

## The Perspectives of Urban Renewal: Reevaluating the Image of Late Twentieth Century Gentrification of U.S. Chinatowns

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# The Perspectives of Urban Renewal: Reevaluating the Image of Late Twentieth Century Gentrification of U.S. Chinatowns

## Abstract

Urban renewal or gentrification has affected many low-income minority families in the United States with redevelopment projects that destroyed their neighborhoods for the affluent white middle class. Unlike, many minority groups who protested against the intrusive practice Chinatowns communities saw themselves divided over the issue. Chinatowns throughout the nation benefitted from redevelopment projects that brought new investments into their neighborhoods' businesses, but like other minority neighborhood, they also suffered as their residents were displaced. This case study examines the debates over urban renewal of Philadelphia and Washington D.C's Chinatowns through local newspaper coverage from the 1970s-1990s. Specifically, this study uncovers the patterns, voices, and circumstances that led to the preservation or destruction of these Chinatowns due to gentrification. While Washington D.C's Chinatown embraced urban renewal projects to bolster its businesses and witnessed the transformation of its neighborhood into a culturally co-opted tourist site, Philadelphia's Chinatown took the path of protest and successfully fought for the survival of their neighborhood as a cultural bastion. These inner conflicts over redevelopment revealed that Chinatowns had to make difficult decisions regarding the future of their neighborhoods and gentrification. The results of that decision created two frameworks of Chinatowns that continue to persist today: Chinatowns that continue their role as an ethnic enclave or the conversion of Chinatowns into economic cash cows for tourism. Future research needs to incorporate the diverse voices in all neighborhoods affected by gentrification and examine how communities choose to navigate the phenomenon in the present day.

## Keywords

U.S. Chinatowns and Gentrification, Urban Renewal, Urban Redevelopment, Gentrification

## Cover Page Footnote

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# The Perspectives of Urban Renewal: Reevaluating the Image of Late Twentieth Century Gentrification of U.S. Chinatowns - *Christian E. Manalac, Temple University*

*“Most people seem to think more, and improved housing is one of Chinatown’s basic needs. Chinatown is too small to serve both business and residential purposes... Maybe it would be better if the people moved out and it was made into an attractive commercial and tourist center.”<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

The above statement spoken by Temple University History Professor Dr. Sin Ming Chiu in 1969, represented the tensions within Chinatown communities on the idea of urban renewal. Planners of urban renewal reimagined cities as places of tourism and feats of modernization that can meet the demands of a new globalized world. Minority communities such as Chinatown were oftentimes destroyed as a result of these redevelopment projects to realize the goals of urban planners.<sup>2</sup> From the end of World War II to the dawn of the 21st century, minority neighborhoods all across the United States saw their livelihoods threatened with the rise of urban renewal projects that sought to revitalize deteriorated cityscapes for the future.

Faced with this challenge to their identities, minority neighborhoods in American cities debated the value of urban renewal. Many hoped these projects would turn their decayed communities into vibrant living spaces filled with happy families. But these projects oftentimes failed to help minority neighborhoods and instead, worked for the interests of the white affluent middle class.<sup>3</sup> An intriguing perspective in the urban renewal debate would be from U.S. Chinatowns who also saw it as a divisive issue. Chinatowns, unlike most marginalized neighborhoods, benefitted from urban renewal by using financial investments from those projects

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<sup>1</sup> *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Nov 16, 1969, *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Mounted Clippings*, Box 14, SCRC 169C, 1884-1729, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Zipp and Michael Carriere, “Introduction: Thinking through Urban Renewal,” *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 3 (May 2013): 360.

<sup>3</sup> R.J. Chaskin, and Joseph, M.L., “Positive’ Gentrification, Social Control and the ‘Right to the City,’” in *Mixed-Income Communities: Uses and Expectations of Space and Place*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 2 (2013): 481.

to fuel their cultural tourist economy. But this form of development came at the expense of the communities' residential needs. This toxic battle between profits and people dominated arguments over development projects in Chinatowns in the late 20th century and represented the complexity of the issue for many minority neighborhoods during this era of change.<sup>4</sup>

This research paper tackles the debates on urban renewal by examining the two Chinatowns of Philadelphia and Washington D.C. in the postwar era. Specifically, this case study will uncover the patterns, attitudes and circumstances that led to the survival or destruction of Chinatowns due to redevelopment. Urban renewal is typically portrayed by the public as a battle between local neighborhoods and urban developers over city spaces. But the Chinatown debates also uncovered intense inter-community conflict between residents who saw a need for neighborhood revitalization against others who saw urban renewal as a destructive force. Chinatown business owners often preferred urban development projects that increased their profit margins, while homeowners focused on maintaining and improving residential areas. I argue that the Chinatown urban renewal debates of the 1970s-1990s forced the neighborhoods to make a crucial decision regarding their communities and redevelopment. The results of that decision created two frameworks of Chinatowns that would define these communities in the future. Chinatowns either cemented their place as an ethnic enclave for the Asian community or they became culturally inauthentic Chinatowns dedicated to economic tourism.

## **Historiography**

The phenomenon of urban renewal dominated the histories of American cities during the 20th century. Laws such as the 1949 and 1954 United States Housing Acts gave many U.S. cities billions of dollars in federal funds and resources to renovate their urban cores.<sup>5</sup> The funds from those laws birthed the first era of urban renewal from 1949 to 1974, which was a time of mass redevelopment of ghettos across U.S. cities. The redevelopment of these low-income locations was intended to spur economic development by attracting middle-

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<sup>4</sup> Kartik, Naram, "No Place Like Home: Racial Capitalism, Gentrification, and the Identity of Chinatown," *Asian American Policy Review* 27, no. 16 (2017): 37-39.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Zipp and Michael Carriere, "Introduction: Thinking through Urban Renewal," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 3 (May 2013): 359.

class residents to the urban core.<sup>6</sup> In reality, these redevelopment projects eradicated many minority neighborhoods in the name of “progress” and forced many historic minority communities to move out from urban spaces they had called home for generations.

In 1964, sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term “gentrification” to describe the process of urban renewal. Glass’ concept inspired a vast international body of scholarship, which identified gentrification as a predatory phenomenon that displaced low-income communities for the interests of the white middle class.<sup>7</sup> Supporters of gentrification, which oftentimes were urban planners or pro-business community leaders, argued against Glass’ definition asserting that they only intended to reverse the decline of low-income neighborhoods through revitalization projects, while opponents of gentrification, such as local community advocates, agreed with Glass and saw it as a frightening experience that uprooted residents who were typically poor. In their 2017 study of gentrification in Chicago and New York, sociologists Jeffrey M. Timberlake and Elaina Johns Wolfe indicated various factors that made certain neighborhoods more susceptible to gentrification such as the location of these neighborhoods to their city’s entertainment districts and economic centers. Other factors included disinvestment, low-quality housing stock and deteriorating infrastructure common to minority neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> Advocates of urban renewal in the post-war era framed the process as a positive force that brought long overdue upgrades to deteriorating neighborhoods in the United States. An example of such an advocate would be former Philadelphia mayor Wilson Goode in 1990 who claimed: “We [city government] made the area [North Philadelphia] more appealing for public investment, and I think that private dollars will follow.”<sup>9</sup> Despite Mayor Goode’s belief in private investment as a means to revitalize low-income neighborhoods, the horrifying experiences of the victims of gentrification illustrate the dangers of that mindset.

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<sup>6</sup> Derek S. Hyra, “Conceptualizing the New Urban Renewal: Comparing the Past to the Present,” *Urban Affairs Review* 48, no. 4 (July 2012): 502.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Thompson and Willis Keya, “Gentrification and Its Implication in the United States,” In *Urban and Regional Planning and Development*, eds. Thakur R., Dutt A., Thakur S., Pomeroy G, (Springer: Cham, 2020),\_338.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey M. Timberlake, and Elaina Johns-Wolfe, “Neighborhood Ethnoracial Composition and Gentrification in Chicago and New York, 1980 to 2010,” *Urban Affairs Review* 53, no. 2 (March 2017): 237.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Schism, "A Neighborhood Struggles for a Revival: Focus: Philadelphia," *New York Times*, Nov 18, 1990.

Millions of minorities around the U.S. saw their neighborhoods demolished in the name of beautification. Derek S. Hyra demonstrated the debilitating effects of gentrification: “By 1963 more than 609,000 people had been displaced because of redevelopment projects... Of the 609,000 people displaced by 1963, two thirds (406,000) were racial minorities, mostly African-Americans.”<sup>10</sup> As for the reasoning for this targeted destruction of minorities, Chuo Li elaborates, “To recapture the centrally located neighborhoods occupied by minorities after the whites moved out, urban renewal was employed as a mechanism to reclaim central urban spaces and reshape the city’s racial contours...”<sup>11</sup> In response, minorities organized protests against gentrification and oftentimes found their own neighborhoods divided on the issue.

The dilapidated state of minority communities before the advent of major urban renewal projects can be attributed to the racially motivated policies of the U.S. government and attitudes of white middle-class Americans. When African Americans and other minorities migrated to cities for work after World War I, their sheer numbers overcrowded urban spaces, overloaded city services, and increased competition for jobs. In order to preserve the cities’ services and spaces for whites, governments and private interests at all levels implemented racial segregation policies to keep minorities in check. Racial policies such as zoning reserved ownership of single-family housing to whites, while mortgage loan lending guidelines by the Federal Housing Association included racially restrictive requirements that prohibited homeowners from selling their homes to minorities. In addition, minorities could not move out of these decayed neighborhoods easily, as policies such as redlining explicitly excluded minority neighborhoods for financial loans based on its racist tiering system of urban spaces, and private covenants or contracts by homeowners excluded minorities from buying housing outside their designated areas.<sup>12</sup> These exclusionary policies and the growing popularity of suburban housing in the 1930s-1950s spawned the idea of “white flight” in which “white Americans move from the urban core to surrounding suburban communities for fear that their property’s value will decrease as a result of African

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<sup>10</sup> Hyra, “Conceptualizing the New Urban Renewal: Comparing the Past to the Present,” 503.

<sup>11</sup> Chuo Li, “Postwar Urban Redevelopment and the Politics of Exclusion: The Case of San Francisco’s Chinatown,” *Journal of Planning History* 18, no. 1 (February 2019): 29.

<sup>12</sup> Teron McGrew, “The History of Residential Segregation in the United States, Title VIII, and the Homeownership Remedy,” *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* 77, no. 3/4 (May 2018): 1018–1023.

Americans moving into the neighborhood.”<sup>13</sup> As a result of these racist policies, many minority neighborhoods were trapped in deteriorating spaces as public investments went to the suburbs, financial loans that could have been used to improve minority neighborhoods were denied by banks, and race divisions deepened as whites unjustly blamed minorities for the ruined state of cities.<sup>14</sup> The idea of urban renewal, brought to life by the Housing Acts after World War II, provided an opportunity for many minority neighborhoods to escape the cycle of poverty that destroyed their communities. The choice to trust the government to rectify its discriminatory housing practices of the past spurred heated debate within minority communities in the U.S. on how to improve the conditions of their neighborhoods.

Conflicts over urban renewal occurred not only between neighborhoods and the city, but between different groups within communities as well. An example of this would be the divisions in the African American community of Roxbury in Boston in the 1960s over the value of urban renewal. Liberal minded African American residents advocated for further racial integration of the neighborhood by promoting the creation of racially integrated and modernized development projects that could help dispel ghettos in the city. Skeptical community members, on the other hand, realized the destructive potential of urban renewal and sought to stop the projects completely.<sup>15</sup> The internal divisions within Roxbury revealed a truth too often ignored: minority communities were not monolithic in their thoughts on gentrification and struggled to come to a consensus on the issue.

A powerful sense of community in residential neighborhoods can be a major roadblock to urban planners due to their potential to protest harmful urban policy as a collective body. Neighborhood community can be defined as a resident’s trust in their neighborhood, sense of belonging in the neighborhood and the belief that any needs by the neighborhood can be accomplished by relying on members in the neighborhood.<sup>16</sup> Josh Gibbons, Michael S. Barton, and Timothy T. Reling focuses on this feeling of neighborhood community by

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<sup>13</sup> Teron McGrew, “The History of Residential Segregation in the United States, Title VIII, and the Homeownership Remedy,” 1021.

<sup>14</sup> McGrew, “The History of Residential Segregation in the United States, Title VIII, and the Homeownership Remedy,” 1025.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel and Carriere, “Introduction: Thinking through Urban Renewal,” 364.

<sup>16</sup> Gibbons, Joseph, Michael S Barton, and Timothy T Reling, “Do Gentrifying Neighbourhoods Have Less Community? Evidence from Philadelphia,” *Urban Studies* 57, no. 6 (May 2020): 1145.

examining gentrified and non-gentrified neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Their findings reveal that gentrified neighborhoods had less neighborhood community than non-gentrified neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup>

One of the aspects of the gentrification debate between cities and minority communities would be the belief that it could be a positive force for neighborhoods. As described by Robert J. Chaskin and Mark L. Joseph, “Positive Gentrification” is “public policy that harnesses private capital and market forces to attract higher-income residents and generate neighborhood revitalization while attempting to reduce segregation and foster inclusion.”<sup>18</sup> However, the main goal of positive gentrification seeks to integrate low-income residents and high income residents to not only resolve the poverty in these neighborhood, but create a positive relationship between the two communities.<sup>19</sup> The authors conducted their study on the merits of “Positive Gentrification” by monitoring three mixed-income communities in the city of Chicago. For the results of that research, Chaskin and Joseph found that despite the economic improvement of these neighborhoods through this mixed-development plan it failed to truly integrate low-income residents into the community as equal partners. The societal and attitudinal differences between low and high-income communities has caused lower income peoples to feel discriminated against due to their behavioral norms, stereotypes involving race, class and discomfort of living next to each other.<sup>20</sup> Although mixed-income communities can improve the poor conditions of low income neighborhoods, failing to establish a positive relationship with the very people it aims to help is a severe roadblock for positive gentrification to be a viable mechanism of change for these communities.

At the time of postwar urban renewal projects, Asian communities such as Chinatowns experienced mass immigration in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that significantly increased the population of their neighborhoods. According to Jackelyn Hwang, the sudden influx of Asian immigrants to the U.S. spawned improved economic and social conditions for minority neighborhoods by increasing housing demand, populating vacant residential

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<sup>17</sup> Gibbons, Joseph, Michael S Barton, and Timothy T Reling, “Do Gentrifying Neighbourhoods Have Less Community? Evidence from Philadelphia,” 1144, 1159-1161.

<sup>18</sup> Chaskin, and Joseph, “‘Positive’ Gentrification, Social Control and the ‘Right to the City’ in Mixed-Income Communities: Uses and Expectations of Space and Place,” 481.

<sup>19</sup> Chaskin and Joseph, 480.

<sup>20</sup> Chaskin and Joseph, 494.

blocks and commercial storefronts.<sup>21</sup> The benefits of immigration to these low-income neighborhoods brought fears that these immigrants could potentially attract gentrifiers and urban planners to take advantage of the immigration wave in these minority neighborhoods with targeted urban planning projects. Hwang notes that although the immigration wave revitalized ethnic enclaves it also failed to spawn massive renewal projects and a movement of middle-class white residents in other low-income neighborhoods. Asians and to a certain extent Hispanics acted as “pioneers” of gentrification in low-income communities. The study highlights the impacts of immigration on gentrification and how they can spur new waves of urban development to occur in low-income communities.<sup>22</sup> The immigration waves of the 1960s-1970s benefitted Chinatowns with immense economic benefits in terms of businesses and workers, but ultimately also helped put these neighborhoods on the map as cultural hotspots for their cities.

During the late twentieth century urban renewal waves, Chinatowns had long relied on strategies of cultural tourism to survive.<sup>23</sup> Chinatown communities successfully marketed themselves as tourist hotspots, which attracted consumers and financial investments to their streets. Scholars of urban planning Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Konstantina Soureli explain that the “tangible benefits of cultural tourism may include job creation for local residents, increased business for local merchants who often struggle to maintain small or ethnic businesses, and amenities such as physical and social infrastructure improvements, as well as safety, which can all benefit both residents and tourists.”<sup>24</sup> But centering development on cultural tourism risked the residential community at the heart of these neighborhoods. Nancy Leong expands on the idea of cultural tourism with the idea of racial capitalism which takes advantage of race one’s racial identity to gain social or economic benefits. Racial capitalism surrenders the control of one’s racial identity outsiders to influence and

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<sup>21</sup> Hwang, Jackelyn, “Pioneers of Gentrification: Transformation in Global Neighborhoods in Urban America in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Demography* 53, no. 1 (2016): 190.

<sup>22</sup> Jackelyn, “Pioneers of Gentrification: Transformation in Global Neighborhoods in Urban America in the Late Twentieth Century,” 190, 210.

<sup>23</sup> Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Konstantina Soureli, “Cultural Tourism as an Economic Development Strategy for Ethnic Neighborhoods,” *Economic Development Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (February 2012): 50. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Konstantina Soureli note that cultural tourism focuses on “the mosaic of neighborhoods and places, their traditions, art forms, celebrations, and experiences that reflect the diversity of city space.”

<sup>24</sup> Loukaitou-Sideris and Soureli, “Cultural Tourism as an Economic Development Strategy for Ethnic Neighborhoods,” 52.

potentially control for profit. In exchange for the commodification of race, non-white racial identities for exploited.<sup>25</sup> Chinatowns represent the duality of racial capitalism and cultural tourism. Was Chinatown a for-profit venture for businesses or a culturally authentic neighborhood that catered to the Asian community? Chinatowns across the United States grappled with different visions of their neighborhoods' futures.

Chinatowns faced specific challenges compared to other ethnically defined neighborhoods in the postwar era. According to Urban Studies scholars Domenic Vitiello and Zoe Blickenderfer, Chinatowns “were targeted more often for roads, highways, civic centers, public and office buildings, and other downtown development; and in the postwar period generally not for wholesale clearance and redevelopment like many African American neighborhoods.”<sup>26</sup> This was due to the geographical location of Chinatowns in the urban cores of cities which increased the likelihood of Chinatown’s assimilation by urban planners for their economic initiatives. In order to resist gentrification, Chinatowns created “Save Chinatown movements,” which spawned various community development organizations and advocacy groups that helped change the perspectives of city planners to preserve Chinatown rather than destroy it.<sup>27</sup> In this war over city spaces, Chinatowns had two options to ensure the survival of their neighborhoods. The first option had Chinatowns become what Asian-American activists called “ethnic Disneyland” or cultural theme parks for tourists, while the second emphasized Chinatown’s cultural authenticity as vital enclaves for ethnic minorities.<sup>28</sup> The histories of Washington D.C. and Philadelphia’s Chinatowns can reveal the factors that led to the defeats or triumphs of Chinatowns in response to urban renewal.

### **Endless Conflict: Philadelphia’s Chinatown and Gentrification in the 1950s-1980s**

The beginning of Philadelphia’s Chinatown battle with gentrification involved the Comprehensive Plan devised by the city in 1960. This Comprehensive Plan like others of its time outlined the costs, benefits, rationales of all urban development for the city. The plan’s main goals focused on providing better living

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<sup>25</sup> Naram, "No Place Like Home: Racial Capitalism, Gentrification, and the Identity of Chinatown," 31-32.

<sup>26</sup> Domenic Vitiello and Zoe Blickenderfer, “The planned destruction of Chinatowns in the United States and Canada since c.1900,” *Planning Perspectives* 35, no. 1 (September 2018): 147.

<sup>27</sup> Vitiello and Blickenderfer, 152.

<sup>28</sup> Vitiello and Blickenderfer, 161.

conditions for residents and a competitive edge to attract people to the city instead of the suburbs or other U.S. cities.<sup>29</sup> The main case of gentrification that Philadelphia's Chinatown faced during the 1970s-1980s would be the attempted removal of the Holy Redeemer Church for a ramp for the Vine Street Expressway in 1973. Although, the expressway's completion permanently damaged Chinatown's viability as an ethnic enclave, the efforts of the neighborhood's protest movement saved the church from certain destruction. Unlike Chinatowns such as D.C which fell to gentrification, Philadelphia's Chinatown proved that urban planners could not redevelop any neighborhood at will. Philadelphia's Chinatown's successful preservation of the Holy Redeemer Church demonstrated that minority neighborhoods needed to protest against gentrification and that they could win against urban planners.<sup>30</sup>

When the Holy Redeemer Church opened its doors to worshippers 1941, it was the first church built to serve Catholic Chinese peoples in the entire western hemisphere.<sup>31</sup> For Philadelphia Chinatown, the church also served as the heart of the neighborhood, described by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as "Chinatowns' church, school, recreational and cultural center."<sup>32</sup> The church's location on 10<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets sat on the path of PennDOT's 54-million-dollar planned expressway. George Moy, a construction supervisor for the Philadelphia Housing Authority, emphasized the importance of the Church to Chinatown: "If Holy Redeemer goes and there is no replacement of comparable facilities... I would almost bet my dollar that a sizable portion of the Catholic Community would pack its bags and leave."<sup>33</sup> The Redeemer's removal would put an end to many Catholic Chinese and other Asians from living or visiting Chinatown to attend church services. Additionally, the church was the only educational facility in the neighborhood and taught most if not all of Chinatown's youth. Although the plans only called for the demolition of the Church, the survival of the school and the Redeemer's other services were also put in jeopardy by the project.<sup>34</sup> According to Sister Thomas Mary of the church "Families

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<sup>29</sup> The 1960 Comprehensive Plan: Philadelphia City Planning Commission," City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, May 4, 1960, 92, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Yee, "The Save Chinatown Movement: Surviving against All Odds," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 24-25.

<sup>31</sup> "Who We Are 簡介和背景," Philadelphia Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and School, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Harry Gould, "Expressway Poses Crime Threat, Chinatown Fears," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 29, 1973.

<sup>33</sup> Gould, "Expressway Poses Crime Threat, Chinatown Fears."

<sup>34</sup> Gould, "Expressway Poses Crime Threat, Chinatown Fears."

will be seriously disrupted and young people with leadership capabilities are being forced to move.”<sup>35</sup> The possible destruction of the church would guarantee the destruction of the community.

According to proponents of the plan, the construction of the Vine Street Expressway promised to alleviate traffic going into and out of the city. Philadelphia faced immense gridlock as workers from the suburbs commuted to the city for their jobs. This also impeded tourism and deterred potential residents from moving to the city. City planners devised the Vine Street Expressway to lessen the burden on the 2,100 miles of local streets that were consistently packed with drivers. Philadelphia desperately needed this expressway in order to connect with outer suburbs and ease the headaches of drivers looking to get around in the city.<sup>36</sup>

However, the construction of the Vine Street Expressway acted as part of a prolonged process by Philadelphia urban planners to remove Chinatown permanently. This process of removal began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Philadelphia’s urban planners began to chip away at Chinatowns borders with “City Beautiful” projects. According to Vitiello and Blickenderfer, many urban planners saw the removal of minority spaces as “synonymous with destroying the cramped jumble of land uses breeding vice, disease, and other social ills that Chinatowns represented to reformers.”<sup>37</sup> Local newspapers supported the arguments by urban planners. The *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* depicted Chinatown as a ghettoized dump that had to be removed from the cityscape. The *Evening Bulletin* printed several derogatory headlines calling for the neighborhood’s demise including, “‘City’s Chinatown Soon Only Memory: Modern Commerce Clawing at Heart of Area, While Residents Sit Unperturbed...’ and ‘Dwindling Race Street Chinatown Doomed by Opening of Bridge and House of Hundred Rooms among Those to Vanish as Bland Orientals See Garage Rise on Site Where Pipes and Fan-Tan flourished.’”<sup>38</sup> These headlines created the image that Chinatown’s destruction was inevitable and that the residents were ignorant of the obliteration of their neighborhood. City planners in the 1970s, however, did not foresee the resistance of many Chinatown residents.

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<sup>35</sup> Gould.

<sup>36</sup> Philadelphia City Planning Commission, “The 1960 Comprehensive Plan: Philadelphia City Planning Commission,” 92, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Vitiello and Blickenderfer, “The planned destruction of Chinatowns in the United States and Canada since c. 1990s,” 148.

<sup>38</sup> Kathryn E. Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle*, (Temple University Press, 2015), 36.

One of the major sources of resistance came from an underground local Chinatown publication called *Yellow Seeds*, which ran from 1972-1977. Printed by an organization founded by local college students, the *Yellow Seeds* wrote about urban renewal efforts in both English and Mandarin, which allowed the entire community in Chinatown, the suburbs, and college campuses to learn about the most pressing issues that affected the Asian-American community.<sup>39</sup> The *Yellow Seeds* provided much needed coverage on Chinatown's gentrification battles and brought to the communities' attention of the need to mobilize against the designs of urban planners. One of the newspaper's most crucial reports highlighted the spontaneous protest by Chinatown youth against the destruction of the Holy Redeemer in 1973, where they stated:

At 7:30AM, demonstrators consisting mainly of residents and people who worked in Chinatown, assembled around the site, and asked the forman [sic] to stop the work. After being refused and ignored, the demonstrators climbed onto the rubble in spite of the running crane and tractor and the flying debris. The workmen were forced to stop and the group remained on the rubble.<sup>40</sup>

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* offered a different version of the same events: ““For three days, young people from Chinatown demonstrated and finally stopped the demolition by lying in front of the machines. Some climbed the hills of the rubble and refused to come down.””<sup>41</sup> The key differences between both reports illustrated how each side saw the demolition of the church. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, whose audience was the whole city, depicted the event more neutrally and less dramatized than the *Yellow Seeds* report, which told Chinatown residents of the heroism shown by the protestors who risked their lives dodging flying debris to defend their neighborhood from intrusive city interests. What differentiated these two depictions even further would be how the *Inquirer* framed the issue. The headline and ending of the article upheld long-held stereotypes by city planners of Chinatown as a crime-filled ghetto, Rod Townley of *the Inquirer* reported Chinatown as “A neighborhood beset with cruising prostitutes and flattened housing...” Then after Townley described Chinatown as a somewhat decent neighborhood to live in, he concluded with: “the cold hard truth remains. Chinatown's

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown*, 423-425.

<sup>40</sup> *Yellow Seeds*, Vol 1, Number 6, September 1973, p. 2, *CCC Periodicals*, Box 639, SCRC 396, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries.

<sup>41</sup> Rod Townley, “Chinatown Fights for Its Life: Is a neighborhood beset with cruising prostitutes and flattened housing any place to bring up kids?,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 18, 1974, 247.

future is in the hands of outsiders.”<sup>42</sup> These polarizing accounts by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Yellow Seeds* illustrated the divide between the Chinatown community and the public on the image and future of Chinatown.

Like other urban neighborhoods, Chinatown was made up of various groups that represented the community and whose views on urban renewal fluctuated during the process. Before the attempted removal of the Holy Redeemer, the editors of the *Yellow Seeds* were skeptically optimistic about urban renewal. In their first volume in 1972, they deduced “If Chinatown is to remain intact as a vital community and not as just a collection of shops and restaurants, more housing and community services for the growing population and increasing number of immigrants must be provided. The community and the City, to be sure, must work together in order to accomplish this.”<sup>43</sup> Despite knowing that the city held negative images of Chinatown, the *Yellow Seeds* urged the Chinese community to collaborate with urban planners to foster meaningful change for the neighborhood. This lofty sentiment would change five years later when the editors of the publication professed, “In the Chinatown housing struggle, we fell into the trap set by the city. We forgot our past experiences and lessons— that the government cannot and will not serve the interests of the people.”<sup>44</sup> The *Yellow Seeds* were hopeful that they could work together with city planners to make gentrification work for their community and over time saw their hopes fade due to the actions of urban planners towards Chinatown. The city had divided Chinatown into North and South sides due to the Vine Street Expressway, boxed the community on all sides by additional urban renewal projects, and then neglected Chinatown’s requests for solutions to their housing issues.<sup>45</sup> The *Yellow Seeds*’ trust towards the city’s redevelopment efforts had been repeatedly strained to the point that they concluded that only through protests could they save Chinatown.

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<sup>42</sup> Townley, “Chinatown Fights for Its Life: Is a neighborhood beset with cruising prostitutes and flattened housing any place to bring up kids?” 249.

<sup>43</sup> *Yellow Seeds*, Vol 1, Number 6, p. 2 September 1973, Box 639, *CCC Periodicals*, SCRC 396/1884-1639, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>44</sup> *Yellow Seeds*, Vol 3, Number 2, p. 7 September 1977, Box 639, *CCC Periodicals*, SCRC 396/1884-1639, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>45</sup> Domenic Vitiello & Zoe Blickenderfer, “The planned destruction of Chinatowns in the United States and Canada since c.1900,” 154.

A foundational member of the organization and one of its most vocal leaders, Mary Yee came to Philadelphia in 1970 to study urban planning and quickly became embroiled in the battle to save Chinatown from city planners. Yee's empathy with the predicament of Philadelphia's Chinatown can be attributed to her experiences of growing up in Boston's Chinatown:

I was interested in community development. Because in Boston, major highways had taken half of the housing in Chinatown. I noticed a big difference, because that has caused a lot of Chinese population to disperse to the suburbs and surrounding area. So the neighborhood was no longer cohesive. A lot of social relationships were difficult to maintain... In Boston I had seen what had happened and I also felt strongly about social justice. So, when I came to Philadelphia and started to get to know Chinatown, it was clear that they had these problems on the horizon...<sup>46</sup>

Having experienced the horrors of gentrification personally, Yee made it her mission to ensure that Philadelphia's Chinatown did not fall to ruin like Boston's Chinatown. Community unity was the key to saving Chinatown, and thus the *Yellow Seeds* took a practical approach to spreading their message by word of mouth and conversation: "We would go deliver our papers in the restaurants and we'd sit and chat with people or meet them on the street and chat with them about stuff, or they'd ask us questions about the articles. . . . People wouldn't overtly say they agreed, but it certainly started discussions."<sup>47</sup> Despite not being a native to Philadelphia, Yee exhibited a sense of loyalty and pride to fight for Chinatown's survival.

Not all residents of Chinatown appreciated the inflammatory rhetoric of the *Yellow Seeds*. The Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA), the unofficial leaders of Chinatown, looked at the rhetoric of the youth organization with skepticism and disdain. The CBA's function in Chinatown "focused on resolving internal conflicts between individuals, associations, and businesses; providing mutual assistance; and managing housing, turning outward only when larger 'treaty rights' were involved. The CBA was largely composed of older Chinese-born men, many of whom did not speak English (or at least not fluently)."<sup>48</sup> Mary Yee explained the position of the leadership of the CBA in a later interview: "The elders' attitude was that only they could speak

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<sup>46</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle*, 85.

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle*, 76.

for Chinatown, that the second generation was too Americanized, and that ‘you can’t fight city hall.’”<sup>49</sup> Much of the leadership of the CBA had little if any interactions with City Hall due to language constraints and ethnic conflict that forced many Chinatown residents to keep to themselves.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the CBA did not have the technical knowledge to fight against urban renewal and thus were convinced that the community could not “fight city hall.” The CBA’s personal pride hinted at by Yee, through their attitude towards leadership, also meant that they would accept no one but themselves to represent Chinatown. According to the *Yellow Seeds*, without the expertise and knowledge of Chinatown’s young activists, the CBA’s leadership would have certainly lead Chinatown down the road of ruin.

One of the biggest obstacles to a youth-elderly coalition would be T.T Chang, the self-proclaimed “mayor” of Chinatown. Chang had immortalized himself in the community with the creation of the Chinese Cultural and Community Center in 1955 and his revival of the Chinese New Year Parade.”<sup>51</sup> Despite his position, Chang’s reputation within the neighborhood was mixed at best. Former director of personnel for Chiang Kai-Shek in China, Chang immigrated to America in 1952 to escape communism and established his position in the inner workings of Philadelphia’s Chinatown through his membership in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).<sup>52</sup> Unlike his CBA counterparts, Chang utilized his influence within the organization to forge important connections with powerful city bureaucrats and other officials as the self-made “mayor of Chinatown”. Chang’s unorthodox methods and immigrant status earned him the ire of some members of the community who called him an outsider and an “arrogant son of bitch” for his courting of influential non-Chinese contacts.<sup>53</sup> Chang’s goal for Chinatown was to “promote a positive image of Philadelphia’s Chinatown aimed at counteracting older stereotypes and addressing blight in the community”<sup>54</sup> Chang sought to redevelop Chinatown through urban renewal and aimed “to leverage the possibility of creating Chinatown as a tourist

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<sup>49</sup> Mary Yee, “The Save Chinatown Movement: Surviving against All Odds,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 24-31.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Andy Wallace, "T.T. CHANG, 74; CALLED 'MAYOR OF CHINATOWN'," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jul 26, 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Wilson, 58-59.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle*, 71-71.

<sup>54</sup> Wilson, 59.

destination showcasing ancient Chinese culture to secure monies for redevelopment.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike the elderly leaders in the CBA, Chang’s impressive leadership over the CBA and other community figures in Chinatown made him a revered figure in the neighborhood, praised for his committed initiatives to make Chinatown great again.

The image of Chinatown as a tourist site enraged the members of the *Yellow Seeds*, who believed Chang was selling out the neighborhood for profits. The *Yellow Seeds* barraged Chang with numerous articles that criticized his vision for Chinatown, with headlines such as “T. T. Chang: Who Is He Really Helping?” and “Let us all watch out for the people in the community who try to sell us out.”<sup>56</sup> The *Yellow Seeds* challenged Chang for his silence in the face of the Vine Street Expressway and unwillingness to use his connections with the media, politicians, and members of the business community to fight city hall. Chang’s only comment towards the issue was, “I don’t like the word fight” to which Mary Yee rebuked, “Well we’re not afraid of the word fight.”<sup>57</sup> The differences between the second generation and elderly leadership in Chinatown often resulted in open conflict. Chinatown’s future hinged on a compromise amongst the militant youth like *Yellow Seeds* and old guard paragons like T.T Chang.

A divided Chinatown stood no chance at surviving the aggressive efforts of urban planners, and thus compromises had to be made in order to unite the entirety of Chinatown against gentrification. Cecilia Moy Yep, a youth leader not associated with the *Yellow Seeds*, adopted a moderate stance in comparison to her “radical” counterparts and attempted to form a committee under the CBA to represent Chinatown in the urban renewal debates. In an interview on the difficulties of that process, Yep remarked:

We had to organize. But if you’re going to organize as a new group, claiming to represent Chinatown or part of Chinatown, you were dragged head on into the Chinese Benevolent Association. They were an established organization in Chinatown. I don’t know just who would recognize them as being but they are, like with the city officials at that time. To have a community fighting amongst themselves as to who’s the leader, the city’ll just come right in and bowl you over... . So we acknowledged that we would be a committee under them, not threaten their prestige or their claim. We knew we just had to

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<sup>55</sup> Wilson, 70.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson, 90.

<sup>57</sup> Townley, “Chinatown Fights for Its Life: Is a neighborhood beset with cruising prostitutes and flattened housing any place to bring up kids,” 247.

either respect them, or we had to fight them and, on the other hand, fight the government. . . . We didn't challenge their authority; we acknowledged their superiority.<sup>58</sup>

Yep's willingness to work with the CBA marked one of the first instances in which elderly and youth leadership of a Chinatown collaborated. The committee Yep and the CBA created would soon become the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC), Chinatown's premier organization which led the effort for urban redevelopment projects that would benefit residents.

The *Yellow Seeds* may have questioned elders such as T.T Chang on his methods, but they never lost sight of the goal of saving Chinatown. Mary Yee described their role in the movement as the "loyal opposition" whose goal was to remind the community that they were all on the same team. She suggested that the "threat to community survival prompted the different sectors of the community to bridge generational, religious, educational, and geographical boundaries," and that "by establishing [an] identity as a community and by being a public presence in political forums and in the media during the early years, [Chinatown] became a force to be reckoned with."<sup>59</sup> At the end of the day, however, the Expressway successfully divided the community into north and south sides and opened the door for urban renewal projects such as the Gallery Mall and the Philadelphia Convention Center to be built. But crucially the expressway also became the catalyst for Chinatown to unite against gentrification and forced urban planners to alter their plans to accommodate for Chinatown's demands. This pivotal victory over gentrification validated the activism of Philadelphia's Chinatown and encouraged the community to continue their movement to ensure that their neighborhood would never fall to urban planners.

### **Capital of Renewal: D. C's Chinatown and Gentrification from the 1970s-1990s**

The Chinatowns of Washington D.C. and Philadelphia had vastly different responses to gentrification in the 1970s-1990s. Washington D.C.'s Chinatown battle over gentrification began with the 1950 Comprehensive

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<sup>58</sup> Wilson, *Ethnic Renewal in Philadelphia's Chinatown: Space, Place, and Struggle*, 77.

<sup>59</sup> Yee, "The Save Chinatown Movement: Surviving against All Odds," 27.

Plan by D.C. urban planners who drafted future redevelopment projects for the city.<sup>60</sup> The announcement of D.C.'s first convention center and sports complexes in 1972 disrupted the peace of Chinatown residents. Planned to be built in the heart of the Chinatown neighborhood, the project was projected to encompass eight city blocks and destroy over 129 Chinese businesses.<sup>61</sup> In 1972, self-proclaimed community leaders held a modest protest against the convention center that forced urban planners to move the project several blocks away from Chinatown and promise to preserve the neighborhood.<sup>62</sup> In exchange, community leaders and Chinatown merchants worked with the city to transform Chinatown into a "tourist" spot.<sup>63</sup> This agreement between the Chinatown community and D.C. planners reminded residents of the 1920s when; Chinatown was almost permanently removed from the city due to the Federal Triangle project, which sought to replace Chinatown with "federal, district and cultural buildings."<sup>64</sup> At that time, Chinatown residents made compromises with D.C. to relocate the neighborhood to another part of the city to survive. The Triangle project instilled a sense of dread within the community that they could be removed at any time by urban planners.<sup>65</sup> The 1972 D.C. convention center tested the mettle of Chinatown to subvert urban planners and guarantee the neighborhood's survival.

The leaders of D.C.'s Chinatown acquiesced the neighborhood to urban renewal in the hope that it would revitalize the community with economic investments, while Philadelphia's took to the streets to vehemently reject urban renewal on the grounds that it destroyed the very communities it sought to "help". However, by the time of its completion in 1982, the DC convention center had displaced 13% of the total population (60 of the 487 total residents) in the neighborhood and attracted private developers who wished to take advantage of the available property to transform Chinatown into an bustling tourist destination for visitors

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<sup>60</sup> National Park Capital Park and Planning Commission, *Washington Present and Future: A General Summary of the Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital and its Environs*, (Washington D.C, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), 5.

<sup>61</sup> "The Convention and Sports Arena Complex," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Feb 23, 1972.

<sup>62</sup> Saundra Saperstein, "Chinatown: Dreams for A Better Life: Chinatown: Dreams for a Better Life for the Old, New," *The Washington Post*, Feb 24, 1985.

<sup>63</sup> Domenic Vitiello & Zoe Blickenderfer, "The planned destruction of Chinatowns in the United States and Canada since c.1900," 144.

<sup>64</sup> David Hathaway, and Ho Stephanie, "Small but Resilient: Washington's Chinatown over the Years," *Washington History* 15, no. 1 (2003): 45.

<sup>65</sup> David Hathaway, and Ho Stephanie, "Small but Resilient: Washington's Chinatown over the Years," 45 & 48.

to Washington D.C.<sup>66</sup> Despite D.C. and Philadelphia's Chinatowns shared ethnic identities, the communities of their cities tackled gentrification in completely opposite ways. D.C.'s Chinatown also had intra-community conflict between pro-business and pro-community advocates, but their Chinatown was represented by two completely different populations from the suburbs and inner city. This population difference favored the suburbs and titled D.C.'s Chinatown to support gentrification instead of rejecting it. Unable to unite its entire community against gentrification, D.C.'s Chinatown became the prime example of a Chinatown co-opted by urban planners.<sup>67</sup>

One of the primary factors to D.C.'s demise as a cultural neighborhood would be the population makeup of the city. A 1973 study by D.C.'s Redevelopment Land Agency showed that the Chinese-American population in D.C. nearly doubled between 1960 and 1970 from 4,156 to 8,298 residents.<sup>68</sup> Although Chinatown's population expanded a wave of immigration in the 1950s-1970s, Vitiello and Acolin noted that this influx may have weakened the community, as that wave was "part of a broader shift from the old pattern of immigrant settlement in central city enclaves to a new prevalence of locating directly in suburbs."<sup>69</sup> The shift in D.C. was even more extreme since most of the residents in the 1973 study lived in the suburbs.<sup>70</sup> Newer immigrants did not see Chinatown as their "home" since they did not live there and only went to Chinatown for its amenities and services just like tourists. Signs of this settlement pattern emerged as early as 1972, when Betty Medsger of *the Post* described Saturdays in Chinatown as "slow" days for the community due to the lack of automobile traffic from office workers in the suburbs. However, come Sundays and during the Chinese New Year, Chinatown witnessed periodic revivals with the business of Chinese suburbanites filling the neighborhood with life. Based on these differences, Medsger concluded that "The two worlds of Washington's Chinese-the

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<sup>66</sup> Linda Wheeler, "Mixed Blessing for Chinatown: Chinatown's Property Values Climbing," *The Washington Post*, Jul 12, 1986.

<sup>67</sup> Sandra Saperstein, "Chinatown: Dreams for A Better Life: Chinatown: Dreams for a Better Life for the Old, New.

<sup>68</sup> William H. Jones, "Chinatown Rejuvenation Urged: Many Favor Trade and Community Center," *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, Feb 25, 1973.

<sup>69</sup> Arthur Acolin, and Domenic Vitiello, "Who Owns Chinatown: Neighbourhood Preservation and Change in Boston and Philadelphia," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 8 (June 2018): 1693.

<sup>70</sup> Jones, "Chinatown Rejuvenation Urged: Many Favor Trade and Community Center."

inner-city Chinatown and the suburban dispersal- are very different.”<sup>71</sup> In the debates over urban renewal, Asian residents within D.C. competed with their suburban counterparts to determine which “community” represented Chinatown. Two leaders emerged as representatives of these communities and their interests: Dr. Toon Lee (Dr. Lee) sought to utilize urban renewal to preserve Chinatown’s image as a residential haven for families and Dr. William Chin Lee (Dr. Chin Lee) plowed the way for Chinatown’s as a business empire focused on tourism.<sup>72</sup>

Dr. Toon Lee came to Washington D.C. from China when he immigrated to the U.S. in 1948.<sup>73</sup> In addition to his work as a local physician for the neighborhood and in the city’s health department, Dr. Lee’s involvement in Chinatown largely stemmed from his work as president of the D.C. branch of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) founded in 1940.<sup>74</sup> This organization catered to new immigrants and long-time residents alike by providing them with services in healthcare and education, settling local disputes, burying the dead, upholding Chinese traditions, and answering other neighborhood needs. As Chinatown’s unofficial spokesperson, Dr. Lee often represented the community in interviews with the *Washington Post* for celebrations such as the Chinese New Year.<sup>75</sup> Dr. Lee identified the poor housing in the community as one of the major issues for the neighborhood. He called the aged homes in the neighborhood “antiques” on the verge of falling apart. In a 1989 interview, Dr. Lee expressed a need for urban redevelopment in Chinatown but exclaimed that outside developers “Say they want to enhance Chinatown. They don’t want to enhance us, they want to squeeze us out.”<sup>76</sup> Dr. Lee believed that urban renewal could help revitalize Chinatown, but also understood that the people of Chinatown were not the beneficiaries of those projects. Despite the historic legacy of the CCBA, the association had lost much of its power in the community by the 1970s due to the immigration wave of the 1960s-1970s. As Chinatown’s inner-city residents dwindled, so did

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<sup>71</sup> Betty Medsger, "Chinatown Not Home to most Chinese: Chinatown is no Longer Home to most Washington Chinese," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Dec 05, 1972.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen J. Lynton, "Far East Center to be Built in D.C.'s Chinatown: Far East Center to be Built in D.C.'s Chinatown," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 1983.

<sup>73</sup> Hathaway and Ho Stephanie, "Small but Resilient: Washington's Chinatown over the Years," 47.

<sup>74</sup> “About Us,” Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Washington, DC.

<sup>75</sup> Ellen Hoffman, "Dragons Cavort on H. Street," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Oct 12, 1970.

<sup>76</sup> Kathy Ann Waterman, "Chinatown: The Old Vs. the New: Chinatown Fights Battle to Preserve its Heritage," *The Washington Post*, Dec 02, 1989.

the power of the CCBA since less people required their services.<sup>77</sup> For housing and other issues, the CCBA failed to confront the rise of gentrification in the 1970s.

On the other side of the debate was Dr. William Chin Lee, born, raised, and educated in Washington. Serving as an internal medical doctor for the community until his retirement in 1982, Dr. Chin Lee also made a name for himself in politics.<sup>78</sup> In 1972, he competed against Jerry A. Moore, the Republican Party's favored candidate and former city councilman, and Gen. Hassan Jeru Ahmed in a three-way battle for the Republican nomination for the House of Representatives.<sup>79</sup> Against four to one odds, Dr. Chin Lee won the election by a razor thin margin of seventeen votes against the favored Moore.<sup>80</sup> Despite losing the general election for delegate against the Democratic incumbent Walter E. Fauntroy, Dr. Chin Lee had won respect for the Asian community at a time when racial tensions diminished minority representation in politics.<sup>81</sup> Taking his successes in politics to Chinatown, Dr. Chin Lee hoped to save the neighborhood by utilizing his political experience and connections to help spur Chinatown's transformation into a tourist paradise.

The beginning of the end for D.C.'s Chinatown started with a proclamation for a new trading center for Chinatown in 1983 by the Chinatown Development Corporation, an organization made up of thirty-four Chinatown business members. Dr. Chin Lee, at that point the president of the CDC, proudly announced "We see this project as the first step in an effort to make Washington, D.C. a major gateway for trade and cultural exchanges between the U.S. and the Far East."<sup>82</sup> The 1973 study mentioned previously also revealed that both the Chinatown community and Chinese business owners wanted a Chinese Trade and Community Center to boost the neighborhood's local economy and provide much needed neighborhood services.<sup>83</sup> The land of the

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<sup>77</sup> Jacques Leslie, "Chinatown: Setting for a Poignant Tale of Paper Sons, the Gold Mountain and Plastic Pagodas: Potomac," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Apr 25, 1971.

<sup>78</sup> Hathaway and Ho Stephanie, "Small but Resilient: Washington's Chinatown over the Years," 46.

<sup>79</sup> David R Boldt, "1972: 'the Year for Chinese': 1972: 'the Year for Chinese'," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Apr 03, 1972.

<sup>80</sup> Martha M. Hamilton, "Chin-Lee Banking on Bipartisan Vote: Chin-Lee Banks on both Parties in Uphill Fight for Delegate Seat," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Aug 13, 1972.

<sup>81</sup> Martha M. Hamilton and Ronald Taylor, "Voting Percentage in District was Lowest in City's History," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, Nov 09, 1972.

<sup>82</sup> "D.C. Chinatown Site of Huge New Trade Center," *Asian Week*, May 26, 1983.

<sup>83</sup> Jones, "Chinatown Rejuvenation Urged: Many Favor Trade and Community Center."

trading center was being leased by D.C.'s Metro Transit Authority and they only selected the CDC's bid for the land. Dr. Lee, alongside other fellow community advocates, were unsuccessful in their attempts to be a part of the project and thus were completely excluded from the venture. The bias of the Metro Transit Authority towards Dr. Chin Lee's group was attributed to the "overwhelming" support by D.C. agencies for the trade center.<sup>84</sup> A possible rationale for this bias has to do with American foreign policy and President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China reestablishing U.S.-Chinese relations. Dr. Chin Lee's 1972 campaign resonated with American foreign policy, urban planners, and Chinatown businessmen alike where he wanted "to allow people to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps."<sup>85</sup> Dr. Chin Lee's vision for Chinatown supported the idea of the "American Dream" by giving businesses in Chinatown the best opportunities to succeed made possible by urban renewal. The coalition of city planners and the CDC had effectively excluded one part of Chinatown in the gentrification process. Dr. Chin Lee's CDC paved the way for the economic metamorphosis of the neighborhood and left community activists such as Dr. Lee in the dark.<sup>86</sup>

A resident of the area for twenty years, Dr. Lee witnessed the agonizing decline of Chinatown as a residential neighborhood through his own eyes. The opening of Chinatown to urban renewal projects such as convention center and trading center led to a significant rise in property taxes for the neighborhood that forced out many Chinatown residents. By 1986, only half of Dr. Lee's patients were Chinese. In 1986, the *Post* noted that "Lee's parents three-story row house had an assessed value of \$66,750 in 1977, \$285,000 in 1982 and \$695,000 this year, almost entirely attributable to increases in the value of the land."<sup>87</sup> Land value and high property taxes reserved Chinatown's spaces for outside developers or business owners who handled the costs with ease. No lower income family could afford the exponential increase in taxes. Dr. Lee echoed fears of the remaining D.C. Chinatown residents that "eventually there will be a Chinatown with no Chinese... Many of the large developers are non-Chinese. The development in Chinatown is a positive step, but not if we cannot stay

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<sup>84</sup> Lynton, "Far East Center to be Built in D.C.'s Chinatown: Far East Center to be Built in D.C.'s Chinatown."

<sup>85</sup> Hamilton, "Chin-Lee Banking on Bipartisan Vote: Chin-Lee Banks on both Parties in Uphill Fight for Delegate Seat."

<sup>86</sup> "D.C., Chinatown Site of Huge New Trade Center."

<sup>87</sup> Linda Wheeler, "Mixed Blessing for Chinatown: Chinatown's Property Values Climbing," *The Washington Post*, Jul 12, 1986.

here when it is all over.”<sup>88</sup> Resigned to the fate of Chinatown’s transformation into an urban developer’s sandbox, Dr. Lee knew it was only a matter of time before the Chinese would be completely forced out of D.C.

By 1995, D.C.’s Chinatown was well underway into becoming the one of the city’s most popular development sites. For new residents, D.C.’s Chinatown was “like a train station: When the train arrives, you take it to the next destination.” These words by Dr. Lee perfectly described the state of Chinatown by 1995. Chinatown had long served as a community where immigrant families could plant their roots and raise children; now it was merely a pitstop for immigrants on their way to the suburbs. The residents of Chinatown were completely defeated, and even Chinese businessmen who benefitted from recent development projects felt the pressure of gentrification. For example, in 1995, Tony Cheng, who owned multiple properties and two restaurants in Chinatown, noted that business in the area had been bad in recent years and he was willing to sell to developers for the right price. By 1995, Chinatown residents at the Wah Luck House, an apartment building built in 1982, accepted that Chinatown was no longer an ethnic enclave and found it foolish that they once thought the Wah Luck House symbolized Chinatown’s resistance to gentrification. Residents believed that the construction of Wah Luck alongside the new Chinese Far East Center, showed that their voices were being heard by urban planners and that they could survive as a residential community. Contrary to their hopes however, D.C.’s Chinatown devolved into a bidding war among outside interests over available spaces in Chinatown. By 1995, Dr. Lee concluded, “History moves on” and perhaps that was fitting for this once vibrant neighborhood.<sup>89</sup>

Washington D.C.’s Chinatown at first claimed its spot in D.C as an oasis for Chinese immigrants who escaped racism to find a new home. The end of the neighborhood’s authentic Chinatown in the 1970s-1990s began when community and business leaders allowed the construction of a convention center that sapped the community of its cultural vitality. Trends in immigration catered to the suburban Asian population and resulted

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<sup>88</sup> Linda Wheeler, “Mixed Blessing for Chinatown: Chinatown's Property Values Climbing.”

<sup>89</sup> Marc Fisher, “If the Price is Right, we Sell,” *The Washington Post*, Jan 29, 1995.

in their interests being prioritized over the residents of Chinatown. Despite being at one point the commanding president of the CCBA, Dr. Toon Lee was powerless to contest Dr. William Chin Lee's CDC. Chinatown's residential and business leaders had been divided and conquered by external interests. By 1995, the neighborhood became a free for all amongst urban developers as external interests bought out land from Chinese businessmen and homeowners alike. Tourists and D.C. Asian suburbanites benefitted the most from urban renewal projects and completely destroyed the authentic culture of D.C.'s Chinatown.<sup>90</sup> The pivotal period of the 1970s to the 1990s transformed D.C.'s Chinatown into an ethnic Disneyland for tourists far removed from its beginnings as a sanctuary for Asian immigrants.

## **Conclusion**

The choices that the Chinatowns in D.C. and Philadelphia utilized in the 1970s and 1980s influenced how those communities face the issue of gentrification today. Philadelphia's Chinatown now attempts to seize its own destiny and reclaim the lands they lost to gentrification in the 1970s. The neighborhood sustained intergenerational coalitions from the 1970s alive through the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, which dedicated themselves to urban redevelopment projects that would improve the lives of its residents. One such reclamation conflict is playing out in the neighborhood of Callowhill, or Chinatown North, a space the neighborhood lost when the Vine Street Expressway was constructed. Since 2018, the PCDC has led the fight to recover their "rightful" spaces of Chinatown North against the wishes of the majority white population of Callowhill, with both groups claiming these spaces as their own.<sup>91</sup> The PCDC believed that the non-English speaking residents of Chinatown North were being excluded in talks regarding Callowhill's Business Improvement Bill, a plan that funded future development projects in the neighborhood. Chinatown leadership saw this as another deliberate attempt by white "outsiders" to prevent minorities from having a voice in community development. Although the PCDC made some progress in reclaiming Chinatown North with the

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<sup>90</sup> Yanan Wang, "D.C. 's Chinatown has Only 300 Chinese Americans Left, and they're Fighting to Stay. Rich People would Never have Lived here before. Now they're Trying to Buy Everything," *The Washington Post*, Jul 16, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Valerie Russ, "At Tense Meeting about Proposed Callowhill Improvement District, Request for a Restart Fails," TCA Regional News, Jun 26, 2019.

construction of the Crane Tower Apartments in 2019, the conflict with the Callowhill residents in North Chinatown suggest that another fight over urban space is brewing once again.<sup>92</sup> Philadelphia's Chinatown faces the dilemma of community inclusion and how to make urban renewal work for all actors involved. How do two distinct ethnic communities with competing claims to city spaces reconcile their differences? Whether it is minority or white communities, do any of these groups have greater claims to the city? Chinatown's prior successes against the Vine Street Expressway in 1973, a Phillies Stadium in 2001, and other urban renewal projects have taught the community that a "culture of protest" works in the fight against gentrification. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how can Philadelphia's Chinatowns utilize their legacy of activism to produce meaningful change that can help improve the community? Philadelphia's Chinatown provides an interesting case study to see how minority communities attempt to navigate the discourse of gentrification and urban spaces.

On the other hand, Washington D.C.'s Chinatown has been decimated by gentrification in the late 20th century. According to Yanan Wang of the *Washington Post*, "The population of Chinese-Americans in Chinatown has shrunk from a high of 3,000 to about 300 -- half of whom are now fighting to be able to stay."<sup>93</sup> D.C.'s Chinatown became a symbol of submission, agreed upon by Philadelphia Chinatown community advocates such as Mary Yee from the *Yellow Seeds* who remarked "Had we not resisted what government officials and politicians thought was inevitable at the outset, we would probably have suffered the sad fate of Washington, DC's Chinatown, devastated by its convention center and the Verizon Center."<sup>94</sup> This case of a fallen Chinatown offers insight on how Chinatowns oppose gentrification. Why did "Save Chinatown" movements remain isolated in the past when they all faced the same issue of gentrification? Even if each Chinatown had their own unique circumstances, why did they decide to go it alone against gentrification? The urban renewal era of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reinforced the notion that Chinatowns relied upon cultural tourism to survive against urban renewal. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can Chinatowns move on from their historical reliance on

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<sup>92</sup> Valerie Russ, "New Crane Chinatown apartments to open this month, but some ask: Where's the affordable housing?," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 11, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Yanan Wang, "D.C. 's Chinatown has Only 300 Chinese Americans Left, and they're Fighting to Stay. Rich People would Never have Lived here before. Now they're Trying to Buy Everything," *The Washington Post*, Jul 16, 2015.

<sup>94</sup> Yee, "The Save Chinatown Movement: Surviving against All Odds," 24-31.

cultural tourism and find other ways to thrive as a community? D.C.'s Chinatown provides a grim lesson to minority communities divided on the issue of gentrification, that if they choose to support urban redevelopment, they may find their voices lost in the dust of a construction site.

Chinatown neighborhoods in the United States were subjected to rigorous battles over the merits of urban renewal. Whether it was through the fiery chants of "Save Chinatown!" that echoed throughout the streets of Philadelphia or the extinguished flame of D.C.'s Chinatown neighborhood lost to gentrification, Chinatown communities were instrumental in deciding the fate of their localities. Both Philadelphia and D.C. Chinatowns experienced an influx in immigration and intra-community divisions that threatened their neighborhood's response to gentrification. Philadelphia's immigration population in the suburbs jumped from 48-60% between 1980 and 2010.<sup>95</sup> Yet, Philadelphia's Chinatown protest movement empowered its residents to fight for their right to stay in the city instead of fleeing to the suburbs, while D.C.'s Chinatown succumbed to internal infighting and leadership who orchestrated the downfall of their neighborhood with urban planners. As stated by the *Yellow Seeds* "The fate of Chinatown is now in your hands, the hands of the Chinese people. You, the people of Chinatown, cannot continue to be apathetic. If you do not awaken now, you may soon find there is no Chinatown left to fight for."<sup>96</sup> The cases of D.C. and Philadelphia Chinatowns reveal the importance of social activism to combat gentrification and the complex relationships in minority communities that could hinder attempts at social mobilization.

Future studies should consider how various minority communities can work together to combat urban renewal. With more neighborhoods becoming integrated with a wide variety of peoples, how do diverse communities bridge cultural divides to combat gentrification, and what prevented them from doing this in the past? Chinatown's experiences with gentrification reveal that minority communities can hold a variety of

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<sup>95</sup> Acolin and Vitiello, "Who Owns Chinatown: Neighbourhood Preservation and Change in Boston and Philadelphia," 1695.

<sup>96</sup> *Yellow Seeds* Vol 2, Number 1, p. 2 April 1973, Box 639, CCC Periodicals, SCRC 396/1884-1639, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

opinions on urban renewal that can affect how their communities respond to the phenomenon. In addition, gentrification is a popular topic in the present day, and is widely agreed by scholars to be a major problem for minorities neighborhoods. Cities all over the U.S. have drafted new comprehensive plans such as Philadelphia's 2035 and D.C.'s 2006 plans to be more inclusive and truly improve the states of minority communities ravaged by previous urban redevelopment projects. Gentrification must be studied further in order to analyze how minority communities today navigate the phenomenon of gentrification and how they can reap the benefits of a beautiful city in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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