

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT
TO A MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT TO A MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

An Exploration of the
Houston Chinatowns

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my father Yunshi Zheng (鄭允實)
and mother Yaofang Ma (馬瑤芳) –
*their infinite love, wisdom and sacrifice have bestowed me with
life's most exquisite blessings. My father's parting words were
a plea for me to bring this study to fruition.*
*I dedicate this book to his cherished memory, and to my mother
who continues to nurture me with her unwavering guidance.*
To my parents I am forever indebted.
– Zen Tong Chunhua Zheng

To my daughter Yue
and grandsons William and James –
*with deep pride and gratitude for their love for Chinese culture
and drive to explore our celebrated heritage.*
In their passions I find inspiration.
*May Chinatown and this book always serve as
a testament to the splendor of our treasured roots
and the power of the rich diversity that thrives in its streets.*
– Yali Zou

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PROLOGUE: A TALE OF LOST AND FOUND

In the hazy grip of a sultry September day in 2011, a three-story edifice with a green-tiled roof and red-and-brown masonry walls crumbled into a pile of rubble at 801 Chartres Street on the eastern fringes of downtown Houston, Texas. Having witnessed the passage of 64 years, the building met its fate that marked the end of an era for a once-vibrant community (Chen, 2015; The Arch-Ive, 2023). Vanishing in a cloud of dust alongside the demolished structure were five majestic Chinese characters in faded paint, which had adorned the apex of the façade proudly announcing the name of its custodian – the Houston branch of the national On Leong Chinese Merchants Association, a cherished institution of the Chinese community.

Orchestrated by a San Antonio, Texas developer who had acquired the property to make way for a proposed hotel project (Business Wire, 2011), the demolition obliterated one of the last vestiges of a once-thriving neighborhood known as Old Chinatown, regarded as a key initial settlement of Chinese immigrants in the city's east end.

Since 1951, the On Leong building had not only been the headquarters of the merchants' association, but also a bastion of cultural identity, a heart beating with the pulse of the Chinese community. It served as a landmark in the core of the Chinese enclave that centered on Chartres and St. Emanuel streets, where bustling restaurants, grocery stores, and laundries stood side by side.

Within the walls of the On Leong building, the Houston branch of the national Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association found its home, and it served as a hub for myriad communal activities for Chinese immigrants – from merchants' meetings, banquets, and weddings to lodging for weary immigrant bachelors and newcomers seeking refuge.

On the third floor, an ancestral altar stood as a testament to the reverence bestowed upon the forefathers of Chinese families. And it was in the embrace of this locale that the resplendent celebrations of Chinese New Year unfolded each year. Amidst the exuberant lion dances and the cacophony of firecrackers, a jubilant atmosphere permeated Old Chinatown, drawing crowds of residents and visitors from near and far.

Yet, those cheers and the vivacity of the past have long faded into the annals of time. The On Leong spot would remain a haunting, gaping void for years to come, with only remnants of the Chinese community's flagship building remaining as fragments of the original red-tiled floor that endured the demolition. The planned hotel project never materialized. The site eventually fell into a lackluster commercial strip center.

The 800 block of Chartres Street is just one of many blocks in the vicinity that intersperse vacant lots with shuttered structures and disused warehouses. Once teeming with life, Old Chinatown now has descended to largely a forsaken landscape of desolation and melancholy, earning the unfortunate moniker of "no man's land" (Lomax, 2009).

Approximately 20 miles from Old Chinatown, a different world unfolds in southwest Houston.

Stretching 10 miles westward along Bellaire Boulevard from its eastern starting point west of US Highway 59, a dynamic Chinese commercial district emerged amidst the decline of Old Chinatown. Over the decades, the district has blossomed into an expansive boomtown, lined with commercial plazas, shopping malls, supermarkets, restaurants, teahouses, bakeries, jewelry stores, gift shops, and myriad services from banks, law firms, and insurance agencies to clinics, pharmacies, and massage parlors.

The district bears the unmistakable imprint of its immigrant roots, with street signs and business markings speaking Chinese, and the saccharine strains of Mandarin pop ballads wafting through the air, accentuating a leisurely cadence to life. As one ventures deeper into the blocks flanking Bellaire Boulevard, a rich tapestry unfurls, weaving together community centers, dance studios, martial art schools, temples, churches, apartments, and senior residences. Welcome to New Chinatown!

The inauguration of the first Chinese supermarket at Diho Plaza in 1983, spearheaded by ethnic Chinese investors from Taiwan, heralded the advent of an era of commercial development in southwest Houston, propelled by a surging Asian immigrant population and the availability of affordable land (Li, 2012, 2020). This momentous development began to supplant Old Chinatown in east downtown as the premier Chinatown of Houston.

Over the past three decades, the area along Bellaire Boulevard has experienced accelerated expansion, transforming the corridor into a flourishing commercial and cultural hub. The waves of progress have not only beckoned the Chinese population but also people from other Asian ethnicities, most notably the Vietnamese, as well as non-Asians who seek to shop, reside, or establish businesses in the vicinity. Vietnamese American-owned enterprises, including those operated by Vietnamese Americans of Chinese descent, have proliferated in the western expanse of the corridor.

In 2011, the then-Vietnamese American Houston city councilman Al Hoang made an unsuccessful attempt to rename the street Turtlewood Drive, where he resided, to Little Saigon Drive, to reflect the Vietnamese immigrant heritage that permeated a significant portion of the area's population (Moran, 2011a; Priest, 2011).

The rapid growth in population and diversity of the area even caught the attention of US Congressman Al Green, an African-American lawmaker, who established a satellite office in Chinatown to serve his expanding constituency. Housed in the International Trade Center building owned by the Chinese daily newspaper publisher Wea H. Lee,¹ Green's office symbolized the increased recognition of the Chinese and Asian communities in the area, further elevating New Chinatown's prominence.

Today, shopping malls and plazas along Bellaire Boulevard are teemed with business signs in a variety of Asian languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, alongside English. Yet, amidst the confluence of cultures and the spatial intermingling of businesses of various Asian ethnicities, differing opinions emerged.

In recent years, questions have arisen regarding the "Chinese-ness" of New Chinatown. Some argue that the proliferation of Vietnamese enterprises and other ethnic establishments, particularly along the western stretches of Bellaire Boulevard, has diluted the area's distinct Chinese character to such an extent that the term "Chinatown" no longer aptly encompasses its essence. They have been advocating the moniker "Asiatown," contending that this designation better represents the inclusion of various Asian ethnicities in the vicinity and the area's broader international appeal.

In 2007, Texas lawmaker Hubert Vo, who is of Vietnamese descent, joined forces with local business leaders, including Lee, the newspaper publisher, to seek official recognition for the area. The effort led to the state Legislature's authorizing the establishment of a tax-levying district called the International Management District, which encompasses New Chinatown (International Management District, 2012, 2016, 2023; The Editorial Board, 2022).

The designation enables the district to collect tax revenues from businesses within its jurisdiction to fund initiatives and services to promote economic development, improve infrastructure, strengthen public safety, beautify public spaces, and implement community enhancement projects within the district.

The creation of the International Management District is recognized for having a positive impact on the vitality of the Chinatown area through its various initiatives aimed at improving the overall environment. These initiatives and collaborative efforts, which prioritize multiculturalism and inclusivity, unintentionally contribute to the growing endorsement of “Asiatown” as a more comprehensive label for the area.

However, steadfast advocates of Chinatown’s enduring legacy assert that its essence remains quintessentially Chinese, highlighting the primary segment of Chinatown situated east of Beltway 8,² where the New Chinatown development originated. They argue that these blocks continue to be predominantly Chinese in terms of commercial ownership, cultural orientation, and clientele.

They maintain that the designation of “Chinatown” has been rooted in the neighborhood since its inception and speaks to the Chinese heritage of the area.

Chinese American business operators, who have transplanted themselves from east downtown Houston to the New Chinatown since the 1980s, adamantly emphasize the importance of preserving and honoring the deep roots of Chinatown (Li, 2012). Leaders including former Houston city councilman Gordon Quan, a Chinese descendant, aligned themselves with this perspective and collaborated with local advocates to promote the area as Chinatown (Rodriguez, 2007).

In 2002, Grace Feng, owner of Grace Computer & Internet Corporation, and the China Town Map & Directory, labeled the area “Chinatown” in an area map produced for visitors and tourists. Feng articulates her reasoning:

Every major city has a Chinatown ... Not every city has an Asia Town, so we decided to keep it Chinatown. That’s what most people know this area as. (Rodriguez, 2007)

Similar to the International Management District, the Southwest Management District, formerly known as the Greater Sharpstown Management District, includes New Chinatown as a commercial district it serves. For years it has prioritized the promotion of the New Chinatown and the preservation of its Chinese identity. Amongst the initiatives, the management district installed branded Chinese-English bilingual Chinatown markers in key locations to denote the Chinese neighborhood’s boundaries.

There has been a paucity of scholarly inquiries into Chinese immigration and Chinatowns in Texas. The evolution of Houston's Chinatown over the span of a century – from its humble origins to its subsequent decline and eventual disappearance in the east end to the rise of a new Chinatown in southwest Houston – has garnered minimal scholarly attention.

These gaps in the comprehensive understanding of an important community gave rise to this pioneering research aimed at filling this void in history and ethnic and immigrant community studies.

A central focus of this book is the exploration of the ongoing debate concerning the identity of Houston's two Chinatowns, their significance, and the implications of their changes and transformation for their stakeholders – residents, business and service operators, visitors, consumers, and the broader Houston population.

The book aims to construct the history of both Old and New Chinatowns, examine the distinctive nature of their development, and the roles that immigration patterns, cultural, social, and economic conditions have played in the metamorphosis of Houston's Chinatowns.

By documenting the history of the Houston Chinatowns, unearthing their significance, and shedding light on their challenging and dynamic journeys, this study contributes a valuable body of knowledge that spans scholarly realms, educational curricula, municipal planning, community engagement, economic development, and cultural appreciation and consumption.

The book aspires to foster a deeper understanding of the multifaceted roles played by Chinatown and Chinese immigrants in a diverse, multicultural, and international city. Furthermore, it seeks to illuminate the impact of the city's growing diversity on the evolution of Chinatown, serving as a lens through which to view the ever-changing dynamics of this vibrant district.

Amidst the stagnation faced by the redevelopments of Chinatowns across the United States, the remarkable tale of Houston's New Chinatown arises as a beacon of development, holding profound implications for a diverse and multicultural America.

THE RESEARCHERS' JOURNEYS

Central to unraveling the dynamics of Houston's Chinatowns in the present study, the convergence of the researchers' personal experiences, professional journeys, and scholarly trainings collectively guided their inquiry into these distinct urban spaces.

For nearly three decades, both investigators have immersed themselves as participants and observers in the Houston Chinese American community, bearing witness to the dynamic communal life and evolution of these neighborhoods. Their distinct academic preparations in diverse disciplines provided a robust foundation for grasping the intricacies and complexities of the two Chinatowns in flux. And their professional adventures in the city are intertwined with the Chinese American and the broad communities locally, regionally and internationally.

Author Zen Tong Chunhua Zheng, who earned his graduate degree in journalism and communication at the University of Oregon, has built an extensive journalistic career across wire service, print, broadcast, and digital media. Arriving in Houston from Eugene, Oregon, decades ago, Zheng found a Chinese neighborhood on the rise, a welcoming sanctuary of Far East flavors and culture that rekindled his experiences from younger days.

Serving as the managing editor for Southern News Group, Zheng became immersed in the Chinese and Asian American community through editorial planning and management, gaining the first-hand insight into the dynamics of the interaction between ethnic residents and the broad community.

Zheng's subsequent 12-year tenure with the *Houston Chronicle*, the city's sole daily newspaper and the seventh largest in the nation, encompassed roles as a reporter, feature writer, copy editor, and blogger. Throughout his time there, Zheng extensively covered the city's multiethnic communities including the Chinatowns and was frequently consulted by the newspaper on matters related to Asia and the local Chinese and Asian American community.

Additionally, Zheng has engaged as an adjunct professor teaching Asian culture- and community-related courses at the University of Houston Asian American Studies Center and as a research fellow there focused on the study of local Asian communities including the Chinatowns. In the past decade, his expertise extended to communications, marketing and public relations with entities such as the city of Houston and the regional healthcare system. Presently, he leads communications, marketing and community engagement at the Houston Community College, one of the nation's most diverse institutions of higher learning.

Throughout these professional engagements, Zheng's profound involvement with the Chinese and Asian American community is paralleled by his integration into the wider societal context beyond cultural confines.

Researcher Yali Zou's scholarly journey led her to Houston in 1994 as a faculty member at the University of Houston after earning her Ph.D.

in sociocultural foundations at the University of California, Davis, and completing her postdoctoral research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

The next year, Zou launched the Asian American Studies Center at the University of Houston and serves as its executive director. She has infused the center with a vibrant array of research and education programs. The center became a hub of interdisciplinary exploration dedicated to studying Asian and Asian American experiences in the United States and abroad. Through community engagement and collaborations, she gleaned insights into the history and resilience of Chinese immigrants in building the two Chinatowns.

As professor in educational leadership and policy studies and global leadership studies, Zou has authored and co-authored eight books covering the breadth of ethnography, education leadership, multicultural studies, and cross-cultural communication.

The resonance of her initial visit to Houston's New Chinatown upon her arrival in the city remains vivid – a culinary experience that evoked cherished childhood memories and affirmed the dictum “you are what you eat.”

Over the decades, her weekly pilgrimages to Chinatown meshed grocery shopping with a deep connection to the Chinese roots. She became increasingly engaged with the Chinese and Asian community. Amongst her involvements, she serves on the board of Chinese Community Center, which is Houston's largest Asian community-serving organization with a citywide multiethnic outreach mission.

Over the decades, both Zheng and Zou observed the evolution of the Chinatowns, particularly the transformation of New Chinatown into a dynamic crossroads, inviting both Chinese and non-Chinese residents to engage in the mosaic of Chinese cuisine, culture, and celebrations.

Informed by these collective experiences, a poignant gap in literature became evident to both researchers – an absence of a comprehensive history of the two Chinese neighborhoods. Houston's unique status as host to two distinctive Chinatowns further heightened this void.

Recognizing the confluence of East and West in this economic and cultural epicenter, in 2007, the researchers embarked on this joint endeavor to chronicle the journey of Chinese immigrants in Houston and the Chinatowns they built.

The researcher's aspiration is to encapsulate the rich heritage and contributions of the Chinese community while exemplifying the potential for multicultural growth in the United States. In this pursuit, the researchers seek to unveil the unspoken narratives that document the development of Houston's two Chinatowns, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of their history and the promise of a multicultural America.

NOTES

1. Wea H. Lee's name in Chinese is 李蔚华.
2. Beltway 8 is a ring road that stretches more than 80 miles around Houston. It is officially designated as "Sam Houston Tollway" by the Harris County Toll Road Authority in the tolled segments. The non-tolled sections are referred to as "Sam Houston Parkway."