaza, thousands of protestors marched through LA Chinatown in 2012. "We don't want you in Chinatown. We don't want you in Los Angeles."<sup>204</sup> Gathered from across the county and beyond, these protestors decried the construction of a supermarket in the neighborhood. The swarming crowd convened under the dragon gates monument by Cathay Manor. Against a live rendition of "This Land Is Your Land" by Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello, the protestors' chants grew louder: "We don't want you in Chinatown."<sup>205</sup>

The origins of this protest began just over two decades earlier. In 1992, under the CRA's massive Chinatown budget expansion, the CRA completed a new 6-story low-income housing development. Grand Plaza Senior Housing "opened its golden, affordable doors to seniors in the area", right across the street from Mr. Yin Po Lin's senior housing site that was proposed back in the late 1970s.<sup>206</sup> The CRA was interested in mirroring the (temporarily) successful model of Cathay Manor's building arrangement, wherein the Chinatown Service Center (CSC) occupied the first floor and provided direct services to seniors in the apartment. Instead of a service center, the CRA proposed to open Downtown LA's first major chain supermarket on the first floor of Grand Plaza's building.<sup>207</sup> Such a market would serve both the elderly tenants in Grand Plaza, as well as Chinatown residents throughout the neighborhood by providing groceries and household necessities.

By the time the CRA was federally dissolved in 2011, the first floor of Grand Plaza still remained unoccupied. Finally, in February 2012, national retailer Wal-Mart announced its plans to open a grocery store in that very spot.<sup>208</sup> Local leaders and community members reacted with an uproar, especially given recent media coverage that exposed Wal-Mart's "low-end wage scale, non-

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<sup>204</sup> Bloomekatz, "Thousands Rally against Wal-Mart in Chinatown."

<sup>205</sup> Bloomekatz.

<sup>206</sup> Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles, "CRA News, Quarterly Review of Programs, Projects, and Upcoming Events, 'Chinatown Revisited.'"

<sup>207</sup> LA Times, "New Supermarket for Chinatown."

<sup>208</sup> Zahniser and Li, "L.A. Council Proposal Could Keep Wal-Mart Grocery out of Chinatown."

unionized workforce” across the US, and corruption in its international locations.<sup>209</sup> Within a month, City Council member Ed Reyes filed a formal motion to request a temporary ordinance that would ban “big-box” and “formula” retailers from opening shops in Chinatown, accompanied by the following explanation:

Chinatown is a focal point of commerce and culture for the Chinese population of Southern California with a unique and historical character. There is a need to protect Chinatown’s historically significant resources, including its vibrant small business sector, which supports the needs of local residents and are compatible with the neighborhood; create a supportive environment for new small business innovations; and preserve and enhance existing neighborhood-serving retail uses and future opportunities for resident employment, and business ownership.<sup>210</sup>

Through mobilizing values of cultural preservation that community activists and older Chinatown residents often espoused, Reyes attempted to protect Chinatown as a space for traditional “mom-and-pop” stores, as opposed to a space that could “turn into Main Street suburbia”.<sup>211</sup> Wal-Mart spokespeople accused Reyes of moving too quickly and working with no consideration of district needs, claiming that “it speaks volumes [of Reyes] that the community was not consulted in the writing of the motion.”<sup>212</sup> Days later, the City Council unanimously voted in agreement with Reyes, with the added support of US Representative and Monterey Park native Judy Chu. But the Council was 24 hours too late: Walmart had just secured permits to renovate the vacant spot under Grand Plaza. The mayor’s office refused to take a stance, instead sharing that “the mayor supports bringing fresh and healthy grocery options to all of Los Angeles.”<sup>213</sup>

In opposition to Wal-Mart’s impending arrival, a group of activists worked in alliance with residents, business owners, workers, and youth to establish the Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED).<sup>214</sup> As tensions in the community mounted, civil rights and union activists

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<sup>209</sup> Bloomekatz, “Thousands Rally against Wal-Mart in Chinatown.”

<sup>210</sup> Reyes, *New Formula Retail Uses in Chinatown / Land Use Regulatory Controls*.

<sup>211</sup> Mai-Duc, “Bid to Halt Wal-Mart in L.A.’s Chinatown Falls Short.”

<sup>212</sup> Zahniser and Li, “L.A. Council Proposal Could Keep Wal-Mart Grocery out of Chinatown.”

<sup>213</sup> Zahniser and Li.

<sup>214</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, “About Us.”

gathered in July of 2012 to stage the aforementioned large-scale protest. Led by CCED organizers, other local advocacy groups like Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), and labor unions from across LA County, several thousand people marched through Chinatown with banners such as “Wal-Mart = Poverty” and “Wal-Mart: How the 1% Hurts the 99%.”<sup>215</sup> CCED member King Cheung declared his organization’s stance: “We believe small businesses will be hurt. Some will close down and there will be layoffs [at Wal-Mart]. We just can’t support a Wal-Mart who has no heart and no morals. We don’t want you in Chinatown. We don’t want you in Los Angeles.”<sup>216</sup> Other well-known grassroots activists like United Farm Workers co-founder Dolores Huerta joined the march, drawing attention from both local and national media networks.<sup>217</sup>



*Figure 16. Protesters marching by LA State Historic Park (left) and gathering under the Gateway to Chinatown Monument (right), denouncing Wal-Mart’s proposal in Chinatown in July 2012.*<sup>218</sup>

In addition to anxieties about Chinatown losing “character and identity” that Reyes expressed, CCED and many other protestors were fundamentally concerned about potential material impacts on

<sup>215</sup> Lovett, “A Walmart for Chinatown Stirs a Fight in Los Angeles”; United Press International, “Anti-Walmart Demonstration in Los Angeles - All Photos.”

<sup>216</sup> Bloomekatz, “Thousands Rally against Wal-Mart in Chinatown.”

<sup>217</sup> Capital & Main, “Thousands March and Rally Against Walmart in LA.”

<sup>218</sup> Miles, “Walmart Opens In Major City’s Chinatown, Despite Protests”; Capital & Main, “Thousands March and Rally Against Walmart in LA.”

workers both in and outside of Chinatown.<sup>219</sup> Members of SEACA feared that Chinatown might lose more jobs due to closures of locally-run produce stands and other small grocery stores than jobs that Wal-Mart would bring in.<sup>220</sup> Current Wal-Mart employees were also frustrated with the company's anti-union practices and low wages, declaring that "we will not take the abuse, the disrespect, the impoverished wages, [or] the neglect of communities, associates and small businesses any longer".<sup>221</sup>

Despite vocal opposition to Wal-Mart, various Chinatown locals were actually in favor of the new retail project, most notable among them many seniors. Some low-income and elderly residents explained that Wal-Mart would be a huge convenience, especially because other supermarkets were over a mile away from the heart of Chinatown.<sup>222</sup> For residents that relied on public transportation, leaving the neighborhood for household necessities was a significant time and financial burden. Carrie Gan, a lifelong community resident, explained that small businesses might not be negatively impacted by Wal-Mart's arrival: "I'm not saying anything about the mom-and-pop stores, because I still go there. But I want some place where I can go get my toothpaste and toilet paper."<sup>223</sup> Gan had a fair point: Chinatown's smattering of locally-owned grocery stores offered fresh produce, meat and fish, and packaged goods, and daily necessities, but very few storefronts offered all these items at once.<sup>224</sup> Wal-Mart would provide a centralized location fulfilling most basic needs, especially for the seniors living in Grand Plaza, and their products would also be more affordable than many local stores because they were a national chain.<sup>225</sup>

In addition to residents' priorities regarding resource accessibility, some business owners also believed Wal-Mart might attract new visitors into Chinatown and boost overall activity in the neighborhood. However, these business owners' stores were unlikely to compete with Wal-Mart

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<sup>219</sup> Wong, "Community Fights Walmart's Backdoor Chinatown Strategy."

<sup>220</sup> Newton, "Newton."

<sup>221</sup> Bloomekatz, "Thousands Rally against Wal-Mart in Chinatown."

<sup>222</sup> Huang, "Red Flags Raised Over Potential Sale Of Troubled Chinatown Housing Complex."

<sup>223</sup> Mai-Duc, "Bid to Halt Wal-Mart in L.A.'s Chinatown Falls Short."

<sup>224</sup> Barragan, "Ai Hoa Market Will Relocate after 30 Years in Chinatown. Residents Blame the Landlord."

<sup>225</sup> Newton, "Newton."

because they sold such specialized products like medicinal herbs.<sup>226</sup> Hordes of journalists and public commenters also pitched in with their perspectives. The *LA Times* published a particularly controversial opinion piece, declaring that Wal-Mart was simply following zoning rules and filling a space that had been vacant for over a decade.<sup>227</sup> *LA Downtown News* reporter Sue Laris criticized Reyes' proposal as well:

For a frame of reference, this is not my macro position on Wal-Mart, which I generally oppose. But this is specific to Chinatown or any other community with a distinct character... In short, if Chinatown had wanted to keep its local character, I would have enthusiastically supported that stance. But they don't. They want to grow like a real town, not just a tourist town. City Hall should respect that, City Council should respect that.<sup>228</sup>

In her evaluation, Laris framed growth in Chinatown as antithetical to preservation of the neighborhood's "character" and cultural markers. Notions of progress and cultural preservation were seen as mutually exclusive by Laris, while the CCED and SEACA believed locally run small businesses by immigrant residents were needed for the future of Chinatown.

The BID echoed Laris's stance that perhaps the Chinatown community was interested in growing in a new direction, and Wal-Mart could be a catalyst for neighborhood change. George Yu and his coworkers declared that "unions don't represent the entire community", not-so-subtly antagonizing the CCED, SEACA, and their labor allies.<sup>229</sup> The BID pushed the logic of capital development as progress, emphasizing that Chinatown should "let the people that live there decide with their pocketbooks whether large corporations can serve the community".<sup>230</sup> Yu emphasized that the local community members supported the arrival of Wal-Mart:

Look, you have to understand, 99 percent of the Chinatown community and Chinatown residents support this neighborhood market. Ninety-nine percent of the opposition comes

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<sup>226</sup> Newton.

<sup>227</sup> *LA Times*, "Let Wal-Mart Have Chinatown - Los Angeles Times."

<sup>228</sup> Laris, "Wal-Mart - Chinatown Should Get What Chinatown Wants."

<sup>229</sup> Mai-Duc, "Bid to Halt Wal-Mart in L.A.'s Chinatown Falls Short."

<sup>230</sup> Mai-Duc.

from well outside of Chinatown. Chinatown has become the battleground between Wal-Mart and labor—but planning is not the place for a social agenda.<sup>231</sup>

Without further prompting, Yu actively called out SEACA as a group from “outside of Chinatown”:

No one knows Chinatown businesses better than myself... SEACA reps a handful of high school students who have been alive for a far lesser time—with all due respect—than this space has been vacant. I’ve worked in Chinatown—again—long before [SEACA organizer] Sissy [Trinh] was born. So please do not tell me they know what’s best for Chinatown... We are a free market economy, and Chinatown must evolve. All of this talk against Wal-Mart—it’s so arrogant in terms of telling this community what’s best for it. I assure you they all shop at Target or Wal-Mart in their neighborhood but they won’t allow it here—this makes absolutely no sense.<sup>232</sup>

This was not the first time that CCED, SEACA, and their c-organizers heard this critique. CCED and SEACA activists pushed back against Yu, explaining that “everyone [CCED] has a connection to Chinatown—they used to live here, have family here, come here on break. They are a part of Chinatown.”<sup>233</sup> These organizers also argued that George Yu didn’t even live in Chinatown, which Yu himself confirmed.

As the BID and progressive organizations’ arguments regarding community representation persisted, Wal-Mart’s impending arrival continued to generate debates over Chinatown’s future. By Fall of 2012, the City Council’s stance on Wal-Mart was no longer unanimous, as a redrafted proposal from Reyes failed to pass in October.<sup>234</sup> Local reporters criticized Wal-Mart’s PR team for hiring traditional Lion Dancers to “ward off bad luck from two decades of vacancy” at the construction site.<sup>235</sup> And CCED members condemned the company for hiring representatives who asked Chinatown residents to “sign pro-Wal-Mart petitions without explaining to them what it is, without translation.”<sup>236</sup> But with city permits already obtained, it seemed that vocal community activism was not enough to stop Wal-Mart from opening. In September 2013, the LAPD arrested 21 labor activists

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<sup>231</sup> Hong, “Wal-Mart in Los Angeles Chinatown.”

<sup>232</sup> Hong.

<sup>233</sup> Hong.

<sup>234</sup> Mai-Duc, “Bid to Halt Wal-Mart in L.A.’s Chinatown Falls Short.”

<sup>235</sup> Wilson, “Pro-Chinatown Walmart Rally Will Include ‘Traditional Lion Dance to Ward off Bad Luck.’”

<sup>236</sup> Hong, “Wal-Mart in Los Angeles Chinatown.”

during a march from Downtown LA all the way to Chinatown in protest of Wal-Mart's abusive working conditions.<sup>237</sup> Less than a week later, Wal-Mart opened their Chinatown Neighborhood Market on the first floor of Grand Plaza.<sup>238</sup>

In the wake of these "Wal-Mart wars" (also referred to by a *Curbed LA* contributor as a "nuthouse shitshow"), it seemed that the corporation and its supporters emerged victorious. But just two years after the Chinatown storefront's launch, Wal-Mart made an announcement: their Chinatown Neighborhood Market was shutting down due to global company cutbacks.<sup>239</sup>

The opening and rapid closing of Wal-Mart left Chinatown community members reeling, with dozens of workers losing jobs, and residents once again struggling to find affordable alternative groceries in the area. CCED organizers admitted that Wal-Mart temporarily filled a void of supermarkets in Chinatown, but they emphasized that Wal-Mart's closure brought upon new challenges: "It's not like, oh, we won! Because we now have new problems that [Wal-Mart] created."<sup>240</sup> Some local residents suggested that the Asian supermarket chain 99 Ranch Market should move into the Grand Plaza building instead.<sup>241</sup> However, in the early 1990s Chinatown did have a 99 Ranch Market, which quickly closed its doors just like Wal-Mart.<sup>242</sup> Despite the BID's successful efforts to bring the youth back to Chinatown through an abundance of restaurants like Chego! and Howlin' Ray's Chicken, the neighborhood remained inaccessible for elderly residents seeking accessible groceries and daily necessities. In the words of the *LA Times* wealth reporter, "historic Chinatown is something of a hipster foodie's fantasy, with some of the trendiest restaurants in the city... but for Chinatown's senior citizens, the old neighborhood is more of a food desert."<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Lopez, "Wal-Mart Protesters Set to March from Downtown L.A. to Chinatown"; Lopez, "21 Arrested in Wal-Mart Protest in Downtown L.A."

<sup>238</sup> Hsu, "Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market Opens in Chinatown."

<sup>239</sup> Wattenhofer, "Chinatown's Much-Hated Walmart Closing After Just Two Years"; Masunaga, "Wal-Mart to Close 269 Stores, Including 154 in the U.S. and 9 in California."

<sup>240</sup> Huang, "Wal-Mart Leaves behind LA's Chinatown - and Mixed Emotions."

<sup>241</sup> Huang.

<sup>242</sup> Burum, "Markets: Shopping in a Chinese Wonderland"; Yu, Chinatown Business Improvement District.

<sup>243</sup> Chang and Do, "Chinatown Is One of L.A.'s Trendiest Dining Destinations. But Residents Don't Have a Supermarket."



As a result, local workers and Chinatown tenants, especially elderly residents who were disabled or did not drive, were the people left the most vulnerable.

Since their inception in 2012, the CCED has ascended as one of Chinatown's most prominent organizations, fighting for "interconnected" community resources and affordable housing in a "rapidly gentrifying" neighborhood.<sup>244</sup> They describe themselves as an "all volunteer, multi-ethnic, intergenerational organization" that "builds grassroots power through organizing, education, and mutual help."<sup>245</sup> Although CCED voices many of the same fundamental values as the BID to promote "cultural integrity and preservation of the neighborhood", their political approach is radical and focused on serving the working class. Their mission statement calls for unity around Chinatown's shared future:

We – the residents, youth, adults, business leaders, and friends of Chinatown – are the Chinatown community. We are united around a common vision for a vibrant, culturally diverse neighborhood, where everyone is valued for their talents and contributions to the larger community.<sup>246</sup>

As a relatively new organization in the community, CCED has drawn volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds. In addition to mobilizing local tenant associations and elderly residents themselves, CCED also draws in many younger volunteers through active campaigns across multiple social media platforms, and through connections with local college campuses like UCLA. Some CCED organizers live in Chinatown and have direct family connections with the neighborhood. However, many other volunteers are scattered throughout LA County and even beyond, with active members living in the Bay Area who call into meetings over Zoom.

Given the demographic composition of CCED volunteers, George Yu's criticism regarding CCED's lack of community representation does hold some ground. Although CCED is not simply a "handful of high school students" as Yu disparaged, CCED volunteers include many college-aged students and young professionals who moved to LA County and joined the organization, despite having no

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<sup>244</sup> Yue and Zhou, "Beyond Cathay Manor."

<sup>245</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, "About Us."

<sup>246</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development.

direct, personal relationship to LA Chinatown (and maybe not to any Chinatown). By any traditional means, the CCED is not particularly representative of the LA Chinatown community or its cross-sections. Yet, the CCED maintains that everyone in their organization “has a connection” to LA Chinatown.<sup>247</sup> Are these connections to Chinatown based upon personal identities, or built upon solidarity with others?

Despite having deep personal connections with LA Chinatown, community activists like Don Toy ended up actively endangering the tenants he claimed to represent and serve, all while declaring that the elderly were key to Chinatown’s future. George Yu grew up in Chinatown and pushed for Chinatown’s business interests, yet his actions through the BID left behind many local merchants who could not compete with new young entrepreneurs, not to mention the low-income tenants who were further priced out of new luxury rental spaces. Toy and Yu stand in contrast to the CCED, an arguably non-representative group seeking equity for Chinatown’s elderly tenants and small businesses by working alongside these vulnerable groups. The differences between these actors reveal how interrogating representativeness is a limited framework for evaluating strategies of development, and whether or not visions of progress will serve the people that they claim as part of their community. Instead, examining practices of solidarity are perhaps more revelatory to understand different organizing methods in community development.

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<sup>247</sup> Hong, “Wal-Mart in Los Angeles Chinatown.”

## Chapter 5: The CCED and Reshaping Visions of the Future (2019 - Present)

The CCED's recent organizing history serves as a provocative lens to interrogate questions about representation, solidarity, and progress brought up by the Wal-Mart discourse. Their activism at the intersection of tenant rights and business interests provides an excellent opportunity to revisit moments throughout LA Chinatown's history, from establishment of the BID, to suburbanization and changing demographics, and even back to Don Toy and Cathay Manor. In stepping through a few contemporary moments that share echoes with the past, we not only illuminate the CCED's active mobilization of both youth and elders, but also demonstrate how they understand the elderly as tangible parts of the future, and not just instruments to ensure the progress of the youth. We also observe how the CCED subverts previous notions of community progress, instead organizing in solidarity towards a vision of an equitable Chinatown that meets the needs of existing residents and their businesses.



Figure 17. Residents sitting in front of Ai Hoa Market weeks before its closure in Fall 2019, accompanied by CCED volunteers holding posters to demand affordable groceries for the neighborhood.<sup>248</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Barragan, "Ai Hoa Market Will Relocate after 30 Years in Chinatown. Residents Blame the Landlord."

In Fall of 2019, the last two remaining full-service grocery stores in LA Chinatown shut down. G and G Market provided many elderly Chinatown residents with fresh groceries, seafood and poultry, frozen items, and some limited daily items at a relatively affordable price, but their LLC-run landlord served an eviction notice after disputes regarding parking spots.<sup>249</sup> Ai Hoa Market faced a similar fate, with their white developer landlord raising rent and charging Ai Hoa’s owners several thousand dollars a month for parking lot usage.<sup>250</sup> These small businesses’ displacements were eerily reminiscent of local business owners' demands for neighborhood parking in the 1980s, with no resolution even 40 years later.



Figure 18. Instagram post by @ccedla in December 2020, with the following abbreviated caption: “Hey all you self-proclaimed “entrepreneurs”-- We understand that the rent was a steal. We understand that Chinatown is “hip”... Have you considered that Chinatown isn’t just your profit playground, but rather, a community that many have known as home for their entire lives? ... You might think that contributing economic resources to the community will absolve you of your guilt. But the best thing you can do is leave: your very presence in this community is the problem. Your being here brings in more young, rich hipsters, and because of that, increases real estate speculation and rent for existing community members. You are part of the displacement of longtime community members.”<sup>251</sup>

<sup>249</sup> Chinatown Community For Equitable Development, “Protect Grocery Stores and Community-Serving Businesses in LA Chinatown!”

<sup>250</sup> Le, “LA Chinatown Loses Last Full-Service Chinese Grocery Store – AsAmNews.”

<sup>251</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, “Chinatown Community for Equitable Development on Instagram.”

For CCED and its allies, the exodus of markets like G&G and Ai Hoa run by middle-aged and older locals were a symptom of gentrification directly caused by the BID's actions to usher in youth through business revitalization. Since the arrival of Choi's Chego!, more and more young entrepreneurs have moved into Far East Plaza and locations across Chinatown. The CCED openly critiqued stores like Heaven's Market, a natural wine and flower shop run by two white women on Chung King Road.<sup>252</sup> CCED also called out a swath of Asian American owned businesses like Sesame LA, a "suprette" selling items like "pho-scented chili oil", and pop-up coffee shop Thank You Coffee located in a stationery store, for their failures to provide affordable or relevant resources for the older "legacy" residents of Chinatown.<sup>253</sup> Instead, they advocated for visitors to patronize "legacy businesses" instead. These included businesses operating in Chinatown long before or in spite of the BID's arrival, such as historic Phoenix Bakery, family-owned Gigo's Cafe and Deli, and even boba shop Bubble U which provides discounts for local community members.<sup>254</sup> The CCED's stance illustrates their abandonment of a strict resident versus business framework, as they side with only a subset of the shops and services in Chinatown, specifically businesses which are "family-owned, immigrant-run, or community-serving".<sup>255</sup> They also critique Asian American shop owners as gentrifiers in a community that is presumably for Asian Americans, allowing for an expansive understanding of Chinatown that challenges notions of ethnic representation. By opposing the influx of these new entrepreneurs who serve to attract wealth rather than provide community services or support the livelihoods of established residents, the CCED also illustrates a vision of Chinatown's progress that is anti-growth, in protest of logics used by the CRA and BID which frame capital investment as key to progress.

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<sup>252</sup> The two white women who founded Heaven's Market admitted that they didn't fully understand the "entire ramifications" of their business, but they sought to "better understand capitalism, white supremacy, Asian American history, and gentrification through the Chinatown public library, social media resources, listening to podcasts, participating in workshops, and reading books and articles." See Chaplin, "In LA's Chinatown, New Restaurants Face Sharp Opposition on Social Media From Community Advocates."

<sup>253</sup> Trinh, "A Chinatown Market Celebrates New and Old Asian Staples."

<sup>254</sup> Chan and Zhou, "How to Save Chinatown"; Chaplin, "In LA's Chinatown, New Restaurants Face Sharp Opposition on Social Media From Community Advocates." See the CCED Small Biz Map:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1dGOHn1LkuS5OkCA7E5sFHvD7PwYgcfi&usp=sharing>

<sup>255</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, "CCED COVID-19 Response."



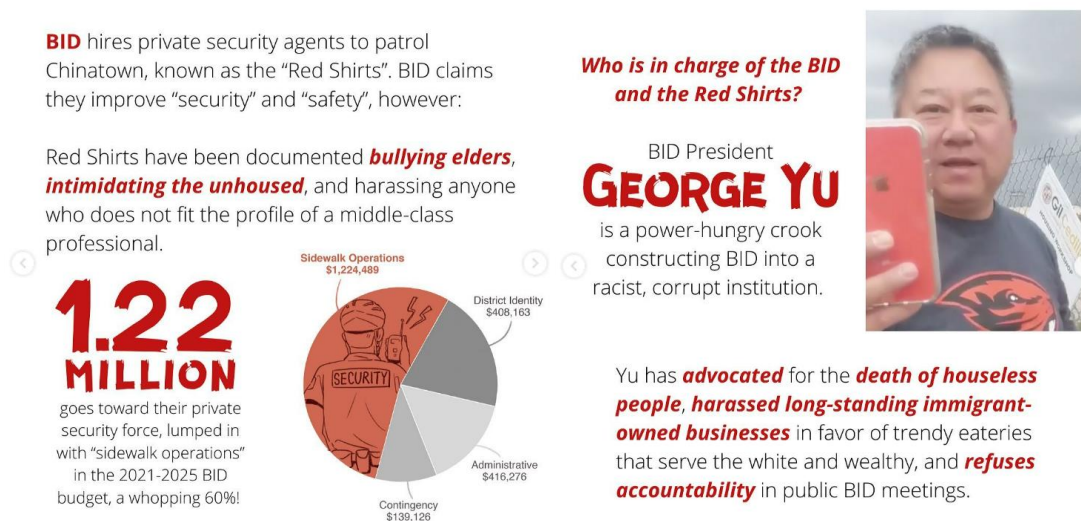


Figure 19. Snippets from CCED’s self-published zine titled “Chinatown doesn’t need the BID.”<sup>256</sup>

However, the CCED’s activism did not end at media interviews and “call-out” social media posts. In wake of these grocery store closures and in response to COVID-19, the CCED initiated a variety of mutual aid programs in partnership with SEACA, providing elderly residents with direct produce deliveries and hot meals.<sup>257</sup> They also organized meetings to connect business owners with lawyers and other legal resources, particularly for vendors facing possible displacement at Dynasty Center, Chinatown’s last community shopping mall that hosts many Cantonese and Vietnamese-owned shops.<sup>258</sup> CCED members have also collaborated with other local organizations like the Skid Row-based group, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, to provide “know your rights” information sessions to address police and security harassment of unhoused people and elders in Chinatown.<sup>259</sup> The CCED published an anti-BID zine in 2021, specifically criticizing the private security patrols that were originally created by George Yu and other LACBC members in the early 2000s to make Chinatown a safer and more palatable place for visitors. CCED’s opposition to the patrols makes clear that their

<sup>256</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, “BID Zine (English)”; Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, “Chinatown Community for Equitable Development on Instagram.”

<sup>257</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, “CCED COVID-19 Response.”

<sup>258</sup> Chinatown Community For Equitable Development, “Defending Dynasty Center: Chinatown’s Last Community Shopping Mall”; de Ocampo, “Dynasty Center Facing Possible Redevelopment, Evictions.”

<sup>259</sup> Horgan, “Coalition Activities—February 27th, 2022.”

vision of Chinatown's future is not one for incoming youth, but rather is based in the current realities of the population in the neighborhood, which includes both elderly residents and even the unhoused. They prioritize the needs of existing residents over the needs of imagined future residents or visitors.

Finally, the CCED has also worked to build residential tenant power across Chinatown, particularly in affordable housing units placed under the threat of redevelopment into mixed-use office spaces or luxury condos, and in buildings with dilapidated living conditions for senior tenants. One such building is Cathay Manor, which continues to be an active site of conflict today. Since late 2021, dozens of different news articles have been published by LA periodicals and national newspapers, highlighting dreadful living conditions for seniors in Cathay Manor. Community members, local officials, and journalists have documented leaky pipes, dirty water, cockroach infestations, missing fire extinguishers, inoperable laundry, moldy walls, and (still) perennially broken elevators in the 16-story complex.<sup>260</sup> Disabled residents have been “essentially trapped” in their small apartments, unable to leave without working elevators.<sup>261</sup> In late 2021, the LA City Council charged Don Toy with 16 misdemeanors related to the elevators, as well as his failure to test and comply with city and fire department protocols.<sup>262</sup> Much of the legal action surrounding Cathay Manor was initiated via the CCED, who demanded action not only from Toy and the CCOA management, but also local and federal officials “who would “ping-pong the responsibility for ensuring access to safe and habitable housing around to each other, each wanting to wipe their hands clean of tenants’ blood.”<sup>263</sup> Despite not living in the same buildings as these residents, the CCED has worked to amplify the voices of tenants at Cathay Manor and beyond. Through regular All Chinatown Tenants Union meetings, the

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<sup>260</sup> Huang, “Red Flags Raised Over Potential Sale Of Troubled Chinatown Housing Complex”; “Broken Elevators and Cockroach Infestations”; “Low-Income Seniors Feeling ‘trapped,’ Demand Building Owner Resign”; Shyong, “Column.”

<sup>261</sup> Smith and Do, “Low-Income Seniors ‘essentially Trapped’ in Chinatown Building as Owner Is Charged for Inoperable Elevators.”

<sup>262</sup> City News Service, “LA City Council Takes Action to Restore Elevators in Senior High-Rise”; Even Congressman Jimmy Gomez (CA-34) publicly called for Don Toy’s immediate resignation from the CCOA, asking the HUD to terminate Toy’s incumbency. See Edinburgh and Gomez, “Congressman Gomez, Cathay Manor Residents Host Press Conference to Call for the Removal of Don G. Toy, CEO and President of CCOA Housing Corporation.”

<sup>263</sup> Chinatown Community For Equitable Development, “LA Chinatown’s Senior Housing Residents Currently Face Hazardous Condi... | TikTok”; Yue and Zhou, “Beyond Cathay Manor.”

CCED not only builds solidarity between themselves and tenants, but also between tenants at different apartment complexes throughout Chinatown.<sup>264</sup>



*Figure 20. Metro Senior Lofts tenant Young Ta-hou (right, holding a megaphone) addresses Meta Housing Corporation President John Huskey (left) about their building's high rent increases in an action supported by CCED members (center, wearing red t-shirt).<sup>265</sup>*

As an organization mobilizing youth even from outside of Los Angeles to fight for the livelihoods of elderly tenants in LA Chinatown, CCED shows a remarkable navigation of the structures that both limit and allow possibility in their radical organizing approach. By mobilizing ideas of “legacy” in their discourse to protect small businesses and senior residents, they demonstrate a key understanding of cultural preservation as a shared value across traditional Chinatown organizations, community representatives, and even the City of LA. However, in contrast to Toy and Yu, their

<sup>264</sup> Yue and Zhou, “Beyond Cathay Manor.”

<sup>265</sup> Li, “Gentrification, Artwashing and Community Power in LA Chinatown with CCED’s Annie Shaw and Sophat Phea.”



actions and discourse do not invoke ideas of the youth or seek aspirational residents and visitors of Chinatown. Instead, the CCED emphasizes that the current senior residents are not only key to Chinatown's future, but they *are* the future, and Chinatown must be developed with their ongoing existence in mind. In intertwining the livelihoods of local business owners and Chinatown residents alike, the CCED also moves forth a “Chinatown-wide anti-capitalist praxis” that dismantles previous notions of urban progress.<sup>266</sup> CCED and their peers challenge the logics of neighborhood development through growth of cultural and economic capital. Instead, they envision a future where the elderly (or the unhoused, or anyone really) do not need to demonstrate their value to the neighborhood’s economic growth to be protected. The CCED’s organizing approach is inherently rooted in solidarity. They actively build connections between the Chinatown community and people like their own organizers, or young people on social media, who may not have direct relationships to LA Chinatown. This approach subverts a framework of representation, opening the possibility of LA Chinatown as an expansive community that includes Asian, Latinx, immigrant, unhoused, young, old, first through fifth generations and beyond, and more people who cannot be easily represented by individuals or even groups.

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<sup>266</sup> Yue and Zhou, “Beyond Cathay Manor.”

## Conclusion: Organizing in Solidarity and at the Margins

“Organizing and building radical tenant power across Chinatown: this is how we’ll fight, and this is how we’ll win.”

-- Janis Yue, CCED organizer <sup>267</sup>

In this thesis, we have traced multiple moments in LA Chinatown’s history of urban development, following the youths and the elders as actors and as subjects in projects of neighborhood change. Beyond our central figures of Don Toy, George Yu, and the CCED, I return to questions of “who’s Chinatown” and “whose Chinatown” to revisit dynamic actors and their complicated notions of neighborhood identity and progress. In the late 1970s, senior citizens in Chinatown were outspoken about their own material demands, seeking affordable (and well-maintained) housing to ensure their own livelihoods. Organizations like Asian Americans for Equality (AAE) and Chinatown Progressive Organizing Committee (CPOC) expressed concerns over tenant displacement, questioning Chinatown’s collaboration with city-affiliated development towards goals of capital growth. By the 1980s, young real estate agent and former LA Chinatown resident Fred Hsieh positioned Chinatown as a dilapidated and crowded space, not suited for new wealthier immigrants. Hsieh’s reshaping of the SGV dramatically influenced LA Chinatown’s demographics, with more SE Asian refugee families and their children arriving to the community. Older, established Cantonese residents and even local teachers at Castelar School saw these SE Asians as “not Chinese enough” in contrast to the newcomers in the SGV. By the mid-1990s, the exodus of families and young professionals away from LA Chinatown and towards the SGV accelerated these concerns of cultural loss and rapid economic decline. Tourist activity in Chinatown was also at a record low. Local community leaders like Roland Soo Hoo and Roger Hong, both with undeniably rich family connections to LA Chinatown’s history, envisioned a Chinatown that would bring back these youth and attract visitors from afar. Alongside the BID, Soo Hoo and Hong sought neighborhood capital investment throughout the 2000s, bringing businesses to attract “hip” and “cool” youth. At the same time, BID-hired security forces harassed unhoused people and the elderly. Finally, in the 2010s, activism over Wal-Mart demonstrated diverging notions of Chinatown’s future from senior citizens, city administrators, the BID, and youth organizers alike. These actors held conflicting ideas about

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<sup>267</sup> Yue and Zhou.

Chinatown's role to bring capital in the urban growth machine, the neighborhood's cultural preservation, the role of small locally owned legacy businesses versus corporate magnates and youth entrepreneurs, and the material needs of vulnerable senior residents.

I briefly revisit Roger Hong and his role beyond an actor in this historical narrative. The first half of my thesis heavily relied on The Huntington Library's Hong Family papers, specifically folders from the personal documents and correspondence of Roger Hong and his father You Chung Hong. Roger was highly engaged with the PAC and a supporter of the BID, and You Chung was central in building New Chinatown and maintained close connections with city and state leaders like Reagan. The Hong's were vocal supporters of development that would allow LA Chinatown's inclusion into the City of LA, ultimately aligning with capital investment in the urban growth machine. Although the Hong's retained documents from dissenting groups like the AAE and CPOC, there are undoubtedly many other narratives about these earlier decades that I or the archives have left behind. Throughout the latter half of this thesis, I often relied on local journalism and public interviews. These sources would benefit from a critique of their authorial voice, particularly since they were pieces shared with public audiences. Without access to internal communications within the LA Chinatown Business Council (LACBC) and the BID, or even within CCED organizers, I also cannot capture the possible conflicts within these organizations that might point to divergent notions of who's and whose within these groups.

These historical narratives regarding development in LA Chinatown also illuminate new opportunities for exploration that I could not do justice to within this thesis. An interesting project could involve a study of why LA Chinatown might be unique in reference to other Asian enclaves like Koreatown or Little Tokyo, which have historically faced very similar patterns of displacement and development, but are not implicated in the shadow of the SGV to the degree that LA Chinatown is. A comparative study between LA Chinatown and its neighboring black and brown communities such as Skid Row could investigate how racial dynamics and logics of cultural preservation influence development in Los Angeles. This also brings up very interesting questions about community safety, policing, and their connections to urban development and private management like the BID's security patrols. To further understand LA Chinatown's dynamics, I think it would also be valuable

to interrogate the role of a growing Latinx population and unhoused people in the neighborhood. By including these groups in their activism, the CCED's vision of Chinatown challenges notions of Asian-ness as central to Chinatown, and questions what it means to be a traditional resident of the space. However, the CCED's exclusion of new, wealthier white residents further complicates their vision as not necessarily all-encompassing of current tenants, but rather focused on a class and capital analysis to determine the most vulnerable populations of Chinatown.

What makes the CCED's vision of Chinatown more expansive and complex, and difficult to identify by a single demographic group? I argue that it is not just the CCED's progressive and anti-capitalist politics that shapes their vision of the future, it is fundamentally who they consider the future of Chinatown, as well as their relationship to Chinatown itself. Throughout LA Chinatown's development history, community representatives like Yu and Toy see the youth of the community as the future of Chinatown. The elders remain important to passing on traditions, but ultimately they see younger generations as the people who should carry on the torch. For Yu and Toy, securing Chinatown's future through urban development means securing what is best for the youth that they aspire to bring back to Chinatown (but do not yet live there): a neighborhood with cultural power and economic opportunity, with "hip" businesses and social spaces, and with legitimacy in LA's growth machine.

However, the CCED subverts these expectations of community representation. Instead of making claims about representativeness, they attach their dedication to Chinatown through the connections that they make with the community. These connections are built through solidarity, through understanding the people of the community and the CCED's relationships to each of them. In contrast to actors like George Yu, CCED's future for Chinatown is not dependent on ushering in capital and economic growth through pursuing single-issue city-affiliated projects, or through bringing back the youth as aspirational residents and visitors. Instead, the CCED's vision for development is rooted in the material realities of vulnerable people that exist in Chinatown today, including small businesses and elderly tenants who live in precarious conditions. CCED treats these elderly residents as the people who will carry on Chinatown's future, and not just as useful instruments to preserve Chinatown's history and culture. In fact, they do not ask any of the people

they serve to exist as contributors towards capital or community growth - their existence is enough to demonstrate that they should be protected.

It may seem curious that the CCED's relative lack of shared identity with the people it serves seems to build stronger solidarities. However, I believe that building solidarity is a process that requires active critique of who is in the community, and one's relationship to the community. In LA Chinatown, the identity of the community is inherently fragile. As highlighted in discussions of demographic change and physical displacements, this community cannot be easily defined by ethnic, racial, cultural, socioeconomic, or even spatial boundaries throughout its history. LA Chinatown exists at the intersections and margins between boundaries. The CCED recognizes this challenge to find the various connections and solidarities that not only hold LA Chinatown together as a community, but also connect CCED organizers to Chinatown's existence, whether through organizers' diasporic identities, or their dedications to a politics of equity and liberation.

Perhaps this internal solidarity, this existence of LA Chinatown at the margins, is what allows external solidarity from individuals who might not be representative of the community to truly serve the LA Chinatown in tangible and material ways. Given a constant challenge to orient oneself in a space at the margins, where the lines delineating who belongs or who represents are constantly blurry, we are compelled and even forced to better understand the dynamic forces that modulate the shape of the space. For LA Chinatown, this dynamism is captured throughout a history of anxieties and hopes about its youth and its elders, and reflected in Chinatown's visions of progress that evolve alongside the actors as we travel through time. Our challenge to understand these dynamics in a marginal space is what allows careful interrogation of the people and their relationships with the place. By building at the margins, in solidarity with communities that are constantly looking to understand their own identity and who the community is for, we can imagine equitable and liberatory futures together.



*Figure 21. Tenants across Chinatown come together for a monthly All Chinatown Tenants Union meeting with CCED organizers to discuss how they can mutually support one another.<sup>268</sup>*

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<sup>268</sup> Yue and Zhou.

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