CHINATOWN: THE NEOLIBERAL REMAKING OF CULTURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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Abstract

Within the complexity of today's urban political economy, Chinatown emerges as a provocative and critical site to dissect how market, state, and community actors construct and negotiate the processes of neoliberalization to forge a new frontier in urban development. By engaging the narratives of Chinatowns in Chicago and New York City—historically rooted in resistance and community—a microcosm emerges for exploring the ways in which economic interests produce and repackage culture and tourism to elevate the prominence of the contemporary city. Strategies of resistance such as organizing and coalition-building will be examined.

Within the complexity of today's urban political economy, "Chinatown" emerges as a provocative and critical site to dissect the ways in which a particular presentation of "culture" and economics together shape the contemporary urban landscape in the United States. In this urban landscape, market, state, and community actors, within the framework of neoliberalism, work in the new frontiers of urban development: the cultural enclave. Neoliberal ideas and experiments, which emerged out of the decline of Fordism and the Keynesian welfare state in the early 1970s, operate forcefully under the assumptions that open, competitive, unregulated markets—liberated from all forms of state intervention—represent the optimal mechanism for economic growth (Harvey 2005). In this economic climate, Chinatowns are packaged for profit as the new destinations for leisure, tourism, and entertainment, predicated upon the economic value of culture, diversity, and multiculturalism.

Neoliberal policies that emphasize unfettered economic growth seek to profit from globalizing U.S. cities by capitalizing on cultural enclaves, such as Chinatowns, and thus endanger the community of these cultural niches. This paper presents the challenges to these communities brought on by the marketing and selling of "culture." It explores how a "Chinatown" becomes transformed into a cultural product through two case studies. The first is the Chinatown neighborhood tour administered by the City of Chicago and the second is the Museum of Chinese in America located in New York City's Chinatown. Although redevelopment policies are powerful, the paper reveals that there have been opportunities for resistance through organizations in these targeted neighborhoods.

CHINATOWN

Chinatown has historically been a steady fixture in urban landscapes. New York, San Francisco, Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago; all have their corner known as Chinatown. The physical environment of a city's Chinatown has often been a highly contested site. On the one hand are the economic aspirations of developers who want to shape and sell the city's ethnic flavor to tourists and other residents; on the other hand are the needs of community members who live and work there (Liu and Geron 2008). To take just one example of how the idea of selling culture operates, in 1990, when the George H.W. Bush Administration used Houston as a site for the world Economic Summit, it deemed the city an "international city."A Chinatown redevelopment plan followed based on the notion that Houston conventioneers would be attracted to the "world city" ambiance provided by a Chinatown development close to the convention hall and thus readily available to conference participants (Lin 1995).

The Chicago Office of Tourism follows such a pattern in its selling of its Chinatown neighborhood. It advertises a Chicago Chinatown neighborhood tour (part of a three-in-one package that includes neighborhood tours of Little Italy and Greektown) (Santos, Belhassen, and Caton 2008). There are two depictions of Chinatown at work in the neighborhood tour. One is exotic Chinatown, characterized by peculiar culinary encounters, colorful pagodas, ornamental tiles, ceramic vases, lion sculptures, and the generous usage of the color red (Santos et al. 2008). These "foreign" elements reinforce Chinatown and, as a corollary, its residents, as the exotic "other." The second image is the comfortable and convenient Chinatown, a part of Chicago, as indicated by the ease with which participants were guided through the neighborhood under the meticulous stewardship of the City of Chicago. The imagery of an exotic and distant Chinatown—reproduced in brochures, talking points from

tour guides, and comments exchanged by tour participants, who were often white and middle- to upper-middle class—reveals the position of the City of Chicago as a cultural broker and as an aggressive government apparatus that remakes culture for economic gains and tourist attractions.

The enduring and "othering" imagery of Chinatown illuminates the dynamics between past and present representations of Chinatown in the wake of heightened tourism in urban ethnic enclaves, as well as the role of the local government in reproducing that imagery. While Chinatown continues to function as a neighborhood foreign to American sensibilities (Santos et al. 2008), this case underscores how tourism, culture, and cultural products are central components to local economic development initiatives. The City of Chicago offers "ethnic" neighborhood tours to represent its culture and history, yet it also draws from the character of the neighborhood to manage and repackage ethnic identity as a commodity. Through these tours, the living public space—of the community and its neighborhood—becomes a space for the city's commodification efforts and the easy consumption of a "foreign" culture, a space clearly demarcated by race and class lines.

In New York City, the Museum of Chinese in America was established a few years after the New York City's financial crisis in the 1970s, which is often regarded as a moment of neoliberal experimentation, characterized by severe limitations on labor rights, the privatization of public assets, and cuts in social provisions (Harvey, 2005; Sze 2010). The expansion period of the Museum of Chinese in America coincided with the reinvention period of Chinatown after the 9/11 attacks, when the leadership of the museum sought to transform the institution into a community leader and a national model (Sze 2010). In this transformation, the museum's focus and services shifted from meeting the needs of local residents to helping to create a marketable neighborhood for outsiders.

This shift is evidenced by the museum's funding and relocation from a building leased to multiple Chinese American social service and arts agencies to a building six times the previous size and designed by a signature architect (Sze 2010). The majority of the total funds that the museum received were restricted to its neighborhood presence in the most material sense: to the renovation and acquisition of the new facilities that would draw outside visitors (Sze 2010). Around it, Chinatown residents and neighborhood stores faced an increased threat of displacement by corporate interests due to its proximity to expensive real estate in Manhattan's Lower East Side. In this way, the museum was part of the neighborhood's gentrification, where policies and patterns of reinvestment and development of an urban space opened it to a more affluent class (Peck 2005).

In this context, the Museum of Chinese in America evolved from a small neighborhood-based cultural organization in Chinatown to a midsize cultural institution of prominence. On the one hand it operated as a site of cultural history through its exhibitions and programs, and on the other it accommodated a gentrifying trend that was transforming the neighborhood from the space of a particular community to a more accessible space for investment, development, and growth.

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

In the wake of gentrification, community actors must strategically negotiate with powerful actors to craft just, innovative, and sustainable strategies that align with the interests of those who actually live in the neighborhoods undergoing rapid shifts. The role of the ethnic enclave within the neoliberal paradigm does not offer any ready-made solutions and strategies for actions aimed at long-time residents; however, a number of notable community organizing campaigns have successfully preserved the physical land and community integrity of Asian American ethnic enclaves.

One organizing strategy that has proven effective in resisting the conflation of culture with economic gains in ethnic enclaves is coalition-building. Advancing the continuum of organizing through community-labor coalitions, such as workers' centers, connects labor organizing with community organizing and amasses more political power. These coalitions enable community actors to increase their capacity to organize collectively against downtown developers or government actors who may continue to institute development measures inconsistent with pressing concerns from the community. Asian-American enclaves have been the birthplaces for the development of numerous community-based labor organizations, such as the Chinese Workers and Staff Association in New York, Asian Immigrant Worker Association in Oakland, and the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance in Los Angeles (Liu and Geron 2008).

Building coalitions within an ethnic-specific community is also a key strategy to shore up collective resources. Boston's Chinatown, for instance, has 75 organizations concentrated within 25 square blocks (Liu and Geron 2008). The concentration and aggregation of resources support Asian-American activists and allies and provide opportunities for community members to serve on voluntary committees and boards. Community leaders in Boston's Chinatown also formed an unconventional, yet innovative, partnership with university researchers to address the constant pressure from downtown developers to build new and larger buildings. The utilization of data analysis contributed to the community's efforts to question the role of development and to demand accountability from economic actors by

generating more sophisticated studies of traffic injuries, scientific surveys of residents about environmental health, the measurement of noise levels, and physical and electronic mapping of data (Brugge and Tai 2002).

While the neoliberalization of modern cities has exacerbated the challenges for progressive urban movements, it has been suggested that the hostile climate for communities can also be seen as an urgent opportunity to foment urban protest on a global scale (Mayer 2009). The salient point here is that transformative organizing through collective action does not necessarily have to remain strictly situated within a particular locale. With the increased accessibility of social media and advanced technology, communicating, organizing, and building solidarity among similar stakeholders in today's globalized urban space offers a chance to address the deleterious effects of globalization in a truly concerted global effort.

A potential drawback to such community-based organizing is that as organizations expand and professionalize, they may increase their disconnection with the grassroots membership by seemingly maintaining the status quo. Due to possible tactical constraints of professionalized approaches, social movements and activists have a limited repertoire of innovative, transformative, and grassroots tactics that they could deploy, often encumbered by legal limitations of political activities.

Liu and Geron (2008) draw from the account of Asian Americans for Equality, which transformed from a grassroots and openly militant organization to a multi-million-dollar community development corporation in Manhattan's Chinatown. During several redistricting processes, Asian Americans for Equality, in order to achieve its desired electoral aims, shifted from aligning with disadvantaged communities of color, specifically the predominantly Latino area in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, to the elite business sector in downtown areas.

The changing nature and diversification of enclaves also pose critical challenges to organizing; for example, the priorities of Vietnamese and Cambodian enclaves, which emerged in the 1970s out of the war and displacement in Southeast Asia, might diverge from the interests of more firmly anchored Chinatowns (Liu and Geron 2008). The bureaucracy of many labor unions and the relatively nascent development of workers' centers also render forming community-labor partnerships tenuous. On transnational organizing, Mayer (2009) warns of the recent trends of non-governmental organizations shifting urban struggles into a depoliticized movement, which has been problematic in the struggles to push for democratic cities.

Ultimately, however, the greatest limitation to strategies of action is the hegemony of the neoliberal paradigm. As community actors engage in movement-building, the neoliberal agenda simultaneously and actively

works to supplant their vision and actions with neoliberal logic. Revisiting the professionalization and expansion of the Museum of Chinese in America highlights this tension. Whether the museum sought to professionalize and expand on its own accord is difficult to know. Whether the museum transformed from a cultural institution into a cultural product, further commodified and repackaged for consumption due to the explicit and implicit demands of its gentrifying neighborhood is worth exploring further. This example is symptomatic of the pervasive and dangerous power of neoliberal ideas and experiments to co-opt culture.

CONCLUSION

Chinatowns are deeply circumscribed within the neoliberal urban landscape, where public spaces are negotiated and reconstructed into privatized spaces and where culture and ethnicity are continuously reshaped and remade. The unresolved tension among state, capital, and community actors in the urban political economy is explored here in the microcosm of Chinatown, but the themes of culture, tourism, and co-optation are likely to correspond with patterns observed in the making and remaking of contemporary and global cities. This observation invites a critical discussion around the reproduction of culture for the consumption of an urbane class, which has assumed economic power. The most formidable challenge in strategizing for change lies in the neoliberal ideology that has asserted its global hegemony.

More encompassing strategies to address problems within the political economy of urban development must also pointedly hold accountable the roles of economic elites and the government in priming the urban landscape for the neoliberalization of cities. Given the scope of the analysis presented here, a tangible solution cannot be offered for deep societal transformation, but it suggests that community actors should be cognizant of the ways in which race and class complicate potential strategies for actions and systemic change in the backdrop of furthering the economic agenda of contemporary cities. Collective action has the power to be transformative, but its impact relies on community actors' abilities to navigate strategically the neoliberal terrain and to engage in a deeper analysis and a more reflexive visioning process of the ways in which community is constructed, maintained, and contested.

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