

New York City's Chinatown as Preservation of Identity:  
An Analysis of the Ethnic Enclave Model

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The tall department stores gradually give way to wider streets and slightly smaller buildings, and the heat of the August day permeates the city even though the sun is hidden behind clouds. I trudge down Bowery, on a mission to get to the Bowery Ballroom for an art project before I need to take a break from carrying my heavy backpack. Eventually, I look up from my feet to take in the unfamiliar surroundings, and suddenly see many more shop signs in Chinese than before. I realized I had inadvertently crossed into Chinatown, and the familiar characters in bold reds and yellows brought me some comfort.

I can't read them though. Some words are easy, common ones that I recognize, but most are just shy of being familiar enough for me to discern the meaning; It's like seeing an old friend, but not being able to remember their name.

Seeing Chinese characters immediately reminds me of my mom. She came to the United States from China for graduate school where she met my dad, making me an in-between sort of kid. I spoke Chinese at home, and English at school. I never had both my feet in one world, always torn between one or the other. Eventually, my Chinese faded, leaving me able to understand and speak, but not read or write. I speak with my mom in Chinese, but the way Chinese characters always seem just out of reach always brings me a pang of sadness, like I've forgotten some of myself and my family along with the meaning of the words.

Though sometimes painful, I do find solace in the fact that we are all in-between sort of kids. When growing up, we leave some things behind and bring other things with us. I bring my mother when I shop for mooncakes for the mid-autumn festival, and my father when I watch fireworks on the Fourth of July. We are all mosaics, made up of pieces picked up along our way that make us who we are.

Nowhere can exemplify this in-betweenness as succinctly as New York City's Chinatown. Throughout history, ethnic enclaves much like Chinatown have been seen in a myriad of ways. For immigrants, these enclaves help to ease assimilation into the host country without the hardship of communication barriers. Acting as a sort of landing pad, immigrants can ease into their new environment while still being surrounded by familiar language and culture. Some theorize that this helps immigrants become naturalized into their host country; the ease of communication allows immigrants to join the workforce easier, which then encourages assimilation or naturalization. Others believe the enclaves segregate immigrants, separating them from the host society. This allows them to avoid the need to learn the skills and languages in order to assimilate, in turn limiting their ability to grow societally. I would argue that Chinatown encourages the comfort and assimilation of immigrants, as well as facilitating the preservation of their identity and community.

The history of New York City's Chinatown starts with the economic downturn that occurred after the Civil War. Deflation and depression caused wages to fall, and jobs became more competitive. Because Chinese workers would work for lower wages, white workers began to resent their competition. Rising racism in the West drove many Chinese immigrants to flee to large cities on the East Coast, like New York City. Immigrants began to gather around Mott Street, and though laws restricting immigration like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 slowed its growth, Chinatown kept expanding. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 overturned much of the previous immigration system, allowing for a flood of immigrants to expand Chinatown far beyond its historical seven-block boundary.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Chuo Li, "Commercialism and Identity Politics in New York's Chinatown," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 6 (November 2015): 1118–34.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144214566956>.

Much like other ethnic enclaves, New York City's Chinatown has often been seen as an opaque and impermeable enclave. Because the immigrants have a space of their own, it appears like a closed community, made up of businesses and people that seem so different, that they are unassimilable,<sup>2</sup> but this is not the case. On a technical level, ethnic enclaves often help immigrants acquire jobs and skills while also being a familiar environment. According to a study investigating the economic success of immigrants in ethnic enclaves, "There is a large positive effect of living in an enclave for the least skilled (i.e., least educated). A standard deviation increase in ethnic concentration causes a 13 percent increase in earnings in this group."<sup>3</sup> These immigrant majority neighborhoods serve as a safe place to land, and a haven of familiarity. This sense of community and solidarity results in more collective economic action, in turn boosting the economies of the enclaves.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Chinatown, since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 allowed for increased and diversified immigration, its economy has thrived,<sup>5</sup> allowing hundreds of immigrants to find jobs. Also, because immigrants face discrimination and alienation in host countries, self-employment opportunities are much easier to attain in a community made up of their peers. As Min Zhou says in her book examining New York City's Chinatown, "In the cultural environment of Chinatown immigrants can conduct their daily lives in their own language, following their own customs and rituals without fear and intimidation."<sup>6</sup>

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2. Kay Anderson, Ien Ang, Andrea Del Bono, Donald McNeill, Alexandra Wong, "Chinatown Unbound: Trans-Asian Urbanism in the Age of China." *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 2 (April 2020): 399–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519899771>.
  3. Olof Åslund, Per-Anders Edin, Peter Fredriksson, "Ethnic Enclaves and the Economic Success of Immigrants: Evidence from a Natural Experiment," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, no. 1 (2003): 329–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25053906>.
  4. Min Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bstj3>.
  5. Zhou, *Chinatown*, 231.
  6. Zhou, *Chinatown*, 219.

The close-knit communities based on family and shared cultural ties found in immigrant neighborhoods take much of the stress out of finding a job, in turn fostering development of businesses and capital.<sup>7</sup> In the case of many Chinese and other Asian immigrants, the economic successes of first-generation entrepreneurs are reinvested in the education of the second generation.<sup>8</sup>

All of this suggests that majority immigrant neighborhoods, especially New York's Chinatown, have been a great success in the advancement of immigrants. As Zhou says, “. . . from the perspective of immigrant Chinese, Chinatown has shown its great potential in helping to ease the transition to their new country and to facilitate their social mobility in American society.”<sup>9</sup>

Moving away from an economic view, immigrant majority neighborhoods have allowed for strong community ties and the conservation of the culture and tradition of immigrants.

Immigrants face unimaginable hardship to travel hundreds of miles from home, into a place completely unknown and unfamiliar. Chinatown has been constructed and developed from the ground up by generations of Chinese immigrants seeking familiarity. It is a preservation of identity in a place often hostile to outsiders, exemplified by unfair immigration acts like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In this case, the high concentration of immigrants has created a space not that segregates, but has created a neighborhood that preserves the cultural identities of the people living there. Not only that, but it has also created a sense of community that residents can identify with. This can be seen in community action like the 1974 petition for equal opportunity in employment. During the construction of Confucius Plaza in Chinatown, the

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7. Zhou, *Chinatown*, 224.

8. Zhou, *Chinatown*, 232.

9. Zhou, *Chinatown*, 219.

project's contractor did not hire a single Asian worker.<sup>10</sup> A petition signed by thousands of Chinatown residents forced the contractors to hire up to thirteen Asian workers, and was one of the most significant times the city had seen a collective action by Chinese immigrants fighting for equal rights. As Chuo Li says in an article about identity politics in New York City's Chinatown, "Because the struggles were grounded in and reflective of the specifically site-bound locality, they signaled a conscious link between the ethnic group and the place of Chinatown, which integrated in a positive way political empowerment and drew upon a clear geographical dimension of ethnicity."<sup>11</sup> This conscious link between place and identity exemplifies the community that has been built in Chinatown, and the extent to which it has brought people together.

In this lens of seeing Chinatown as a preservation of identity, it no longer fits into the black and white arguments of the ethnic enclave model. What the model does not consider is that immigrant spaces can be both separated and permeable; they act as both a refuge and a mode of assimilation. The "segregation" found in immigrant neighborhoods can actually be valuable and protect the identities and interests of the immigrants inside. Overall, the ethnic enclave model is outdated. Seeing ethnic majority neighborhoods as either economically beneficial or detrimental is much too narrow of a view; there are many other factors at play, many of which are more important than measuring enclaves with simply economic terms. Immigrant communities and identities are just as if not more important than their economic output.

The community of Chinatown not only facilitates the comfort and upward mobility of its residents, it brings people together. Diverse groups of Asian immigrants, children of immigrants, and people just missing home, all gather and look for pieces of themselves to pick up.

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10. Li, "Commercialism and Identity Politics," 1118–34.

11. Li, "Commercialism and Identity Politics," 1118–34.

## Bibliography

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