

Chinatowns in Singapore and San Francisco

Chinatowns or ethnically Chinese enclaves can be found in many major cities around the world, especially so in the West due to the historical migration patterns of numerous Chinese migrants. Chinatowns often sprout up organically in areas where pioneering Chinese migrants have settled in their new environments, and over time, consequent waves of migrants settle down due to a variety of reasons such as kinship ties, language familiarity and a general sense of camaraderie and safety especially when in foreign, and often hostile countries (Zhou and Lin, 2005). Despite their similar formation processes, the Chinatowns of the world all have unique characteristics and this paper will be focusing on comparing and contrasting the Chinatowns in Singapore and San Francisco. Starting with a brief history of their development in each country, the paper will then move on to explore how each Chinatown was influenced by the economic, social and political circumstances in each city and molded by the various government policies over the years resulting in significantly different landscapes that gives each Chinatown its own personality.

Chinatown in Singapore started out as part of the first master plan of Singapore drawn out by its modern founder Sir Stamford Raffles in 1822 (Teo, 1992). In order to introduce some order to the growing British port city, he portioned off areas along the Singapore River (where most economic activity took place) for use by the various ethnic groups that populated the place. Chinatown then was simply the area Chinese residents were assigned to and congregated at. As opposed to Singapore's Chinatown, developed more naturally as the first wave of Chinese migrants arrived in San Francisco during the California Gold Rush in the late 1840s/early 1850s (Yu, 1981). These Chinese settled in the area that is now known as Chinatown in San Francisco and their descendants and subsequent migrants continue to live there till today. Although the initial development of Chinatowns in both cities differed, both attracted subsequent Chinese migrants arriving in Singapore and San Francisco to live and work in the area.

One of the most obvious similarities both Chinatowns share is that they were historically areas that provided affordable housing for the Chinese community, which comprised mostly of relatively poor economic migrants. Despite the poor quality of housing and cramped quarters, the benefits of living in Chinatowns outweighed the costs. A common language and culture resulted in a tightly knitted community that offered social support and economic connections to newly arrived Chinese migrants struggling to make a living in a foreign land filled with foreign languages (Wang, 2010). As the Chinese population in both cities grew, living conditions deteriorated as the buildings that make up both Chinatowns face increasing strain to support more residents. Yet its residents were reluctant to move away as the Chinatowns were the only places where they were protected from discrimination and in some cases, physical assault. The need was amplified in San Francisco where the Chinese were an ethnic minority (Yu, 1981). As both cities developed, their Chinatowns evolved accordingly while still continuing to serve the needs of the resident Chinese populations. Singapore's Chinatown goes through a transformation process that is largely driven top-down by the government of the city-state whereas San Francisco's Chinatown managed to maintain its independence and presence despite external pressures due to the organizational efforts of the Chinese community on the ground.

Post WWII, various social and political factors triggered the transformation of Singapore's Chinatown from a largely residential area for its Chinese population into an area that is considered part of the city's cultural heritage, gradually losing its key purpose as an ethnic enclave that offered protection and shelter for the Chinese community. In the late 1950s, the newly independent Singapore government began to draw up the first of its master plans (Teo, 1992). To implement these plans, residents of various squatter settlements and slums were resettled into high-rise apartment blocks owned and managed by the newly set up Housing Development Board (HDB) (Yeoh, 2000). The overcrowded Chinatown area was targeted with many of its residents moved into these newly built public housing units. Additionally, racial tensions (Goh, 1988) amongst the various races in newly independent Singapore resulted in the government taking action to discourage the formation of ethnic enclaves like Chinatown. Instead the various races that made Singapore's population were evenly distributed throughout the city via ethnic quotas (Sin, 2002) imposed on the HDB flats. Moreover, with the establishment of Singapore's independence from Malaysia in 1965, the Chinese became the dominant ethnic group and the need for mutual protection within the Chinese community diminished.

In contrast with Singapore, as an ethnic minority, the local Chinese community had to fight hard in order to preserve San Francisco's Chinatown's location and its purpose in what is considered prime land against a rather unwelcoming resident population (Mayer, 2012) and discriminatory immigration policies. Local lobbies made up of Chinese merchant companies began to push for rights to own land in the early 1900s. Subsequent generations of Chinese-Americans continued to push for financial support from the government to construct affordable housing for its resident population and worked towards repealing laws that prevent Chinese from owning the buildings and land that make up Chinatown (Yu, 1981). As a result of law changes and government grants, San Francisco's Chinatown still continues to serve the purpose of providing shelter for new Chinese migrants while maintaining its status as the social and cultural "home base" (Loo and Mar, 1982) for the Chinese Diaspora in the region. Ethnic Chinese continue to live and work in the area due to the variety of services that cater to their needs and the familiarity and community support that eases their assimilation into the new environment (Wang, 2010). Also, problems associated with migrant communities such as overcrowding and lower median incomes continue to exist (Loo and Mar, 1982), but members of the community who have moved away from the area still return to Chinatown, be it to pick up their groceries or have a culturally authentic meal with friends and/or relatives.

Stripped of its original function as a halfway house for incoming Chinese migrants, Singapore's Chinatown was ultimately designated as a cultural heritage area by government authorities and its shop houses and other iconic buildings were to be preserved for Singaporean and tourists to visit (Pheng and Wong, 1997). But while the physical landscape of Chinatown was conserved, its remaining residents were regrettably reallocated, further amplifying the difference between the original role of Chinatown and the sanitized, beautified and modernized version that housed a variety of retail stores and consumer services (Yeoh, 2000). Meanwhile, in San Francisco, since establishment of Chinatown in the 19th century, remarkable progress has been made to protect it and ensure its legacy as a key transition point for new Chinese migrants and a focal point for the sizable Chinese population in the city. Unsurprisingly, in addition to

these roles, San Francisco's Chinatown is now also considered a cultural site that forms an integral part of the city's social fabric and stands as a living and thriving reminder of the contributions made to the city by its Chinese residents. In spite of their divergent development paths, the global tourist fascination with Chinatowns (Shaw *et al*, 2004) triggered the commodification of Chinese culture, with souvenir shops sprouting up in the Chinatowns of both cities to cater to tourist demands for a tangible piece of the cultural history.

In conclusion, while their origins differed, the Chinatowns of both Singapore and San Francisco were physical manifestations of the Chinese community and served similar functions in helping to facilitate the transition for Chinese migrants arriving in these two cities. Over time, both Chinatowns underwent changes due to a mixture of social, political and economic factors that resulted in the adjustment of land use patterns. Interestingly, tourist interest in these unique cultural landmarks located in two fundamentally different cities ultimately triggered the re-convergence of land use in both Chinatowns. Nevertheless, the Chinatowns of Singapore and San Francisco continue to remain culturally significant to their respective Chinese populations by providing a collective space to indulge in the celebration of various Chinese festivals, such as the Chinese New Year.

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