



ETHNIC RENEWAL IN PHILADELPHIA'S CHINATOWN

- SPACE, PLACE, AND STRUGGLE -

MATHRYN E. WILSON

Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown

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*To my family
and the families of Chinatown,
past, present, and future*

Preface

My first experience with Philadelphia's Chinatown was a common one. During graduate school in the late 1980s and early 1990s, my fellow folklore students and I, always in search of interesting yet inexpensive food, often dined in Chinatown. We favored one Vietnamese place in particular for its vegetable crepes and strong sweet coffee. But as often as we went to Chinatown, I do not remember paying much attention to the neighborhood.

Chinatown really emerged as a neighborhood for me when I went to work for the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in 1997. The Balch Institute was a Philadelphia library, archive, and museum devoted to the immigrant and ethnic experience in North America. The Balch was active from 1972 to 2000, when it merged into the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). One of the first projects I was involved with at the Balch was *Building the Gold Mountain*, an exhibit and program series that told the story of Philadelphia's Chinatown through images, artifacts, and oral histories. Shortly before the exhibit was finished and scheduled to open, the institute invited the community advisory committee to review the results. The committee included, among others, Cecilia Moy Yep, George Moy, Mitzie Mackenzie, and Inspector Anthony Wong. At the time, I was unaware that these people were legends in Chinatown, but soon they made quite an impression on me.

We laid out the exhibit materials on the conference table, walking through each section describing the storyline. At the end of the presentation, Cecilia Moy Yep said something to the effect of, "Well, this is fine, but we need more pictures of Chinatown as it is today." She explained that although people tended to see Chinatown as a mere collection of restaurants, it was a "living community" that needed to be depicted as such in the exhibit. Her comment revealed that for ethnic and immigrant communities like Chinatown, a public

history representation must be a usable past, one that not only portrays historic struggles but also links them to present concerns. This usable past is not some simplistic presentism. Rather, it is a living legacy for a community addressing issues that are both historic and ongoing. In response to this request, I took on the task of using the time that remained to create a final section of the exhibit to represent that living community as best we could. I got my camera and spent a day walking around Chinatown, taking pictures. With Cecilia Moy Yep's words echoing in my head, I focused on capturing images of sites that represented a range of community businesses and spaces, such as a Vietnamese beauty salon, a driving school, doctors' offices, and a wonderful mural illustrating the community's history. And as I contacted community organizations, such as Asian Americans United (AAU), to request images and artifacts, I learned about a variety of community issues.

In the process of developing a program series to accompany the exhibit, I met such residents as Dun Mark and Joseph Eng, old-timers who led a senior tai-chi group in the neighborhood. I observed Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) activists sharing their memories and telling their stories. I screened the video *Save Chinatown*, which portrayed young people perched atop bulldozed rubble and a diminutive but strident young Mary Yee galvanizing a protesting crowd. Later, a stint as an oral-history consultant for the Asian Arts Initiative's (AAI's) "Chinatown Lives" project further deepened my sense of the neighborhood's diversity. I attended AAI's programs on Chinatown and participated in a rally against the proposed baseball stadium in 2000. My connection to the community over the years was never more than casual, but I never forgot the inspiring story of the Chinatown activists and their mandate to look, in their words, "beyond the restaurants."

From 1997 to 2007, I worked with a number of ethnic and immigrant communities in Philadelphia—South Asian, Arab, African, and Latino—to produce public programs, exhibits, educational materials, and publications. Powerful narratives emerged from these projects—stories about what it was like to be a young Indian doctor in the late 1960s, to be resettled as an Ethiopian refugee in the early 1980s, to live as an Arab American after the Oklahoma City bombing in the 1990s, and to live under the radar as an undocumented worker from Honduras in the early 2000s. As we negotiated these projects with our community partners, several issues surfaced again and again, including the challenges immigrant communities faced that culture could address (such as self-representation, image, advocacy, and education) and those it could not (such as poverty, disenfranchisement, and crime). Always there was the imperative to create a usable past that spoke to the needs of the present, address acute anxieties about representation vis-à-vis stereotypes and other forms of misrepresentation, and account for the inherent diversity of even the most seemingly homogeneous community. These projects taught me to listen

and look for contradiction, tension, and diversity; to negotiate the meanings of history, culture, and identity through dialogue; and to understand that when communities of color enter into public space and culture, the expression of their identities and experiences is fraught with underlying dilemmas.

When I returned to academe to pursue my own research, Chinatown almost immediately came to mind. I remembered how I had been schooled by community leaders in 1997, and I wanted to know more about this special neighborhood, its history of activism, and its urban landscape creation. I wondered how Chinatown developers had addressed some of the dilemmas of ethnic self-representation that I had encountered in other communities, particularly the Latino *barrio*. I knew my research could not be an insider's look at Chinatown—I am not the person for that project, especially because I have no knowledge of Chinese. That is not the focus of this book, nor does this book do full justice to the vitally important role that first-generation immigrants play in creating and sustaining Chinatown.

Rather, I have sought to understand, from various perspectives and my own, how the shape and identity of Chinatown emerged historically, how community members understood their landscape, and how and why they worked to defend, renew, and expand it. Early on, I discovered in the PCDC archives evidence of how the neighborhood had been self-consciously constructed in the late twentieth century and how PCDC had worked systematically with the city of Philadelphia to fulfill that goal. I uncovered differences within the community with respect to generation and political ideology that revealed the sophistication of the community's coalition building in the past few decades. I observed the crucial nature of the work of American-born Chinese, who were often dismissed as *juk sing*, in the survival of the neighborhood and its traditions.¹ And I came to understand that the dilemmas of ethnic urban renewal that I found so interesting had a long history.

My approach to this book has been deeply influenced by theories of ethnicity that see it as a fundamentally interactive and highly strategic phenomenon, the result of both attribution from without and self-representation from within. In this way, I appreciate that ethnic places are made, not just inhabited; that they are intimately connected to larger relationships with other communities; and that, more often than not, people must fight for them. In the same way, they must be renewed—often through new immigration, which perpetually reconfigures the landscape, the local microeconomy, and the community infrastructure. In Philadelphia's Chinatown, as elsewhere, newcomers infuse the neighborhood with a new sense of cultural authenticity, while long-time residents and their leaders work to preserve a sense of place by living the legacies of past struggle. I have tried to look and listen, and I hope that my representation of these efforts does them some degree of justice and encourages others to engage with and explore the many facets of this resilient and unique community.

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Introduction

Imagining Chinatown

It is a little before 9:00 A.M. on a summer morning in July 2009, and Chinatown is just waking up. As I walk up Ninth Street toward Vine, I see men unloading a large whole pig from a nondescript white delivery truck through the front door of a small storefront. Looking ahead, I see a busy highway and, farther off, a massive rusting industrial structure. Ninth Street does not continue over Vine Street, so I move over to Tenth Street via Spring, a quiet side street populated by antebellum row houses and a blond brick church with a red tile roof, the Chinese Christian Church and Center (CCC&C). Over on Tenth Street, storeowners are setting up umbrellas and crates of fruits and vegetables on the sidewalk. Elderly men and women walk slowly down the street, carrying bags of groceries, their backs bowed from a lifetime of labor. Many stop every five minutes or so to greet and talk animatedly with others they know. Unceasing traffic clatters down Tenth Street, dodging potholes and construction cones. I see one little boy, about six years old, supporting the arm of his elderly grandfather. Most of the shops and restaurants are closed, the neon lights dimmed until lunchtime. In one vacant storefront hangs a poster depicting five Chinese boys in baseball uniforms, standing in front of a bulldozer. “Looking Back,” its text asserts. In the window of the On Lok Social Service Center, a yellow photocopied flyer declares, “Bad for our City, Bad for Chinatown. No Casino.”

Philadelphia’s Chinatown is a neighborhood where elderly men gather in cafés every morning and afternoon to drink tea and share news and stories; where teenagers play basketball on the church playground after school or congregate in bakeries to drink bubble tea and huddle over each other’s cell-phone screens; where senior residents can walk down any street and point to the second-story rooms where they were born; and where second- and third-