

Neon Signs, Underground Tunnels and Chinese American Identity:  
The Many Dimension of Visual Chinatown

By

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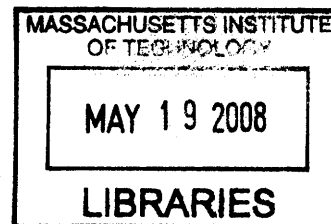
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**ABSTRACT –**

What is Chinatown? Is it an imaginary construct, a real location, or a community? Is it an ethnic enclave only available to insiders, or a fabricated environment designed specifically for tourists? This thesis attempts to reconcile the multiple ways in which Chinatowns in the U.S. are conceived, understood, and used by both insiders and outsiders of the community. By using Henri Lefebvre's triad of spatial analysis (as detailed in *The Production of Space*), I create an analytical narrative through which to understand the layered dimensions of Chinatown through the realms of perceived, conceived and lived space. In the first chapter, I closely analyze the visual landscape of an actual location, Tyler Street in Boston's Chinatown, in order to decipher the spatial (and therefore economic and cultural) practices that shape the environment. In chapter 2, I discuss the representations of Chinatown, or the space as it has been conceived by media makers including photographers, writers and filmmakers. By looking at these through the lens of tourism, I create a framework for analyzing the many cinematic depictions of the neighborhood. In the last chapter, I return to the actual spaces of lived Chinatowns, in particular San Francisco's Chinatown as captured in the independent film *Chan is Missing* (1981), and Boston's Chinatown, as exemplified by three Chinese restaurants in the area. I use Erving Goffman's idea of everyday performance in order to dissect the ways in which people and spaces perform "Chinese-ness" for outsiders of the community. By focusing all three chapters on the material, tangible artifacts of the physical environment, or what I call 'Visual Chinatown,' I hope to create a unified vision of how spaces are created in popular culture.

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## ***INTRODUCTION –***

If I were giving a tour of Boston's Chinatown, I would almost definitely start with a visit to Empire Garden Restaurant. Located on 691 Washington Street, Empire Garden (or Emperor's Garden, depending on which sign you decide to refer to) is located on the upper half of a two-level consumer complex: a fully-stocked Asian supermarket on the ground floor and a traditional Chinese banquet hall on the second. Empire Garden's menu displays what might be considered a prototypical example of cuisine available in the neighborhood: authentic Cantonese food with dim sum on the weekends. This space not only caters to Chinatown visitors but its inhabitants as well; the restaurant regularly hosts community celebrations such as local weddings and large neighborhood events such as the AATC Annual Lunar New Year banquet.<sup>1</sup> The restaurant also serves as a political and social marker within the Chinese community; as part of multiple efforts to resist the continued existence of the Combat Zone (Boston's notorious red-light district), the creation of this complex (and its continued use) serves as a successful example of Chinatown's attempts at neighborhood revitalization.<sup>2</sup>

However, for me, the true interest of the space lies not with its cuisine or standing within the neighborhood, but instead its interior décor. Despite the unassuming façade and nondescript glass double-door entrance of the restaurant (though there is actually ample outdoor signage for the space, Figure 0-1), the interior of Empire Garden is "truly breathtaking" and "dramatic" (as

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1 "Once, in a New Moon," *The Boston Globe*, February 20, 2005, Sunday, Third Edition.; "A Night of Moon, Music and Magic," *The Boston Globe*, February 1, 2004, Sunday, Third Edition.

2 The Combat Zone is the nickname for Boston's infamous red-light district, which was formerly centered on the edge of Chinatown on Washington Street. This district began to form informally in the 1960s, though was actually officially designated by the Boston Redevelopment Authority as an "adult uses" district in 1974 (Schaefer and Johnson, 430). However, after the highly-publicized 1976 stabbing death of a Harvard student, the zone had been targeted for city takeover for conversion into an economically viable, yet safe area (as discussed in the January 5, 1993 *Boston Globe* article by Peter S. Canellos). Active efforts of neighborhood renewal began in the 1990s, both by the city and the Chinatown community; the Pagoda Theatre's proposed transformation into the Empire Garden restaurant and supermarket was praised by Boston Mayor Thomas Menino in 1996 as "another vital step in the revitalization of one of Boston's greatest neighborhoods – Chinatown" (as quoted Matt Brelis, in his February 4, 1996 *Boston Globe* article "Menino praises plan for Combat Zone").

described on the review site, Yelp.com) – something which is primarily due to the building's dramatic history as a theater. Opening as the Globe Theatre at the start of the twentieth century, this building has gone through multiple incarnations - first as a legitimate stage, turned vaudeville theater, turned burlesque house into the 1940s, and then a movie house called Center Theatre later in the decade. It eventually became a pornography house called the Pussycat Cinema, and by the 1970s, began playing an array of Asian kung-fu films, and renamed the Pagoda Theater.<sup>3</sup> In this incarnation, the theater catered primarily to a Chinese audience (a *Boston Herald* article on February 7, 1995 announcing its closure stated that it often only posted the Chinese posters with Chinese names for the films outside), and, due to declining audiences, finally closed as a theater in late January 1995.



**Figure 0-1 (left).** Exterior of Empire Garden Restaurant.

**Figure 0-2 (right).** Interior of Empire Garden Restaurant.

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<sup>3</sup> Ron Newman, comment on “Center Theatre-Boston, MA,” *Cinema Treasures*, comment posted June 18, 2005, <http://cinematreasures.org/theater/3271/> (accessed May 6, 2008).





**Figure 0-3 (left).** Chinese Mural beneath original theater architecture

**Figure 0-4 (right).** Photographic Box and Chinese Lanterns

For the most part, the original architecture of the space was retained throughout the years and still exists in the restaurant today. A description of the original theater interior, found in "Boston Theatre District: A Walking Tour", published by the Boston Preservation Alliance in 1993 (and quoted in the Cinema Treasures website, in "Center Theater-Boston, MA" on December 25, 2004), is as follows:

Designed by Arthur Vinal, it opened in 1903. Its two-story, Romanesque entrance arch was cut into panels with centered light bulbs. The facing was light brick and terra cotta, topped with friezework, cornice, and balustrae. On the latter were eleven bronze posts topped with lamps.

Though the first floor supermarket is completely renovated (no remnants of the old theater architecture remain), the second floor fully exploits the original Romanesque décor (Figure 0-2). The top half of the three-tier, red, black, and gold proscenium arch frames the entire banquet hall. Golden-colored cherubic faces, which are fitted into the molding of the walls, peer into the interior of the space, while elaborate chandeliers with fake candles hang above diners in the restaurant (Figure 0-3). The space is still made 'Chinese', however, through the fusion of select decorative elements into the environment, which include murals of birds and flowers with 'oriental' borders, which are painted into the flat spaces of the wall, Chinese-style lanterns and

light fixtures, lit photographic boxes showing views of Asian landscapes ranging from old Shanghai to the cityscape of Hong Kong at night (Figures 0-3 and 0-4), and of course, the plethora of pink clothed tables, covered with teacup settings and chopsticks, that fill the room.

As an aesthetically ‘hybrid’ space, Empire Garden is by no means a rarity in American Chinatowns; the natural flow of urban development in these districts (as enclaves which have grown within and around previously existing neighborhoods) cultivates ample opportunity for manifestations of this mish-mash, East-meets-West aesthetic. While the physical, material fabric of these Chinatown spaces often exemplifies the negotiation between Chinese immigrants and existing conditions within a neighborhood, academic examinations of Chinatowns in the U.S. rarely address these environments as a fundamental part of the community. A scholarly study beginning with the above description of Empire Garden, for example, might have continued with a discussion about the political history of Boston’s Chinatown and its fight against expansion of the Combat Zone, a sociological examination of restaurant clientele demographics, or an anthropological study of the traditions surrounding Saturday morning dim sum. In general, abstract representations of the living experience of Chinatown, whether they are statistics about Chinatown populations, analyses of its economics, conceptual discourses surrounding the social politics of the space, or even discussions about its depiction within popular culture, often become the main foundations of study.<sup>4</sup> I argue, however, that the tangible, and thus personally experienced, environment of these spaces as seen in Empire Garden should be discussed in tandem with those conceptual dimensions mentioned above in order to arise at a full

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<sup>4</sup> A few examples of these include *Renconstructing Chinatown* by Jan Lin, which frames the study of New York Chinatowns (in Manhattan and elsewhere) through its economic systems, *Picturing Chinatown* by Anthony W. Lee, which examines artistic and ‘documentary’ representations of San Francisco’s Chinatown in the early part of the twentieth century, and *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, by Mary Tin Yi Lui, which analyzes early Manhattan Chinatown through the lens of an infamous murder in 1909, and the subsequent discussions on gender and racial politics.

understanding of it. This inclination is, of course, supported by my past experiences studying and practicing architecture; fundamentally, I feel that the physical environments and sites of live experience (like the elaborately-styled banquet hall of Empire Garden) are as important as other conceptual factors in producing a true understanding of the community and its space. In this thesis then, I attempt to create more complete examination of Chinatowns by examining the material, aesthetic components of it – the tangible objects that provide the medium through which actual people come to know, reside, and live within a space – or what I will call, ‘Visual Chinatown.’ In the end, I hope to reframe Visual Chinatowns within the purview of the cultural, political and economic fabric of their neighborhoods.

My interest in these relations among the multiple dimensions of Chinatown (visual or otherwise) is, of course, framed by my own seemingly disjointed experience of the space. As a first-generation Chinese immigrant, I am both familiar with the actual physical locales of Chinatowns – in Boston, New York, and San Francisco – and the imagined entity of Chinatown as perpetuated through popular culture and its media artifacts – from Fu Manchu adventure stories to prime time television hits such as *The X-Files*. When I initially began to define this project, I struggled to find a way to connect my different knowledge of Chinatown together in a coherent package. I began by looking at filmic depictions of the space since they seemed so different than my personal experience of Chinatown, yet ironically were so known to me through my everyday, media-infused life. However, I came to realize that examining only these in isolation yielded a lopsided picture; it became easy to vilify filmmakers for creating stereotyped visions of an exotic location, and to discount the real-life relationship that Chinese-Americans, including myself, had with such depictions. Eventually, I became interested in creating a more complicated, nuanced vision about how Chinatown comes to be constructed and produced by

both outsiders and insiders to the community, not only through media artifacts, but also the material environment of the space itself (something which I regularly encountered in my everyday life, but did not usually engage with), as well as the dynamic interrelations among different groups of people within the spaces of Chinatown.

For the purposes of my argument then, Henri Lefebvre's holistic system of spatial analysis, as developed in *The Production of Space*, becomes particularly useful. By including multiple dimensions of spatial experience within the purview of study, he hopes to combat the biased use of only the conceptual, representational dimensions of it – discourses that are artificially separated from the living and functioning aspects of a place.<sup>5</sup> According to Lefebvre, this dimension of conceived space (also called “representations of space”) previously lay in the purview of scientists and mathematicians, who used Cartesian coordinates to create an idealized system to describe location or place<sup>6</sup>, and now also includes the way that urban planners and architects plan and discuss space.<sup>7</sup> Lefebvre generally critiques sole use of these conceptual systems of explanation (what he calls the “science of space”) since they do not take into account the tangible aspects that engage inhabitants and users of a space – the physical and social life of an environment. He states:

To date: work in this area [of the ‘science of space’] has produced either mere descriptions which never achieve analytical, much less theoretical, status, or else fragments and cross-sections of space. There are plenty of reasons for thinking that descriptions and cross-sections of this kind, though they may well supply inventories of what *exists in* space, or even generate a *discourse on* space, cannot give rise to a *knowledge of* a space.<sup>8</sup>

In trying to address these limitations of spatial study, Lefebvre proposes an analytical triad for

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5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 7.

6 Ibid., 1.

7 Ibid., 38.

8 Ibid., 7.

understanding space: the previously discussed dimension of *conceived space* (which he calls “representations of space”), *perceived space* (called “spatial practice”), and *lived space* (called “representational space”) (Lefebvre 38-39). Perceived space deals with the discernable nature of tangible space, what can be ‘read’ about a society (economic practices or otherwise) through the physical, material aspects of it (Lefebvre 38). On the other hand, lived space deals with how inhabitants and users experience their surroundings through “its associated images and symbols,” which, through the process of living, the “imagination seeks to change and appropriate.”<sup>9</sup> As Lefebvre states: “The ‘heart’ as *lived* is strangely different from the heart as *thought* or *perceived*.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, all three dimensions (conceived, perceived and lived) engage with different modes of spatial experience. Together, these categories not only yield greater knowledge of a space, but also are the means through which space is actively formed and produced by society: “(Social) space is a (social) product.”<sup>11</sup>

By thinking through Lefebvre’s categories of spatial understanding in relation to Chinatown, I finally was able to develop an understanding of what it was that I was trying to examine: the interwoven layers of activity, thought and action through which the space is produced. While Lefebvre’s tri-part system looks at different objects of study, it also requires different, comparative methods of analysis. In this thesis then, I do not set up one main case study (i.e. Boston’s Chinatown between 1990-2000) or one single method of analysis (i.e. the visual analysis of architectural façades), but instead create a narrative of spatial understanding that fluidly moves through those realms of perceived, conceived and lived Chinatowns. Lefebvre strictly warns against using this spatial triad purely as an “abstract ‘model’” though,

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9 Ibid., 38-39.

10 Ibid., 40.

11 Ibid., 26.

and thus divorcing it from the concrete nature of a space.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, while I look at different manifestations of Chinatown (ranging from the external signage found in Boston's Chinatown, to the imaginary concept of Chinatown as dangerous, dark enclave as perpetuated in the media), I ground this analysis by focusing on 'Visual Chinatown' itself, or those tangible objects which become the means through which people come to know, reside, and live within a space. By focusing on these material of the Chinatown environment (including the neon signs, the restaurant façades, dark alleyways, and colorful decorations) I hope to create a "connective tissue" (to borrow Umberto Eco's term from his essay, "Travels in Hyperreality") that bind together the three chapters of the thesis.

In the first chapter of the thesis then, I engage with *perceived* space and thus spatial practice by observing and reading an actual environment: Tyler Street, between Beach and Kneeland Streets in Boston's Chinatown. By visually reading the existing materials in the space for the economic, social and cultural practices of its users and inhabitants, I try to create a thick description of the space that transcends a single method of analysis. The next chapter of the thesis then engages with Lefebvre's idea of representations of space, or *conceived* space. While Lefebvre's definition of this mode primarily involves the official, formal representations of it, which fall under the scope of "scientist, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers,"<sup>13</sup> I use this category to describe the construction of Chinatown within popular culture, or how this space has been conceived as a visual environment by photographers, writers, and filmmakers. In particular, I engage with the idea of Chinatown as a tourist destination (a ubiquitous concept in the U.S. and elsewhere) in order to look at how the objects of Visual Chinatown are treated within the filmic context, and thus how the numerous cinematic depictions

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12 Ibid., 40.

13 Ibid., 38.

this space can be tied together. Finally, I return to the actual, physical spaces of Chinatown in chapter 3, in order to examine representational, or *lived*, space. I specifically focus on the ways in which the stereotypes of the space (created in the fictional representations of it) infuse themselves into real world of Chinatown, through Asian American film, and through the concrete, aesthetic environment of Boston's Visual Chinatown.

In the end, what I am trying to accomplish is the creation of a more comprehensive, inclusive vocabulary for describing how spaces are created in popular culture, by illustrating how both 'real' spaces and fictional depictions of a space are not just isolated incidents but instead exist within a system of intermingling cultural forces. Because this study engages with multiple dimensions of spatial production, my methods of analysis are not uniform; I draw from different fields including architecture, urban studies, sociology, economics, film studies, and performance studies in developing this examination of Chinatowns. Similarly, my objects of study in this thesis are difficult to categorize precisely; though there is a focus on the tangible, material objects of Visual Chinatown, this 'Chinatown' is not fixed. In some cases, the term may refer to the neighborhood located the South Cove of Boston as it stands today, though in some other cases, the name points to the imaginary conglomeration of underground tunnels that is invoked by reading a 1950s tourist book. My personal experience with the term 'Chinatown' is fluid – I can easily refer to Chicago's Chinese neighborhood, a location I have never visited, using the same name as I do for New York's Manhattan Chinatown, a neighborhood I have frequented since childhood – and thus, my employment of the term throughout this thesis is also fluid. All of this notational fumbling speaks to the 'messiness' of this project in general; the pulling apart and examining of these multiple strands of Chinatown life and production is not a clean process. When researching the particulars of Boston Chinatown's architecture, for example, I was often

faced with conflicting documentation on the architects, owners, dates, and locations of certain buildings and places. This untidiness reflects, of course, the dynamic interchange involved when creating a space, whether it is figuratively or literally. This thesis project then is an attempt to deal with all the tangled threads of data and meaning associated with the production of Chinatown. Ultimately, to borrow a term from theater director Rinde Eckert, I would like to make neat that “beautiful mess” of spatial construction, that is, in the end, based on my personal vision of Chinatown.



## CHINATOWN BASICS –

Before I embark on the examination of Chinatowns, it will be useful to provide some basic information on Chinatowns in the United States, their history, as well as some demographic information on the Chinese immigrants in this country. A thorough discussion of the history of Chinese and Asian immigration and historic Chinatowns can be found in Jan Lin's *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*, the informational website *Asian-Nation*, run by Sociologist C.N. Le, and the book *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965*, edited by Mary Waters & Reed Ueda. A summary of the information that can be found in the above sources is provided below.

### *Historic Chinatowns*

Chinese immigrants began arriving in the United States by the 1850s, during the last decades of the Qing dynasty.<sup>14</sup> Growing British control over China (after China's loss in the Opium War of 1839-1842) created greater economic hardships within the country, and pushed many Chinese laborers overseas.<sup>15</sup> The United States was particularly popular destination for the Chinese, due to the growing need for migrant workers in this country, as well as the discovery of gold in California in the 1840s. Many Chinese came to the United States in the decades following, hoping to get a piece of what they called "Gum Shan" (Mountain of Gold), the nickname that they gave to California.<sup>16</sup> Instead of striking it rich however, many of these sojourners were ultimately employed in thriving American industries in the U.S. such as "railroad construction, land reclamation projects, seasonal agriculture, fishing, canning, and

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14 Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 24.

15 C.N. Le, "The First Asian Americans" *Asian-Nation: The Landscape of Asian America.*, <http://www.asian-nation.org/first.shtml>.

16 Ibid.

urban factory work as cooks, domestics, and laundry workers.”<sup>17</sup> These immigrants primarily arrived from the Chinese port cities of Canton, Hong Kong and Macao, and, as a result, were from almost all Cantonese Chinese from the Southeastern province of Guangdong (also called Canton). For the most part, early Chinatowns were either located in frontier locations (for Chinese working in rural occupations, such as mining), or in “low-rent districts of central city areas near waterfront locations and transportation termini (such as bus and train stations) and in locales often near skid rows and red-light districts.”<sup>18</sup>

After completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 (which was one of the biggest employers of Chinese workers at the time), many unemployed Chinese returned to California and became subject to both racial attacks (which included numerous “anti-Chinese riots, lynchings, and murders,” the most well-known of which occurred in Rock Spring, Wyoming) as well as discriminatory legislation, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which “barred virtually all immigration from China and prevented all Chinese already in the U.S. from becoming U.S. citizens, even their American-born children.”<sup>19</sup> This law was periodically renewed for sixty years, and other legislation barring other Asian immigration (from Japan in 1907 and South Asia and the Pacific Islands in 1917) was instituted into the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Not only did this reduce the number of Chinese in the U.S. (from a high in 1890 of nearly 110,000 to around 60,000 in ensuing decades), but it also increased the ratio of men to women significantly (which was already extremely high, due to cultural pressures for women to stay behind in China) to an all-time high of 27 to 1 in 1980.<sup>21</sup> Jan Lin states:

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17 Lin, 24.

18 Ibid., 27.

19 Le “First Asian”.

20 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 224.

21 Lin, 26.

Chinese exclusion and the naturalization restriction effectively forestalled the development of permanent family-centered communities, and Chinatowns remained bachelor outposts well into the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Though few Chinese still came into the country (through the “paper son” route<sup>23</sup>) after 1882, they were nearly all men, and mostly still from the same geographic locale of Southeast China; thus, making Chinatowns into artificially homogeneous communities. While these Chinese districts were initially only located on the West Coast, eventually “there was a geographic dispersion of Chinese from western to Midwestern and eastern states during the early exclusion years from 1880 and 1910.”<sup>24</sup> This settlement pattern created a spread of Chinatowns located in many major American cities, which all had similar types of development because they were founded by the same groups of immigrants. In Boston’s Chinatown, for example, many of the earliest Chinese were themselves “survivors of the virulent Anti-Chinese Movement [of] the West Coast.”<sup>25</sup>

As isolated bachelor communities, these districts cultivated a particular type of environment, which included such ‘dangers’ as opium dens, brothels, and gang (or “tong”) affiliations. Ideas about these ‘exotic’ neighborhoods were further sensationalized through popular culture media including tourist photographs, travel guides, literature, and eventually film and television.<sup>26</sup> However, the nature of Chinatowns began to change following World War II, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was rescinded in 1943 (partially as a result of favorable

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22 Ibid., 26.

23 “Paper Sons” were Chinese immigrants who came in after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. According to the website “Paper Sons: Life In A Chinese Laundry In The Deep South,” the Chinese “created ways of illegal entry using false identities” to counteract the legal restrictions of the Exclusion Act. “Older Chinese who had worked in the U. S. and held merchant status...would...claim the existence of sons. They would then sell the immigration papers of...nonexistent sons to unrelated young men who wanted to come to America to seek their fortune on Gold Mountain. These imposters, called paper sons, would attempt to enter using their fake papers (gai chee). Inasmuch as the San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906 had destroyed immigration records, it was thus possible for many Chinese to claim such sons had been reported earlier.”

24 Lin, 27.

25 Todd Stevens, “Dinner at the Den: Chinese Restaurants in Boston 1900-1950” (research paper, Princeton University, 1998), 7

26 The propagation of this ‘imaginary’ Chinatown in popular culture is further discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis.

diplomatic relations with China because of a joint alliance against Japan) and the War Brides Act of 1946, which “allowed thousands of Chinese American veterans of World War II to bring wives and children to the United States as special nonquota entries;” as a result, “almost 90 percent of Chinese immigrants admitted to the United States from 1947 to 1953 were women.”<sup>27</sup>

### *The Chinese Community Today*

In 1965, the Immigration & Nationality Act dramatically shifted the Chinese community in the United States, since it reversed many of the restrictive immigration covenants that existed before that time, including the National Origins immigration system of 1924.<sup>28</sup> In general, this legislation and previous patterns of immigration has created a fractured Chinese American community, especially in terms of Chinatowns. Most of the Chinese who arrived before 1965, for example, grew up in Chinatowns and are of the same geographic stock as previous immigrants. However, many of these individuals have since moved away from these ethnic enclaves because of cultural and economic assimilation, and the resulting greater economic prospects elsewhere. Additionally, the cultural (in terms of geographic origin) and social diversity of Chinese immigrants has increased significantly since 1965. A significant number of Chinese immigrants since 1965 (including groups from the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and the Chinese-descended Taiwanese) have come to the U.S. through student or professional (at least for the latter two locations) visas. However, a large percentage of PRC (People’s Republic of China) immigrants are also from lower classes; more than a quarter have

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<sup>27</sup> Lin, 27.

<sup>28</sup> C.N. Le, " The 1965 Immigration Act " Asian-Nation: The Landscape of Asian America, <http://www.asian-nation.org/1965-immigration-act.shtml>>.

had less than a high school education.<sup>29</sup> Thus, after 1965, the Chinese community in the U.S. became increasingly bimodal - the “uptown” Chinese, who are “professionals and other affluent immigrants who reside in suburban towns, and... integrated into mainstream society” versus the “downtown” Chinese, who “are predominantly working-class immigrants who are trapped in poverty-stricken urban ghettos.”<sup>30</sup> However, while the current residents of Chinatowns are predominantly “downtown” Chinese, these neighborhoods (which almost died out by the early 1960s due to lack of population) have been revitalized since 1965 by capital and new businesses created by new Hong Kong and Taiwanese Chinese immigrants.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the number of non-Chinese Asian immigrants (including the Koreans, the Japanese, the Vietnamese, who are the largest refugee group to have ever come to the U.S., and other Southeast Asians) has also increased dramatically since 1965, and have also infused Chinatowns in the U.S.. Thus, any conversation about the insider/outsider dynamic of Chinatowns needs to go beyond a simple understanding of Chinese or not-Chinese; the complicated patterns of Asian immigration in the U.S. creates a complex gradation within the Chinatown community.

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29 Xiao-huang Yin "China: People's Republic of China," in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 346.

30 Yin, 356.

31 Jennifer Holdaway "China: Outside the People's Republic of China," in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 355.



## CHAPTER I -

*Perceived Space: Deciphering Tyler Street in Boston's Chinatown*

An international student friend of mine, who has been living in Boston for four years, told me once that she felt at home everywhere in the city except in Chinatown. There, she felt like a complete tourist. This sense of foreign-ness that alienated her is something not limited to her experience. I, too, even as a Chinese-American feel as if there is something fundamentally confusing about Boston Chinatown and Chinatowns in general, something essentially chaotic about the visual landscape. Maybe it is the busy-ness of the facades, the abundance of signs, the unfamiliar store-types, which make some people feel as if they cannot easily navigate the landscape. Even though there are numerous bilingual signs, one gets the sense that something is lost in the translation. If one reads Chinese (which I unfortunately do not) there are still certain cultural conventions or bodies of knowledge about the community that one might need in order to truly understand what the signs are saying.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the architecture of North American Chinatowns often seems difficult to fully comprehend as compared to other neighborhoods. In many of the older Chinatowns (such as Boston and New York, which were both founded in the late 1800s), initial conditions of immigration often led to over-development of crowded low-rent areas and generally created a sense of haphazardness within the visual landscape. In one Chinatown storefront, for example, there may be multiple shops and residences which may or may not be clearly labeled. In Boston's Chinatown, this density is heightened by the conversion of old brick row residences into commercial space, as well as by the presence of tight winding streets which also make it difficult to find one's way around.

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<sup>32</sup> This might include knowledge about benevolent and family associations, and other organizations (like Chinese gangs called tongs), which are sometimes present in Chinatowns. These have certainly affected the ways in which the society is run. Lack of knowledge about these relationships as well as some Chinese traditions – the ways in which things are named in Chinese culture according to auspicious signs and numbers, for example – certainly conspire to make it difficult for even a Chinese-reader to fully comprehend all the signs or to 'read' Chinatown.

How do residents make their way through such a seemingly unordered and chaotic space? How do they ‘read’ Chinatown? One might assume that residents do not feel the same sense of disorientation and haphazardness that visitors do while looking at the neighborhood. In the urban planning study, *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch speaks of the imageability, or the legibility, of an urban area. He states:

There may be little in the real object that is ordered or remarkable, and yet its mental picture has gained identity and organization through long familiarity. One man may find objects easily on what seems to anyone else to be a totally disordered work table.<sup>33</sup>

This familiar mental image, Lynch says, results from the process of recognizing the parts of a space and organizing these into a personally recognizable and coherent pattern.<sup>34</sup> Even with the addition of new and unfamiliar pieces, people organize these within an already constructed system or stereotype about a space. In this way, observers of all spaces play active roles in *perceiving* the world and thus, developing the image.<sup>35</sup> In this discussion, Lynch uses perception of the space in order to speak about how people navigate through a neighborhood. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre also engages this idea of perception, especially in regard to his conceptual triad of perceived-conceived-lived space. Perceived space, or what Lefebvre calls “spatial practice,” can be directly sensed or perceived through the material, empirical objects in the space.<sup>36</sup> Using this understanding of perception then, we may consider the process of reading Chinatown beyond its ability to help people navigate through a space – as a process, it may be used to uncover something else: “From the analytic standpoint,” Lefebvre states, “the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space.”<sup>37</sup> In his explication of Lefebvre’s spatial triad, Tim Rogers additionally states that perceived space can be understood

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33 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 6.

34 Ibid., 3.

35 Ibid., 6.

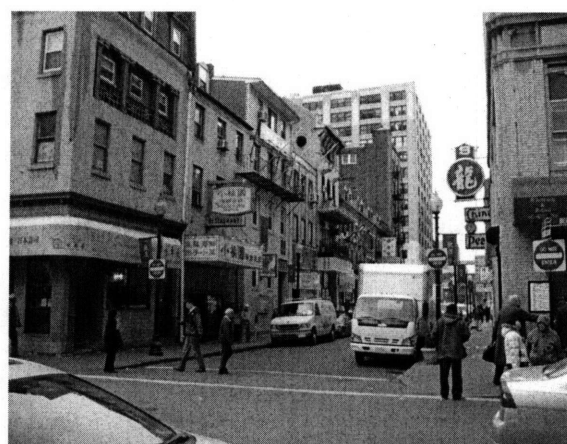
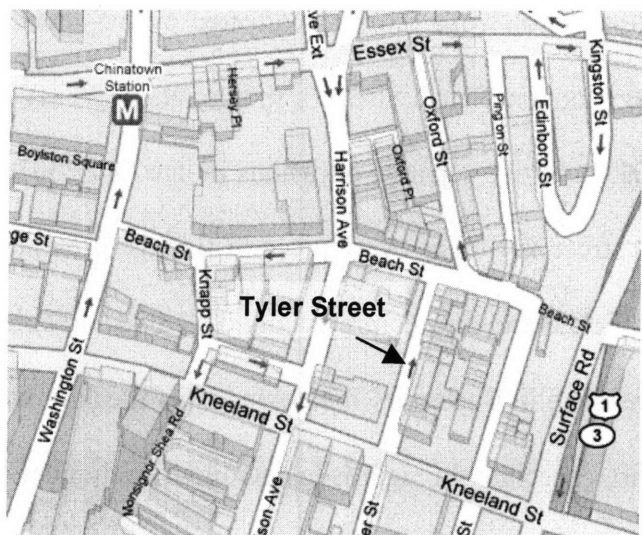
36 Tim B. Rogers, “Henri Lefebvre, Space and Folklore,” *Ethnologies* 24, no. 1 (2002): 29.

37 Lefebvre, 38.



as “both the medium and the outcome of human activity, behaviour and experience” – or in other words, spatial practices.<sup>38</sup> Perceiving, then, is a process of understanding not only how spatial practice “masters and appropriates” a space, but also how spatial practice actually produces and “secretes” a space.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of Chinatown, or specifically Boston's Chinatown then, how can perceived space be understood? What spatial practices can be derived from deciphering its space? In this chapter, I test this theory of discernability by observing a Boston Chinatown space and deciphering it. This process is two-fold: first, I look at a space for its imageability, particularly the ways in which its elements can be put into a larger system of organization: a recognizable and coherent pattern. Then, I read the space for its spatial practice, paying particular attention to the ways in which these practices both appropriate and secrete the physical, material, tangible elements of this space.



**Figure 1-1 (right).** Map of Chinatown (from Google Maps)

**Figure 1-2 (left).** Intersection of Tyler Street and Beach Street.

38 Rogers, 29.

39 Lefebvre, 38.

For this case study, I focus on one of the most heavily trafficked blocks in Boston, Tyler Street between Beach Street and Kneeland Street (Figure 1-1). Though the first Chinese settlements in Boston Chinatown were on Harrison Avenue and Beach Street (in the 1870s), these expanded South along Tyler Street after World War I. This development was most likely a response to the construction of the Boston Elevated Railway lines built on both Harrison and Beach from 1899-1941, which overshadowed commercial development in these areas.<sup>40</sup> Tyler Street thus became an important commercial district in Boston's Chinatown, housing most of the restaurants in the neighborhood. Unlike businesses on some other streets, which mostly catered to local residents, restaurants on this street had mixed clientele, serving both Chinese and non-Chinese, inhabitants and visitors. Because of this mixed audience, Tyler Street may be considered a good site through which to examine the perception of the space, namely the imageability of the neighborhood (as experienced by inhabitants) and decipherability of the space (as experienced by visitors) of Boston's Chinatown.

My method of analysis relies on several stages of work. First, I collected on-the-street, ground observations of Tyler Street between Kneeland and Beach Street (a span of about 200 ft), which I recorded using photographs and video taken on two separate occasions in late Fall 2007. My goal was to document every business on the street as well as every piece of signage present. Because of Tyler Street's history as a heavily trafficked and thus commercially developed area, it contains a greater number of signs than seen elsewhere in Boston's Chinatown. This breakdown entailed a certain amount of selectivity on my part, especially in regards to deciding which pieces of text to categorize as signage; there was a high degree of other visual paper text in the area such as meeting postings, travel agency advertisements, and restaurant reviews. In addition, my

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40 Arthur Krim, "Narrative History: Chinatown-South Cove, Boston, Massachusetts," (Boston Landmarks Commission paper, course pack for Boston's Ethnic Neighborhoods, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.) 18.

analysis of this space also focuses on other physical material manifestations of spatial practice (such as sidewalks or doorways, etc.). By subjecting all the organizations to the same categories, I counteracted my subjectivity to at least some degree.

For the second part of my analysis, I cross-referenced my present day observations of Tyler Street with archival photos of Boston's Chinatown from the Chinese Historical Society of New England (all of which were published in the 2008 book, *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*).<sup>41</sup> The process of drawing conclusions about Chinatown's decipherability from these archival photos also entailed a high degree of subjectivity, on both my part and that of the original photographers (while I was focused on signs, the photographers were often primarily documenting other events such as festivals, etc.). One big issue I had with using the photographs was that they did not provide an even and accurate sweep of the street. For example, while there were many relevant photographs of signage from the 1920s, there were fewer from the 1930s and 1940s, and again an excess of images from the 1950s. Additionally, there were not enough archival photographs of Tyler Street itself, and thus I referred to photographs from other parts of Boston's Chinatown in order to draw comparisons across time. However, because I consider this observational process in terms of Lynch's concept of imageability, or more specifically the practical ability to look at a space and place its individual parts into a coherent pattern of already known conventions, using archival photos in this way seemed appropriate. By looking at select photographs, I could establish a personal and familiar organizational system in which to categorize my current observations of the street. Furthermore, Lynch also speaks of imageability (or patterns for navigation) as something which is formed by the mental image held by the observers of a space. This analysis then, might be considered my mental image of Tyler Street

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<sup>41</sup> All of the archival photos seen this thesis have been borrowed from Wing-kai To and Chinese Historical Society of New England. *Chinese in Boston, 1870-1965, Images of America: Massachusetts* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008).

based on what things stand out to me through my personal experience of observing the area.

In the last part of my analysis, I supplement my research finding with conversations with former residents in Chinatown, information from local newspaper articles and other resources (including an architectural history of Chinatown released by the Boston Landmarks Commission), and my personal understanding of Chinese immigrant culture in the U.S.. This process of compiling and deciding the relevance of information about the space was of course highly interpretive. However, in trying to provide a “thick description” of the space, it became impossible to avoid this pitfall, something which is described by Clifford Geertz. He states:

In finished anthropological writings, including those collected here, this fact—that what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to—is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea of whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined.<sup>42</sup>

If we are to take Lefebvre’s idea that space itself is actively constructed and produced, just as in Geertz’s understanding of culture, then it is impossible to forgo interpretive steps in trying to explain a particular space. In this case, I am the person who is observing and analyzing the space and bringing my own interpretive lenses to the discussion. This fact goes along with Lefebvre’s idea of perception: I sense the space through things that are materially available to me (in this case, I experience the signage and architecture present while walking through the space). Therefore, I do not claim an objective study of the space; instead, my analysis and argument relies on my own perspective as a second-generation Chinese immigrant. The strength of this study does not lie in rigorous empirical research then, but rather my personal familiarity with Chinese immigrant culture and how it operates, as absorbed through my nearly three decades of living inside and as a member of the community.

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42 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 2000 ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 9.

My general observations of Tyler Street are laid out below in “Observing the Space” and is divided into two categories: signage and architecture. The conclusions that I draw about the spatial practice of Chinatown, as read from these observations, are described in the later section entitled “Deciphering the Space.”

### *Observing the Space*

The block of Tyler Street between Kneeland and Beach Street spans about 200 feet. It is a one lane, one-way street with space on either side for parking (Figure 1-2). It contains forty-two businesses, which include restaurants, book and gift shops, travel agencies, and beauty parlors. There are also three community organizations on the street, which are located on the upper floors of the street, rather than the ground level like many of the other businesses. The groups that make up the largest percentage of the street include restaurants (10 of 42), and beauty shops (8 of 42). My observational notes on this block of Tyler Street between Kneeland and Beach (which I shall hereafter refer to only as “Tyler Street”) are split into two categories: Signage Observations, and Architecture Observations.

#### *Signage Observations*

The proliferation of signs on the street creates a seemingly disordered yet hierarchical system of signage that can be analyzed independently of the architecture. In looking at the street, I noticed not only the number of signs but also the variety. These include flat or box signs (often illuminated from behind, Figure 1-3), raised letters (usually put on a building facade itself, Figure 1-4), sticker text on windows (Figure 1-5), neon signs (which feature more generic information such as “OPEN” or are advertisements for particular brands such as TsingTao Beer, Figure 1-6), and cloth signs (including awnings and banners, Figure 1-7). In restaurants, these



**Figure 1-3 (left).** New Lucky House Seafood Restaurant with an illuminated white box sign with red and green text above windows.



**Figure 1-4 (right).** Peach Farm Restaurant with raised letters on the façade.



**Figure 1-5 (left).** Shabu Zen Restaurant with sticker text on window reading "Japanese Hot Pot."



**Figure 1-6 (right).** Window of Peach Farm Restaurant at night with neon signs.



**Figure 1-7 (left).** Suishaya Restaurant with cloth awning.

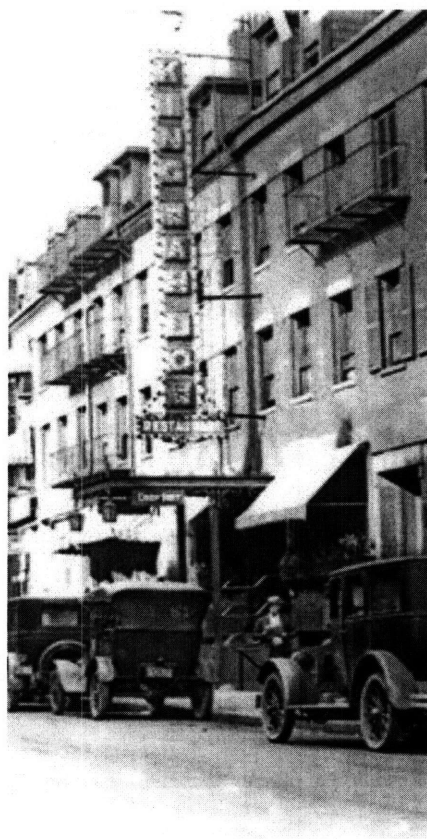


**Figure 1-8 (right).** Sign for Big Fish Seafood Restaurant which hangs perpendicularly from façade.

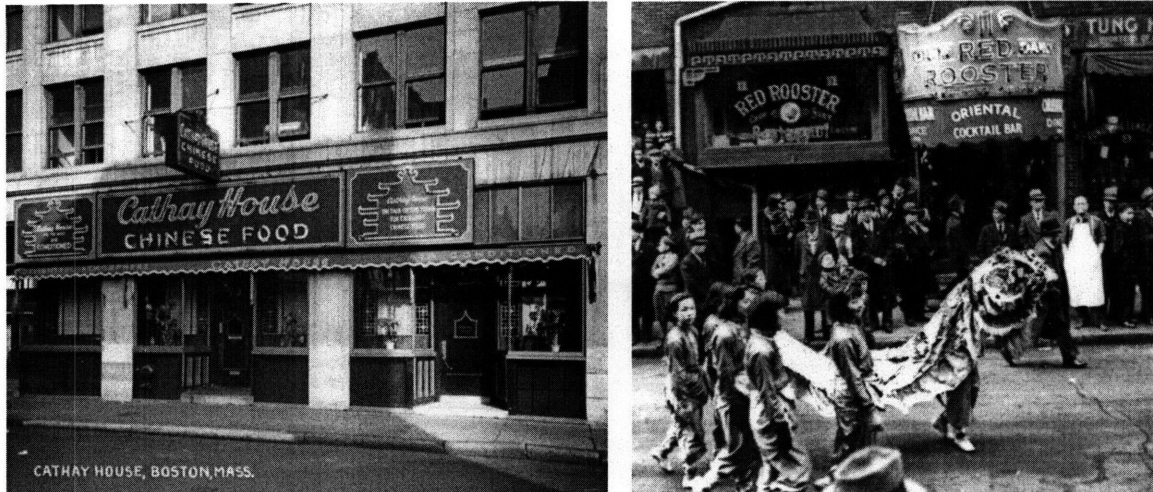


**Figure 1-9 (left).** Connie's Beauty Center (bottom left) uses two simple box signs.

**Figure 1-10 (right).** A typical black wooden sign with gold text for the Quong Wah Lun & Co. from the 1910s (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*).



**Figure 1-11 (left).** **Figure 1-12 (right).** Lightbulb and Neon signage from 1920s Tyler Street (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*)



**Figure 1-13 (left). Figure 1-14 (right).** Mixed signage from the Cathay House Restaurant in 1946 and Red Rooster Restaurant in 1938 (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*).

signage types usually appear in close proximity to one another, especially for those that serve Chinese food. However, the two non-Chinese food restaurants on Tyler Street (including Shabu-Zen and Suishaya, which serve Japanese Hot Pot and Korean-Japanese food, respectively) have simpler, cleaner façades with less signage (compare the exterior of Suishaya in Figure 1-7 with Peach Farm in Figure 1-4, which serves Chinese Cantonese cuisine). For the most part, the box signs often hang perpendicularly from the building façades (Figure 1-8). Other non-restaurant businesses, such as beauty and gift shops, often use only one or two flat or box signs (which may or may not be illuminated) (Figure 1-9). Trends in restaurant signage can be identified through analysis of the archival photographs of Boston's Chinatown. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (through the 1910s), flat, painted wooden signs were typically used for restaurants (Figure 1-10). However, in the 1920s, lighted bulb signage became more popular, and from the 1930s onward, additional types of signage were added such as awnings and neon signs. (Figures 1-11 to 1-14).<sup>43</sup> Historically, other businesses such as grocery stores or services typically used a minimal

<sup>43</sup> It is likely that other neighborhoods in Boston have seen the same progression from wooden, painted signs, to lighted bulb signs, to neon signs and finally to the other forms of signage mentioned above. However, I believe that the particularities of Chinatown, – its economic development, use of multiple language systems, and



number of signs of a single type, moving from flat painted signs in the early part of the century to box signs placed on the façade (Refer back to Figures 1-10 and Figure 1-9).

In terms of the actual text of the signage, contemporary businesses on Tyler Street usually have both Chinese and English names. Specifically, Chinese restaurants on the street have translated English names (i.e. Peach Farm, China Pearl, Ocean Wealth), whereas non-Chinese restaurants have phonetically spelled Asian names (i.e. Shabu-Zen, Suishaya Restaurant). Additionally, other types of businesses have a mixture of phonetic names (i.e. Chung Wah Hong Market, Tat On Auto Supply) as well as English names (i.e. Double Dragon Provisions, Great Wall Gift Shop). This split in naming is partially due to the fact that some businesses are named after their proprietors who either still use their Chinese names (such as Hung Yip Inc., which is a realty office), or their English names (including Judy's Hair and Beauty Gallery, and Connie's Beauty Center)<sup>44</sup>. Historically, this change from phonetically spelled Chinese restaurant names (such as the Hong Far Low Restaurant, one of the earliest registered Chinese commercial locations in Boston in 1896) to mostly translated names (such as Cathay House and Red Rooster Restaurant, refer back to Figures 1-13 and 1-14) occurred throughout the 1920s to 1950s. Other types of businesses such as groceries or auto supplies followed a similar trend, though their conversion to English names has occurred more recently in the 1960s and 70s.

In addition the restaurant name, the text of present-day signage also includes a description of the food; whether it be through types of ingredients (i.e. advertising Lobster and

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cultural traditions, discussed later – yield a particular aesthetic and hierarchy (described in this section) that is unique to the space.

<sup>44</sup> Many long-time Chinese immigrants have both a Chinese and an English name; this is either the result of previously living in an area where this was general practice (such as Hong Kong, which was a British colony until 1997), or assuming an anglicized name after immigrating to the U.S.. Newer immigrants arriving straight from the PRC (People's Republic of China) often do not have English names however.



**Figure 1-15 (left).** China Pearl Restaurant, which features the address number on its sign (No. 9).

**Figure 1-16 (right).** Hon Lon Doo Restaurant, which also features No. 9 on its sign in 1955 (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*).

Scallop specials or announcing that it is a Seafood Restaurant), or the type of national cuisine for non-Chinese restaurants (i.e. “Korean Cuisine and Japanese Sushi,” or “Japanese Hot Pot”). This naming convention has shifted from how Chinese restaurants advertised themselves historically; up until the 1970s, it appears that Chinatown restaurants were explicit about the fact that they were selling “Chinese Food” or were a “Chinese Restaurant.” The phrase “Chop Suey” (an invented American-Chinese food dish popular in the early twentieth century) was most often used in the 1920s, and still occasionally showed up on signs up until the 1960s. Other phrases present in signage in the period of 1930s –1960s included “Oriental Cocktail Bar,” and “Dine and Dance.” Additionally, these historic signs prominently featured the addresses as well as the names of the restaurants. This trend seems to be replaced somewhat by the addition of phone numbers in present-day signage, except for China Pearl Restaurant, which still has a number “9” featured in its neon sign (Figure 1-15, something which can also be seen in the 1950s sign of the same location, Figure 1-16). About half of the businesses on the street (20 of 42) include phone

numbers in the signage; the restaurants have about the same incidence of this numbering as other businesses. The archival photos do not show any phone number listings before the 1960s however, until understandably the phrase “Take-Out” began to show up on signs as well.

Languages used in Tyler Street’s present-day signage is mixed. In the past, signs used only Chinese, only English, or both languages. However, in present-day Boston Chinatown, other Asian languages appear in signs alongside Chinese, which include Vietnamese and Korean. In particular, Lily Beauty Salon has Chinese, English and Vietnamese on its sign (Figure 1-17), and Suishaya Restaurant has Korean, Chinese and English on its awning (refer back to Figure 1-7). Although some organizations and businesses on the street have Chinese-only language signs, these are usually supplemented by English signs placed elsewhere (two exceptions include the Ng Family Association and the “Trendy” Chinese Café, both of which do not use English signage<sup>45</sup>, Figure 1-18).



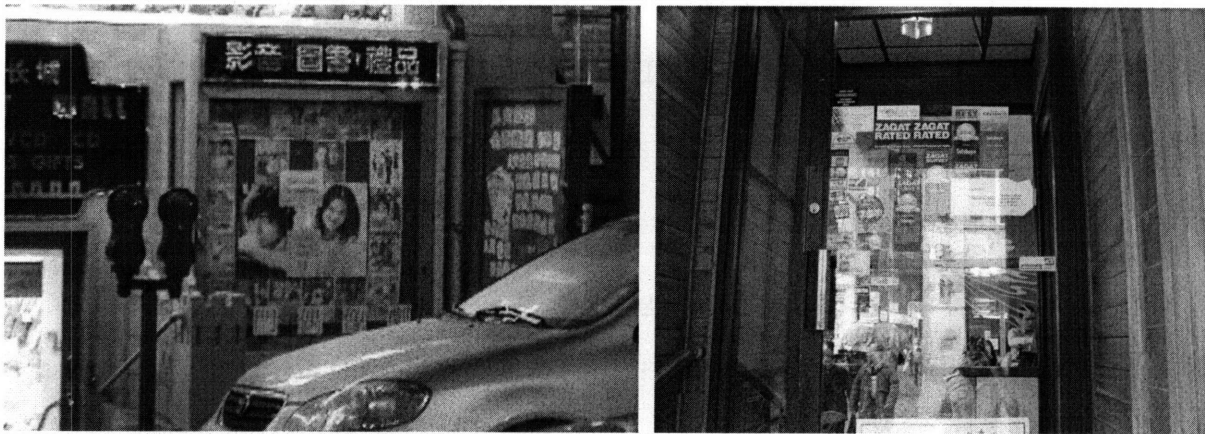
**Figure 1-17 (left).** The Lily Beauty Salon signage features Vietnamese, English and Chinese.

**Figure 1-18 (right).** The “Trendy” Chinese Café (rough translation) uses only Chinese signage for its name (though it clearly also uses the English sign “OPEN”).

Besides signs, there are many other kinds of textual materials on Tyler Street that add to the texture of the street. These include signs unaffiliated with the space, like political campaign signs (which often hang in the windows of businesses), as well as signs affiliated with businesses

<sup>45</sup> This is roughly the English translation for the name of café.

that may be located apart from the business façade (i.e. the posting boxes for community organizations, real estate listings, and special travel deals for travel agencies – Figure 1-19) or signs that may be located in the windows or entrances of the businesses themselves (small movie posters in video store windows, and dinner specials listing, employment advertisement signs, and Zagats and other press clipping in restaurant windows or doors – Figure 1-20).



**Figure 1-19 (left).** Posting box for Great Wall CD and Gift shop.

**Figure 1-20 (right).** Door of Suishaya Restaurant with Zagat and other food ratings.

### *Architectural Observations*

While signage is very prominent within the space, the buildings and construction of the street hard to discern from the ground level. The presence of 3-D signage (creating cantilevered roofs structures as can be seen back in Figures 1-3 and 1-4) obscures what the actual building behind looks like. However, through observing the upper floors of the buildings (i.e. the second floor or above; most of the buildings on the street are, at most, three or four stories), it becomes clear that many of the buildings on the street are old brick row residential buildings. Historic photographs (from the 1920s in Figure 1-21 to placed next to an image of same area today, Figure 1-22) and information from the Boston Landmarks Commission confirm that two large sections of brick row housing (12-22 Tyler Street and 23-27 Tyler Street) have remained on the street since their



**Figure 1-21 (left).** Tyler Street in the 1920s (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*).

**Figure 1-22 (right).** Tyler Street today.

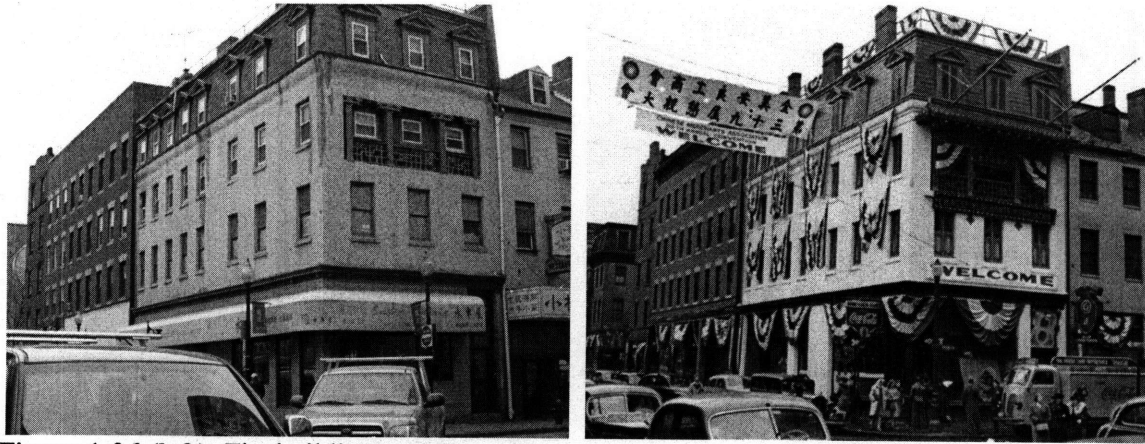


**Figure 1-23 (left).** Glimpses of the original granite steps and entrances are visible behind the banner of Pearl Villa Restaurant.

**Figure 1-24 (right).** Marble cladding is added to the façade of the Ocean Wealth Restaurant.



**Figure 1-25.** A balcony and projected metal awning have been added to the exterior of Big Fish Seafood Restaurant.



**Figure 1-26 (left).** The building on 2 Tyler Street today.

**Figure 1-27 (right).** The Chinese Merchants Association building in 1943.



**Figure 1-28.** The Goon Shee-Lee Association Building at 10 Tyler Street.

construction in 1840-1844.<sup>46</sup> The businesses in these buildings have for the most part retained the original granite steps and recessed entrances (Figure 1-23), adding only signage (which often projects from the façade and oftentimes seems to change the shape of the building elevation), or refacing the façade with other materials (like yellow brick stucco, granite, or marble – Figure 1-24), or adding small architectural elements (such as a fake projecting roof as in Shabu-Zen, or a

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<sup>46</sup> Krim, 12, 18.

balcony as in Big Fish Seafood Restaurant – Figure 1-25). The use of these old brick row houses and the original entrances generally creates a cramped feeling; there are often several businesses per brick row unit, some which are a half-level up, and others which are a half-level down (refer back to Figure 1-23). Other buildings that have remained since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century include the structures on the East and West corners of the Tyler Street/Beach Street intersection. This includes the notable 2 Tyler Street, a building originally remodeled in 1919 from an existing tenement house, complete with a traditional Chinese recessed balcony on the third floor, into the Chinese Merchants Association Building (which later moved to 20 Hudson Street in Chinatown in 1951) (Figure 1-26 and 1-27). Another prominent building on the street is the Goon Shee-Lee Association Building at 10 Tyler Street built in 1928 with a distinctively Chinese design, which includes another Chinese balcony, two tiled roofs with upturned corners, and a red and green color scheme (Figure 1-28). For the most part, the street has remained architecturally the same for over 80 years. One significant difference between the 1920s streetscape and present-day Tyler Street, however, is the absence of several brick row houses on the Western side of the street, which were torn down in the 1930s to make way for a privately owned parking lot.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, the effect of the space suggests that signage dominates over architecture on Tyler Street. Rather than being merely reference points to storefronts or buildings, the signage seems to comprise the actual material substance of the landscape. In their postmodern architectural study, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, Robert Venturi and his collaborators speak about the power of the sign in 1970s Las Vegas and the “contrast between types of orders on the Strip”.<sup>48</sup> While this statement refers primarily to the particular locale of Las Vegas, this understanding can also be applied to present day Tyler Street.

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47 Tunney Lee, e-mail message to author, May 4, 2008.

48 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*, revised ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 20.

In this case, we see two orders: the subverted, but obvious visual order of the street and the dominant, but chaotic visual order of the signs. The signage on Tyler Street not only becomes more important than the architecture, but they actually replace it in terms of visual, and thus perceived significance: “it is an architecture of communication over space”.<sup>49</sup> On Tyler Street then, it seems that “the sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at back, a modest necessity;” thus it is the signs, “through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the megatexture”.<sup>50</sup>

### *Deciphering the Space*

How would one go about deciphering the space described above? One of the obvious ways of thinking about reading the space entails the search for a good restaurant. This is not a trivial exercise; a quick look at Boston tourist guides illustrates that they position Chinatown as a place to visit only if one is looking for weekend dim sum or a seafood feast. If this is the primary motive for visiting Boston’s Chinatown then, it seems reasonable to decipher the space through this perspective. Examination of Tyler Street through the lens of culinary consumerism engages with Lefebvre’s idea of perceived space, in that it elucidates the “production and reproduction [of a society] and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation.” In his discussion of these two modes, Lefebvre categorizes *production* as “the division of labour and its organization in the form of hierarchical social functions,” and *reproduction* as the “bio-physiological relations between the sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family.” While choosing restaurants may relate more

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49 Ibid., 8.

50 Ibid., 13.



closely to the economic system of production than the social forces of reproduction in Chinatown, Lefebvre speaks of how these two modes are related through a third category: “the reproduction of the social relations of production – that is, of those relations which are constitutive of capitalism and which are increasingly (and increasingly effectively) sought and imposed as such.”<sup>51</sup> In this case then, understanding how inhabitants and visitors of Chinatown position themselves within this system of capitalist interaction (as exemplified by the act of dining out) might make sense. How do visitors (and residents) go through the process of choosing which businesses and restaurants to frequent?

Potential audience and competition between businesses seem to influence the number and type of signs seen on Tyler Street. Signs that cater to residents of the neighborhood or members of the community (like those for beauty shops) will be different from signs that attempt to reach out to visitors or tourists (like those for restaurants). As mentioned in the section “Chinatown Basics”, the fracturing of the Chinese community in the U.S. through immigration law (particularly the Immigration Act of 1965) created multiple groups of Chinese, who may either be considered insiders or outsiders to the Chinatown space, even though they do not live in the neighborhood. For many Chinese living elsewhere, Chinatown still serves as an economic and cultural center, either for logistical reasons (i.e. availability of Chinese groceries that are difficult to get elsewhere), or because of a cultural affiliation with the organizations and community there. For example, Chinese professionals living in the suburbs may still continue to visit Chinatown because they feel more comfortable dealing in Chinese, rather than English, with service professionals in auto shops or beauty salons.

In terms the physical environment of Tyler Street, the existence of these multiple audiences influences the system of signage present. In general, non-restaurant businesses on the

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51 Lefebvre, 32-33.

street (including realty shops, travel agencies, and beauty salons) appear to cater to a more limited crowd (because of their Chinese-speaking staff and familiarity with specifically Chinese customs, or, in the case of the beauty salons, hair and trends), and therefore rely more on word of mouth than the storefront and signage. However, restaurants on the street seem to cater to a mixed audience of both residents and visitors, both Chinese and non-Chinese, something that seems to be confirmed by the bilingual signs and menus. Thus, signage becomes important for restaurants, since visitors unfamiliar with the neighborhood often make their decision about which restaurants to frequent based on what it looks like. Because there are ten restaurants on this block of Tyler Street, external advertisement becomes extremely vital for distinguishing themselves from one another.

For the most part, restaurants take full advantage of all the advertisement materials available to them, which include the large, prominent signs (box and illuminated signs, raised letters, awnings and banners), as well as smaller textual materials placed in the windows or entrances (like restaurant reviews, Zagats ratings, press clippings, etc.). Of course, all these textual indicators all have different functions – some marking off the exotic (i.e. the “Oriental” iconography or font as seen in the China Pearl Restaurant sign in Figure 1-15), some indicating the conditions inside (i.e. a formal or casual dining atmosphere), and some that appeal to external references known by even outsiders to the community (i.e. Zagats or Best-of-Boston ratings announcements).

The signage used for restaurants is not only abundant but architectural as well, meaning that it is three-dimensional and adds to the actual built structure of the buildings. This signage includes box signs that project perpendicularly from the façades, creating attached roofs and canopies to entrances (refer back to Figure 1-25 for an example). Because of its architectural

qualities, this signage becomes visible from a distance and fulfills the general need to advertise to moving pedestrians. In the case of Tyler Street, the presence of the elevated train on Beach Street from 1899-1941 provoked this effect; restaurateurs responded to the presence of these trains by creating large, prominent exterior signage.<sup>52</sup> The existence of the elevated train also influenced the text of the signage; as mentioned previously, many featured address numbers that were as large as, or in some cases larger than, the name of the restaurant itself. These numbers often allowed visitors to identify the restaurant, even from afar, at a time when restaurants still had phonetically spelled Chinese names which might have been difficult for visitors to remember (i.e. China Pearl Restaurant, which was previously called Hon Loy Doo, is still often referred to Number 9 Restaurant) (Stevens 34). Present-day signage on Tyler Street has maintained the size and prominence of the older signage, even though the elevated train is no longer there. In many cases, the address numbers have become less prominent than the names (though they have been replaced somewhat by phone numbers), perhaps because these are now easier for non-Chinese speakers and readers to remember since they are translated into English.

In general, the proliferation of different types of cuisine on Tyler Street (and elsewhere – there are also Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Taiwanese restaurants in Boston’s Chinatown) speaks to the growth of the entire Asian population in the United States after the 1965 Immigration & Nationality Act. A 2007 Boston Globe article states that the beginning of this “Pan-Asian smorgasbord” in Chinatown can be traced to the 1980s, “when newly arrived Vietnamese immigrants rented storefronts that had [previously] been part of the Combat Zone” of Boston for the purposes of opening restaurants and other services businesses.<sup>53</sup> In the informational website *Asian Nation*, C.N. Le writes, the “unprecedented numbers of immigrants from Asia [since 1965,

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<sup>52</sup> Stevens, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Schweitzer, “A fare change in Chinatown – Restaurants add Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese items,” *The Boston Globe*, August 6, 2007, Third edition.

has]... led to many demographic, economic, and cultural shifts in the Asian American community and mainstream American society in general... Among other consequences, their presence has contributed to the revitalization (as well as the new development) of many Asian enclaves in several major metropolitan areas in the U.S..”<sup>54</sup> It is important to note, however, that in Boston’s Chinatown, “the vast majority of owners of restaurants have Chinese roots”.<sup>55</sup> which is a result of other immigration patterns in Asia itself. These restaurateurs, who might still be from Vietnam or Malaysia, are likely descendants of the many Chinese immigrants who have been spreading out across Southeast Asia for decades, and who thus still maintain familiarity with Chinese language and customs. Thus, while Chinatown has become more multi-national, it still maintains its original Chinese influence.

In addition, both Shabu-Zen and Suishaya Restaurants (which serve Japanese Hot Pot and Japanese/Korean respectively) seem to reflect the influence of newer Asian middle-class immigrants who have arrived in the post-1965 era. Whereas the Chinese restaurants on the street (that serve for the most part either Cantonese or Taishanese Seafood, which reflect of the early historical immigrant flows from Southern China) have been around for a longer time and seem to reflect the tastes of the long time Chinatown residents<sup>56</sup>, the non-Chinese restaurants seems to reflect the trends in décor and aesthetics (with their “streamlined and modern look”) that can currently be seen in Asian cities, especially Hong Kong and more newly transformed locations such as Shanghai or Beijing.<sup>57</sup> The increase in cuisines in Boston’s Chinatown also comes as a result of the expanded Asian and American palate, that is “increasingly keen to a broader

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54 Le, “1965”.

55 Schweitzer “A fare change.”

56 A PRC (People’s Republic of China) colleague of mine recently told me that Boston’s Chinatown looks, for the most part, like 1980s China – something drastically different from how China appears currently; greater economic prosperity at-large has almost completely transformed the physical landscape China in the last few years.

57 Tunney Lee. “Chinatown History basics” (class lecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MA, November, 2000).

array...[of different national] foods” due to globalization both in the U.S. and abroad.<sup>58</sup>

The lack of change in architecture reveals information about the building use as well as land ownership within the Boston Chinatown community. As mentioned earlier, many of the buildings on Tyler Street have architecturally remained the same since the early twentieth century. This trend is certainly not particular to Chinatowns; numerous residential neighborhoods in the Boston have retained the old brick row housing of the 1800s including the South End and Beacon Hill. However, because this block on Tyler Street is commercial, this might seem to be an oddity except that many residents and other local community organizations still continue to occupy the upper floors of these buildings. The mixed use of this block speaks to the nature of Boston’s Chinatown at large; even though it is an active and commercial district, many Chinese immigrants have continued to reside in the neighborhood, something which still influences the visual architectural landscape of the space.

Another factor in Tyler Street’s constant architecture is building ownership. Several buildings on the street (including the ones closest to Beach Street as well as 10 Tyler Street) are owned by family association organizations (including the Lee and Ng Family Associations). These groups have long been a feature in diasporic Chinese communities, and are derivatives of traditional rotating credit groups in China that promote informal ways of pooling together community capital. In the early days of Chinese immigration (in the late 1800s), the need for these organizations grew in the United States; almost all of the Chinese in the country were sojourning bachelors, sending money back to China either to support their families or repay local clan or district associations who often paid for their original trip overseas. In many American Chinatowns, these organizations often became the medium through which investment capital was

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<sup>58</sup> Schweitzer, “A fare change.”

saved for local neighborhood businesses such as laundries and restaurants.<sup>59</sup> In addition to financial assistance, these family associations also provided social and cultural support for their members. Family associations were often the “center of social life” for early Chinese bachelors (who often lived apart their families in the U.S., since early immigration law severely restricted the entrance of women and children into the country), providing dormitory-style residences as well as space for its members to “smoke, drink, eat, exchange stories and information, and play parlor games such as mah-jongg with their closest kin and countrymen.”<sup>60</sup> Today, family association buildings are no longer regularly used as residences, though on Tyler Street, these quarters (on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floors and above) are still used for social gatherings and family shrines. One might assume, then, that even if family associations (who are not traditional real estate developers) own the buildings, they might have little motivation to raze and rebuild the already functioning the old brick row tenements on the street, especially if they are still actively using the space or do not have the capital needed for major renovations.

The unchanged architecture of the space also speaks to other social practices in the community – namely, the business cycles and customs of the neighborhood, which are driven by increasing rent and property values and intense competition within the neighborhood. Though the population of Asian immigrants (who either want to live in the neighborhood or to open businesses there) has generally been growing since 1965<sup>61</sup>, the geographic area of Chinatown has actually shrunken significantly since its founding in 1870 to only 42 acres (primarily due to the building of the Central Artery and Massachusetts Turnpike during the urban renewal of Boston

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59 Lin, 45-50.

60 Ibid., 47-48.

61 It should be noted that many of the newest immigrants are moving into new enclaves in Malden, Quincy and Brighton, though as of 2000, the population of Chinatown had remained fairly steady (Schweitzer “Chinatown” B1).

in the 1950s and 60s, which reduced the size of Chinatown by two-thirds).<sup>62</sup> Additionally, other city-wide economic developments have made Chinatown a prime downtown location, causing the general gentrification of the area<sup>63</sup>, which also pushes up property value and competition for land. As a result, one storefront or entrance in Boston's Chinatown often houses multiple businesses – something that is seen, for example, in the entrance for The Cute Shop on Tyler Street (that sells gifts), which additionally advertises the presence of Lau Service Center and Rachel Beauty Salon (Figure 1-29).

This crowding of businesses is also due to general business conditions of Chinatowns in the U.S., where there are a plethora of small business owners. According to Le, “of all the major racial/ethnic groups, Asian Americans are the most likely to own their own small businesses” at 11% rate of being self-employed (as compared to the total Asian American population) (“Asian Small Businesses”). Additionally, in 2002 Chinese small business owners made up 26% of all Asian-owned small business owners.<sup>64</sup> The presence of all of these small businesses generates intense competition on the street and in the neighborhood, leading to accelerated levels of development. Le states that “studies...shows there is a high turnover and failure rate for Asian immigrant businesses” including groceries and restaurants, personal service industries, and retail sales and “many Asian small businesses are only able to turn a profit by exploiting their

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62 Sarah Schweitzer, “Chinatown Rooms Without a View,” *The Boston Globe*, June 10, 2001, Sunday, Third Edition.

63 Numerous high-rise apartments have been built in the area since 2000, which drives up property values in the neighborhood (Schweitzer “Chinatown Rooms”).

64 The reasons for this are manifold, as explicated by C.N. Le in his article “Asian Small Businesses” on the website Asian Nation.com. These reasons include labor market discrimination (which is based on limited language skills, race, or because of unaccepted credentials from another country), cultural traits (including hard work, delaying gratification, or sacrificing from the next generation), ethnic resources (such as loan organization such as the Family Associations discussed earlier), class resources (gained from specialized educational resources), or structural opportunities (which are afforded by the existence of stable market – ethnic enclaves, as well as the Asians’ ease of being middlemen between different ethnic groups, and economic openings left by other ethnic groups who moved out of city). These reasons are, of course, discussed more in depth in the article itself.

workers.”<sup>65</sup> In many cases, this hand-to-mouth existence often manifests itself through the physical environment of Chinatowns. On Tyler Street, for example, it seems likely that restaurants often forgo extensive renovations in order to retain the business that might be lost in the weeks or months it would take to dramatically change the already functional physical environment of the space. Thus, instead of changing the entire exterior (or interior) of a space, signs are often reappropriated and added haphazardly creating a frenetic layering of exterior signage (refer back to Figure 1-23 for an excellent example of this: an empty broken sign still stands above the windows of the restaurant, and a banner announcing the seafood specials clumsily hangs over other signage, such that it becomes impossible to discern the name or the location of the restaurant behind, also refer back to Figure 1-29). In this way, the environment and the attached aesthetics of Tyler Street are seen to be “both the medium and the outcome” of the spatial and social practices of Boston’s Chinatown.



**Figure 1-29.** One entrance for several Tyler Street businesses.

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65 C.N. Le, "Asian Small Businesses."



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In this chapter, we see how the imagability of Tyler Street can be formed through these social practices of Chinatown: the economic, as well as social and cultural happenings of the neighborhood. This expanded reading of the space clearly engages with multiple dimensions of perceived space, especially in regard to production, reproduction, and “the reproduction of the social relations of production” –or, as defined by Lefebvre, the relationships that are “constitutive of capitalism and...sought and imposed as such.”<sup>66</sup> The interactions among long-time Chinatown residents, visiting Chinese immigrants, visitors who are familiar with Chinese culture, or those who are not, certainly manifests itself through the physical, material objects in the space, which form the specific aesthetic of the expansive, chaotic signage “megatexture.” While this study specifically applies to Boston’s Chinatown, similar factors of economic, social and cultural conditions in other Chinatowns<sup>67</sup> have similarly affected the physical environments of the space. In the next chapter, we shall see how this seemingly disordered signage aesthetic contributes to an imagined understanding of the space – while this megatexture (as defined by Venturi and his collaborators in *Learning from Las Vegas*) was deciphered through the real practices of the community here, others often use the same objects to indicate or point to something else: a fantastic Chinatown environment that does not really represent the actual, real neighborhoods but rather the mental and emotional space of visitors to the neighborhood.

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<sup>66</sup> Lefebvre, 32.

<sup>67</sup> This assumption is based on the fact that many of them were founded by the same wave of Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as discussed in the ‘Chinatown Basics’ section earlier.



CHAPTER 2 –  
*Conceived Space: A Trip to Filmic Chinatown*

Toward the end of *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), directed by Orson Welles, protagonist Michael O'Hara (Welles) stumbles into Chinatown after escaping from a San Francisco city courthouse.<sup>68</sup> He is in a state of confusion; while this is mostly due to the large dose of sleeping pills he has swallowed in order to escape, his encounter with the exotic and unfamiliar environment of Chinatown heightens this feeling. During his flight through the neighborhood, Michael, filmed from above, is seemingly dwarfed by the Chinese architecture of the space (Figure 2-1). He is also shown through shop windows with almost illegible Chinese text (Figure 2-2), which display an unfamiliar assortment herbal medicines and dried meats (Figure 2-3). This visit to Chinatown, then, is clearly positioned as a kind of foreign, tourist excursion.



**Figure 2-1 to 2-3 (left to right).** *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) – Michael O'Hara's chase is framed by the Chinese architecture of San Francisco Chinatown.

While Michael is disoriented, the titular lady from Shanghai (a.k.a. Elsa Bannister, played by Lana Turner) is not. She actively pursues Michael into the space. Using her knowledge of Chinese language and customs (as gained from her supposed experience in Shanghai and East Asia), she easily navigates the neighborhood. After questioning several

<sup>68</sup> *The Lady from Shanghai*, DVD, directed by Orson Welles (1947; Culiver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2000).

people on the street (Figure 2-4), Elsa eventually finds Michael in a Chinese theater, where a Cantonese opera is playing. The foreignness of Chinatown is further emphasized in this space; the traditional extradiegetic music that underlies the chase through the streets is replaced by the diegetic singing and music of traditional Chinese opera. Though the camera has followed both Michael and Elsa into the space of the theater, Welles initially places the visual emphasis of the sequence on the stage performance and its contexts, thus highlighting the exoticism of the environment. There are several shots of the stage (without the protagonists) that feature the performers in their ornate costumes and the set (Figure 2-5). Additionally, when Elsa walks backstage in order to search for a phone, she passes through an area where an orchestra is playing traditional Chinese instruments (Figure 2-6), as well as the dressing room where performers are applying elaborate make-up and headpieces.



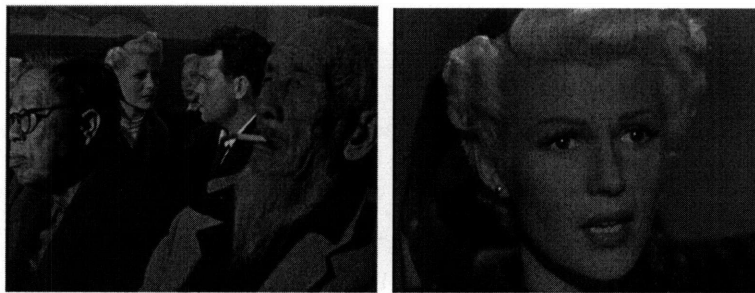
**Figure 2-4 (left).** Elsa Bannister (Lana Turner) asks people in Chinatown about Michael's whereabouts.

**Figure 2-5 (center).** Shot of the stage performance.

**Figure 2-6 (right).** Elsa walks backstage into the area where the orchestra is playing.

After this brief respite of focusing on the performers, the narrative and visual emphasis of the sequence shifts back to Michael and Elsa, who are sitting in the audience together (Figure 2-7) and having a conversation while shot in close-up (Figure 2-8). Michael soon becomes distressed by his circumstances, and Elsa asks him to "just sit...quietly and watch the play," though by this point it becomes impossible for the film spectator to do this since the visual focus

of the sequence has already changed. Policemen walk into the theater searching for the couple, who try to hide by pretending to kiss. Ironically, even the performers on stage (and the workers backstage) become distracted by the action of the audience, and accordingly begin to watch; Welles shoots close-up of their faces as their eyes begin to shift (Figures 2-9 to 2-11). These players then, who were initially the focus of the scene, are thus reduced to a mere backdrop, becoming a diegetic audience for the narrative action of the film; this initial site of foreign excursion therefore becomes a stage for the characters' own narrative. Chinatown becomes site for personal amusement or adventure.



**Figure 2-7 (left).** Conversation between Elsa and Michael in the audience of the Chinese theater.

**Figure 2-8 (right).** Close-up of Elsa Bannister (Turner).



**Figure 2-9 and 2-10 (left and center).** The opera performers' eyes shift toward the audience.

**Figure 2-11 (right).** Backstage workers look toward to the audience.

In this chapter, I examine how Chinatown has been conceived, in Lefebvre's terms, through these two perspectives: the lens of tourism and that of personal amusement or adventure. I begin by tracing how Chinatowns have been historically conceived as tourist experiences, and

how these excursions gave rise to specific methods for controlling or dealing with foreign environments, which include behaviors like taking photographs or following guided tours. I then look at how these behaviors or techniques of spatial mastery have created, originated and persisted the aesthetic of Chinatown as represented in popular culture, or more specifically film. I argue that this inherited way of dealing with unfamiliar environments (both real and imagined) actually creates conditions through which media makers have appropriated these sites for the character's (and thus the spectator's) own amusement or adventure. This mode of representation is obviously not the only way in which Chinatown has been constructed or imagined in popular culture. However, I believe that looking at depictions of the district through this lens of tourism and visitation will provide a useful point of comparison, especially when looking at how outsiders begin to perceive the real landscape of Boston's Chinatown as discussed in the previous chapter. In the last part of the chapter, I place this analysis of filmic Chinatowns into a larger context in order to look the tendencies that overwhelm popular culture's treatment and representations of the district. I specifically examine what I call the dichotomy of Chinatown, where media makers simultaneously highlight the sinister inscrutability *and* the glitzy showiness of the neighborhood, despite the fact that these two tendencies seem at odds with one another.

For the purposes of this chapter, then, I engage with Lefebvre's second category of spatial understanding: representations of space, or conceived space. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre speaks about how understanding of a space primarily falls into this conceived realm since the desire to abstract or create discourses about a space dominate the other realms of lived or perceived space.<sup>69</sup> While Lefebvre is predominantly speaking of the official, scientific modes of understanding or representing a space (especially in regard to how economic production

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<sup>69</sup> Lefebvre, 7.

occurs),<sup>70</sup> I appropriate this term in order to describe how the space has been conceived of in popular culture. I make this conceptual shift because of Lefebvre's insistence that representation of space (or conceived space) is the dominant way that space is understood or produced within society. Though these ethnic enclaves exist as real, physical entities within the United States, Jan Lin states: "Chinatown has traditionally occupied a chimerical position in the American popular imagination."<sup>71</sup> I argue, therefore, that a large portion of the American public (who are predominantly non-Asian, and thus non-Chinese) knows Chinatown through its imaginary constructions rather than as actual neighborhoods. Thus, even though there have been documentary, scholarly discussions of Chinatowns (from Jacob Riis' negative view of Chinatown in *How the Other Half Lives*, to Jane Jacobs' positivist view of New York ethnic neighborhoods in the 1960s),<sup>72</sup> fictional conceptions of Chinatown seem to pervade popular understanding of the space. As numerous scholars (including Jan Lin, Anthony Lee, and Emma Teng)<sup>73</sup> have argued, many of the known journalistic or 'realistic' depictions of Chinatown (including Arnold Genthe's famed 'documentary' photographs of San Francisco's old Chinatown, for example) have been informed, infused, and shaped by the fantastic representations or notions of the space that circulate through mass media.

For the most part, this discussion of Chinatown as conceived within popular culture engages with outsider perspectives on the neighborhood (i.e. not the viewpoint of users or inhabitants of the space). In general, there have been a greater number of outsider-constructed, rather than insider-constructed, representations of Chinatown in American popular culture, which

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70Ibid., 33.

71 Lin, 1.

72 For more information on the relationship between these studies, refer to Lin, 7-10.

73 For additional information on this, refer to: Lin 1-22, 171-188, Anthony W. Lee *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 9-200., Emma Teng, "Artifacts of a Lost City: Arnold Genthe's Pictures of Old Chinatown and Its Intertexts," in *Re/collecting Early Asian American: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 83-114.

is a result of historical, political and social conditions of Chinese living in the United States. As discussed earlier in the section 'Chinatown Basics,' social and legal restrictions created an a unique environment within Chinatowns; these ethnic enclaves were essentially bachelor outposts full of sojourners, who were continually caught up in cycle of making money and sending remittances back home. The act defining and representing ones self for outsiders, therefore, was likely not as prominent an activity for these Chinese as the everyday act of surviving and making a living. Of course, there have periodically been insider groups who have actively created media representations of the community for outsiders (one notable example, for example, is the Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club in the 1930s San Francisco).<sup>74</sup> However, many these representations (including tours, theater performances, etc.) were motivated by the need to satisfy outsider tourist desires rather than a desire for accurate or creative self-representation. Only recently has there been a move in the Asian-American community (in the post-1965 Immigration Act era) to consciously create positive or 'accurate' images of Chinatown for the rest of the population. Thus, the most visible representations of Chinatowns both real and fictional (which range from postcards, tourist guides, films, photographs, and paintings) were mostly created by or for outsiders of the community, and primarily deal with the neighborhood through the lens of travel and tourism.

### ***Tourist Excursions: Rubbernecking through Chinatown***

Historically, the connection between travel and visiting Chinatown has always been apparent. Beginning in 1880s Manhattan, tourist expeditions through less reputable neighborhoods in the city (including Chinatown) became a new form of entertainment for middle-class tourists. These tourists, often called rubberneckers because of their aggressive

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<sup>74</sup> For more information on this group, refer to Anthony Lee's *Picturing Chinatown*.



observation techniques, were led through the district by entrepreneurial guides (who were often not Chinese) and shown the sites. Rubberneckers (or slummers, as they were sometimes called) were usually picked up in Times Square and driven through downtown locations in vehicles called gape, or hay wagons. Stops in Chinatown often included joss houses (or gambling joints), Chinese temples, and the notorious opium dens.<sup>75</sup> As with these gawking visitors, the audiences at-large experienced these foreign excursions to Chinatown through other forms of media such as “musicals, magazine fiction, travel narratives, tourist guides, and journalistic exposés.”<sup>76</sup> Oftentimes these texts claimed to pull back the curtain on “illicit Chinatown activities” such as opium smoking, tong (or gang) violence, and white female slavery.<sup>77</sup> Thus, trips to Chinatown were constructed “either [as] a visit to an exotic land or as a dip into a world of social pathology and vice,” and represented the Chinatown experience “in terms of absolute foreignness.”<sup>78</sup>

While rubbernecking tours of Chinatown ceased in the early twentieth century, the framing of the neighborhood within the context of tourism, especially as seen in popular culture, has remained. Because of this, I employ, in this chapter, Ellen Strain’s ideas about the tourist gaze, a concept that she borrows from John Urry and his book entitled *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society*. While Urry speaks of how this gaze is literally shaped by acts of physical tourism, Strain expands upon this idea by analyzing how this gaze is organized and reinforced through forms of mass media.<sup>79</sup> By connecting it with the idea of the male gaze in Hollywood cinema (as elaborated by Laura Mulvey in her seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”) and that of the consumer pedestrian and filmgoer (as discussed by Anne Friedberg in her book, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*), Strain formulates the

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75 Lin, 174-175.

76 Klein, 228.

77 Lin, 177-78.

78 Klein, 228.

79 Ellen Strain, *Public Places, Private Journeys* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 15.

tourist gaze as “a culturally-constructed dynamic of sight and representation tied to a larger power structure and economic framework”<sup>80</sup> She states:

Primarily, it is a question of positionality, i.e., the taking up of a psychic and visual perspective in relation to an Other, whether that Other be defined as a foreign person, an exoticized culture, or an un-familiar landscape (Strain 606).

This positioning of one’s self in relation to a foreign Other nods at Said’s notion of the construction of the Orientalism, which identifies the gaze as a colonizing phenomenon. Implied in this attitude is the idea that there are ways of dealing with Other peoples or places that actively create opportunities to reinforce this power dynamic, especially within a tourist situation of visiting a foreign country. As Strain explains:

Tourism is characterized by a number of behaviors designed to counteract disorientation and culture shock by giving travelers a sense of mastery over the space and the culture.<sup>81</sup>

Tourists can therefore neutralize the confusion that may occur within a three-dimensional space through behaviors of mastery such as referring to maps, reducing space into a postcard or photograph, pursuing panoramic or aerial views, and following guided tours.<sup>82</sup> All of these techniques not only ways position one’s self in relation to the Other from the outside, but also literally put one inside within a space. Timothy Mitchell describes this as the “double demand” of tourism, where there is the simultaneous desire to be immersed within an environment and to consume it as a contained unit separate from the tourist’s self.<sup>83</sup>

The ideas found in Sergei Eisenstein’s essay “Montage and Architecture” are particularly useful in applying this tourist gaze and tourists’ double demand to modes of popular culture. Like Mitchell, Eisenstein also touches upon the dialectic relationship between spatial immersion and the reduction of the environment into consumable bits. In particular, he stresses

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80 Ellen Strain, “Narrativizing Cyber-Travel: CD-ROM Travel Games and the Art of Historical Recovery” in *Hop on Pop*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 606.

81 *Ibid.*, 609.

82 *Ibid.*, 609.

83 Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 27.

how film can explicitly accomplish these two goals since it can replicate the visual experience of moving through a space by displaying a collection of discrete images or views.<sup>84</sup> In the essay, Eisenstein specifically connects this idea of film to touristic activity by describing an architectural promenade through the Acropolis of Athens where pedestrians are asked to stop along their path to take in the views. This sequencing of physical views, as framed by the architecture of the Acropolis, is what Eisenstein calls “the perfect example of one of the most ancient films.” He states:

It is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one that our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, film can be thought of as a moving “itinerary” for movement or immersion into a space,<sup>86</sup> as well as the literal compilation of distinct images that make up the film frames. Immobile film spectators can become immersed in an environment through acceptance of the camera’s perspective as the extension of one’s own, through Christian Metz’ idea of primarily and secondary identification.<sup>87</sup> The spectator can then begin to think of films featuring exotic destinations their own foreign excursions: where “camera movement would be experienced as the virtual tourist’s rickshaw being set into motion.”<sup>88</sup> The voyeur thus becomes the voyageur; film spectators inhabit and traverse spaces through the cinematic experience.<sup>89</sup>

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84 Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage and Architecture,” trans. Michael Glenny, *Assemblage* 10 (1989): 120.

85 Eisenstein, 117.

86 Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion* (New York: Verso, 2002), 56.

87 Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton and Annwyl Williams (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

88 Strain 2003, 115.

89 Bruno, 10.

*Mastering Chinatown: Flattening and Annotating the Environment*

In the case of films that show exotic locales such as Chinatown, movement through space is not a completely immersive activity however; as mentioned earlier, the techniques of mastery that allow tourists to distance themselves from, or “flatten,” actual foreign environments are also present in these films. In terms of flattening, the ultimate goal is to create a kind of “distanced immersion” in a place, or to create situations where one can consciously separate one’s self from an experienced environment. In general, this flattening process can reduce “signs of difference into consumable spectacle...[as] a mechanism for defusing threat.”<sup>90</sup> While Mitchell speaks of the literal flattening of environments into maps, postcards and photographs, Strain discusses a *metaphoric* flattening of the space that is accomplished by the creation of an easy-to-consume spectacle. During the period of rubbernecking, Chinatown was constantly reduced into consumable bits – something that Sabine Haenni discusses in her article “Filming Chinatown: Fake Visions, Bodily Transformations.” In describing what these tours through Chinatown might have been like, she states: “Explanations by the tour guide and a strict temporal regime dictated the tourists’ access to Chinatown in a way that prevented in-depth encounters;” one example involves tourists visiting a Chinese theater:

At the theater, for instance, there was a special box reserved for “Americans,” and by all accounts, slumming parties often stayed only 10 to 15 minutes before they were shepherded on to the next attraction. Sometimes, theater companies apparently disrupted their regular play, and put on a special, brief show for the tourists, because the Chinese play was deemed too obscene. The entire tour seems to have been comprised of a series of brief “scenes” at best gesturing toward an always absent whole. This institutionalization of ephemerality constructs Chinatown...as an aggregated...surface beyond which the slummers never penetrate.<sup>91</sup>

The entire experience is flattened not through reduction into postcards or photographs, but through restricted engagement with the environment. Thus, we are again reminded of Michael

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<sup>90</sup> Strain 2002, 609.

<sup>91</sup> Sabine Haenni, “Filming ‘Chinatown’: Fake Visions, Bodily Transformations,” in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter Feng (Chapel Hill: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 31.

O'Hara's excursion into the Chinese opera house in *The Lady from Shanghai*; in his daze and confusion, he (and the thus, the film spectator) manages only to catches glimpses of the show, and therefore is never truly given that opportunity to 'penetrate' the surface of Chinatown.

This reduction of Chinatown by actual tourism is clearly replicated in early films featuring Chinatown. Films like *Chinese Procession, No. 12* (1898), *Scenes in Chinese Restaurant* (1903), and *Scene in Chinatown* (1903) showed only consumable chunks of Chinatown, though admittedly this was also due to the time limitations and cultural conventions of cinema at the time. However, the titles of these films (and indeed the content) indicate a conscious effort to make a show out of the prosaic in Chinatown; visiting a Chinese restaurant suddenly becomes an activity worth capturing on film (and in an academic study, as evidenced by my reading of Chinese restaurants on Tyler Street as seen in the previous chapter). This inclination to show only glimpses of Chinatown life were seen more overtly, however, in early fictional narrative films, including *The Deceived Slumming Party* (1908) or *Lifting the Lid* (1905), which were explicitly modeled after rubbernecking tours. *The Deceived Slumming Party*, for example, depicts a group of naïve tourists who are escorted to a Chinatown. During their trip, in their desire to see the district at its most 'sensational,' they are subjected to the supposed horrors of the neighborhood. These include the suicide of a young, white girl in an opium den, and a cold-blooded murder in a Bowery saloon.<sup>92</sup> It eventually becomes clear to the audience, however, that the slummers are being tricked. Whereas the tourist group only gets a peek at these terrible happenings, other scenes of the film show Chinatown in its normal state: people leisurely playing cards until called upon to perform as opium addicts for the gullible rubbernecker. This narrative element seems to illustrate the performance of "Chineseness" in that theater of Chinatown space (complete with audience) as discussed earlier. In this fashion,

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92 Haenni, 25-26.

Chinatown is conceived by these early filmmakers as a conglomeration of small consumable bits: portions that strictly serve the purpose of debunking the myths, while simultaneously sustaining them an enacted imaginary, and thus promoting the characters' (and ultimately the spectators') own amusement.

In general, this touristic quality of visiting Chinatown is something that has infused many later filmic depictions of Chinatown. Few narrative films use Chinatown as a primary setting (though notable examples of this include *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), which both almost entirely occur in Chinatown);<sup>93</sup> however, most filmmakers position Chinatown as a place to be visited, and therefore a place that can be flattened for tourists. In general, this reduction of Chinatown is mostly accomplished through narrative intervention, wherein the story does not allow for deep immersion or interaction with the environment. Cinematic characters often have very specific reasons for visiting Chinatown – whether for dropping off dry cleaning like Donald Sutherland's character in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978), getting secret information as in *Pickup on South Street* (1953)<sup>94</sup> or searching for someone as with the Anna May Wong film noir, *Impact* (1949). In these cases, there is no real need for immersion; the unfamiliar, threatening elements of the space need not be encountered if they are not explicitly part of the goal. The objects thus form a flattened backdrop for action rather than something that drives it.

This effect has been heightened further in a number of recent films featuring Chinatown, which often use the district as a pass-through space in between other locations. In *16 Blocks*

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93 Both of these films feature white protagonists who are trying to accomplish goals that relate explicitly to Chinatown, which includes wiping out a crime syndicate (in the former), or attempting to retrieve a stolen truck (in the latter). Chinatown is rarely featured as a place where people are permanently located unless they are Chinese. One notable exception is *Pieces of April* (2003), where the titular character lives in low-rent apartment in Chinatown, an occurrence that is perhaps explained by her alternative, artistic lifestyle.

94 The scene in *Pickup on South Street* actually occurs in a Chinese restaurant, which may or may not be in Chinatown, but one could argue that the restaurant is synechdocal for the neighborhood.

(2006), for example, the protagonists' main goal is to traverse Chinatown (which is part of the titular 16 blocks) in order to get to the courthouse for the conclusion of the film.<sup>95</sup> While police detective Jack Mosley (Bruce Willis), and Eddie Bunker (Mos Def) cross through a number of interior maze-like spaces of Manhattan Chinatown (Figure 2-12), they have no time nor motivation to interact significantly with the environment because they are running away from other policemen who are trying to kill them. A similar sense of urgency pushes Leonardo DiCaprio's character in *The Departed* (2006), who is being chased through the rainy, foggy streets of Boston's Chinatown by Matt Damon's corrupt policeman.



**Figure 2-12 (left).** *16 Blocks* (2006) Jack Mosley and Eddie Bunker enter into the labyrinthine-spaces of Chinatown.

**Figure 2-13 (right).** Mosley leads Eddie Bunker through a Chinese kitchen underground.

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<sup>95</sup> *16 Blocks*, DVD, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (2006; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).



**Figure 2-14 (left).** Jack Mosley walks through a Chinatown laundry room without interacting with the scene behind him.

**Figure 2-15 (right).** Jack Mosley passes through a mysterious steam-filled room.

It should be noted here that both films mentioned above highlight movement (through the chase sequence) as a mode through which the characters experience Chinatown. This method of capturing space through movement, Strain argues, is a fundamental part of early cinema. Numerous films made during the last turn of the century featured footage shot from moving vehicles. Notable examples of this include the films of James H. White, an early filmmaker employed by Thomas Edison, who made many transportation-related pieces including *A Storm at Sea* (1900), which was shot from a boat, *Panorama of the Moving Boardwalk* (1900), shot from a moving sidewalk, and *California Orange Groves, Panoramic View* (1898), shot from a train. Ellen Strain speaks about the general consciousness of filmmakers about the cinematic camera's ability to capture motion (a topic which has similarly discussed by many film scholars including Lynn Kirby, Stephen Bottomore, and William Uricchio):

Thus, the exotic locale depicted on film could no longer be tamed in its stillness, no longer reduced to a picturesque place whose timelessness was confirmed by the frozen nature of the image... the pressure to represent a world in motion and the persistent appeal of distant lands...forced traveling filmmakers to find strategies for adding movement to the exotic postcard.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Strain 2003, 110.



Chase sequences through Chinatown seem to fulfill the understood potential of the camera to move fluidly and swiftly through a space. Active movement within the space does not promote total immersion into the environment, however. In fact, because the camera, the characters, and thus the spectators are moving quickly through their surroundings in these chase sequences, they experience only glimpses of it while in motion (Figure 2-13 to 2-15). There is certainly not enough time to stop, observe, and fully engage with Chinatown.

This lack of engagement with the environment also promotes a flattening of the objects in the space; because the things are not actually dealt with, their functionality is less important than their visual interest. In *16 Blocks*, for example, Jack Mosley passes through a mysterious steam filled room after descending into the underground spaces of Chinatown (refer back to Figure 2-15). This shot lasts only for a few seconds, and therefore the characters and spectators are unable to fully comprehend what is happening in the space – what the objects are, or what people are doing there. Objects in these filmic Chinatown environments thus become like objects in a museum; their utility is irrelevant compared to how they fit with the environment and seemingly compose the Chinatown picture. As Umberto Eco states (in relation to museum dioramas): “the designers want the visitor to feel an atmosphere and to plunge into the past without becoming a philologist or archeologist;” so while the museum “distinguishes genuine pieces from reconstructed pieces...the distinction is indicated on [separate] explanatory panels beside the cases” which are not a part of the museum diorama itself. Therefore, in these historic reconstructions, “the original object and the wax figurine mingle in a continuum that the visitor is not invited to decipher.”<sup>97</sup> This idea relates to Ellen Strain’s second set of conflicting tourist demands, or in other words:

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<sup>97</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: A Helen and Kurt Wolff book, 1975), 9.

The desire to perceived foreign culture as a play of surfaces without depth or meaning and the urge to view foreign culture as a layered structure requiring decoding or demystifying.<sup>98</sup>

The objects of cinematic Chinatowns in this case are like the “play of surfaces without depth or meaning”; they are pleasing to look at, but they have no actual use or function. Strain argues that tourists experiencing this demand therefore digest culture as “an accumulation of tastes, colors and textures” such as face paint on a Native American dancer, rather than signs that hold actual meaning. These layers can thus promote confusion, but they also can be understood as hieroglyphs awaiting translation. In this way, tourists seek something that Strain calls the “annotated spectacle,” or the experience of encountering “puzzling foreign-ness,” which can easily be translated into “distantiated knowledge” through things such as guidebooks, maps, or guides.<sup>99</sup> While Strain uses the idea of these incompatible demands specifically for the purposes of discussing CD-ROM games and their use of annotation (whether it be through a narrator, textual explanation, or visual perspective shifts), this notion can be applied to filmic constructions of Chinatown, especially when filmmakers directly address these needs through the literal production and manipulation of the space.

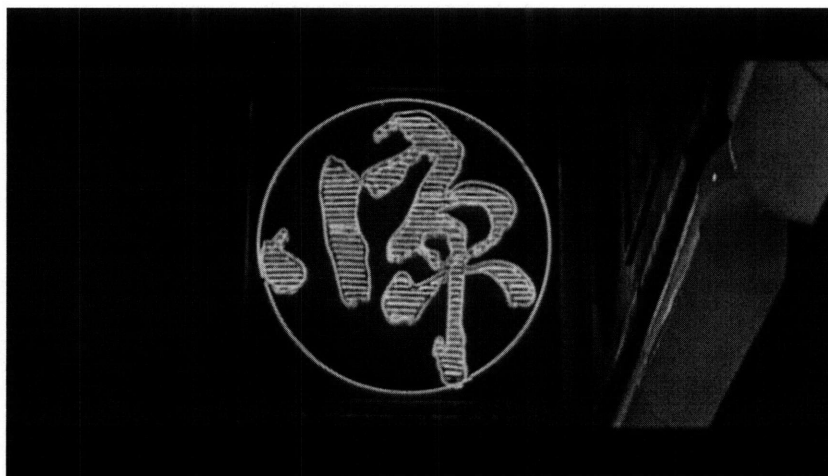
In film, for example, directors can promote the ‘knowability’ of the space by literally providing annotations through ‘insider’ characters. These characters function as guides for the outsider protagonists venturing into Chinatown. A young smart-aleck Chinese boy leads Randall Peltzer to his grandfather’s curiosity shop in the film *Gremlins* (1984). In *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), Wang Chi and his Chinatown cohorts lead white American protagonist Jack Burton through the geography of the neighborhood, while also providing ‘insider knowledge’ about the Chinese supernatural forces they encounter throughout the film. Thus, Burton (and the

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<sup>98</sup> Strain 2002, 607.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 607.

audience) is never completely baffled; knowledgeable and wise guides always support him. In *Flower Drum Song* (1961), a film that actually features an entirely Asian cast and an Asian story, the threat of Chinatown is dissipated by virtue of the fact that it is a Chinese-American story. The main characters are Chinatown residents, and as Christina Klein explicates, the fear of the unknown is reduced since the audience is brought inside the community and are guided like “privileged tourists through the inner workings of Chinese families, businesses, social relations and customs.”<sup>100</sup>



**Figure 2-16.** *Dangerous Days: Making Blade Runner* (2007) – Neon Sign inspired by the Japanese character for “origin.”

The positioning of characters in Chinatown environments that are easy to comprehend or navigate is especially clear when a set is designed specifically for a film (as opposed to location shooting). Building an environment from scratch allows for the literal construction of the environment which is both “a play of surfaces without depth or meaning” and “a layered structure requiring decoding or demystifying.”<sup>101</sup> One example of this occurs in *Blade Runner*

100 Klein, 228.

101 Strain 2002, 607.

(1982)<sup>102</sup>, where this production can be seen through the panoply of Asian advertisements and signage that are used throughout the film. In working on the set for the movie, Tom Southwell (a production illustrator for the film) was asked to create designs for several neon signs that would be used throughout the film.<sup>103</sup> In *Dangerous Days: Making Blade Runner* (2007), a documentary on the making of the film (which accompanies the Final Cut DVD of the film), Southwell states that one of his visual inspirations was a graphic he saw on a poster – the Japanese kanji character for ‘origin’ (which is actually originally derived from Chinese script) (Figure 2-16). While designing the signs, Southwell played with the look of the character, distorting and making it more graphically appropriate, saying:

The way I perceived it...I could make it look like a map of the world because these look[ed] more like land forms more than they look[ed] like letter forms to me because I don't speak...Japanese.

Thus, because the signs were to be used as set decoration, it did not matter what the signs said explicitly. Southwell states:

Most English speaking people aren't going to know what it says, but in those characters, it becomes visually very, very important. If you could read it, your eye would go it and you'd be distracted, you'd be looking at it, and reading it, and he [director Ridley Scott] doesn't want you looking at it and reading it, he just wants you to be dazzled by how beautiful it is.

In the final film, these and other neon signs are scattered across the entire set – in store windows and hanging off building facades (Figures 2-17 and 2-18). In the context of the film, they are completely nonfunctional; they mean and point to nothing in particular. In general, the conglomeration of these (in addition to the hordes of Asian people and the continually growing

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102 Though *Blade Runner* does not explicitly occur in Chinatown, it is clearly a pan-Asian urban environment, full of Oriental influences including noodle shops, Geisha girl advertisements, and brightly colored neon signs. In discussing the film, Giuliana Bruno states: “The explosive Oriental dominates, the Orient of yesterday incorporating the Orient of today...the postindustrial city recreates the third world inside the first...The Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* is China(in)town;” in Giuliana Bruno, “Ramble City: Postmodernism in *Blade Runner*,” *October* 41 (1987): 66.

103 Charles de Lauzirika, “Dangerous Days: The Making of *Blade Runner*.” Disc 2. *Blade Runner, The Final Cut*, two-disc special ed. DVD. Directed by Ridley Scott. (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007).

trash of the city) creates a sense of chaos and confusion (Figure 2-19); however, upon closer examination, the repetition of the same neon symbol (the distorted Japanese character) negates that effect. Thus, there is no reason to be confused because there is nothing to be misunderstood. Like the cacophony of signs discussed in the previous chapter (where old signs lacking referents are left hanging in the space, while new ones are being patched over them), meaning here is flattened; there remains a glittering surface, but one without any real connotation or depth.



**Figure 2-17.** *Blade Runner* (1982) – Origin sign is in store window behind Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford)



**Figure 2-18.** *Blade Runner* (1982) – Origin Neon sign is in another store window that replicant Zhora crashes while running away from Deckard.



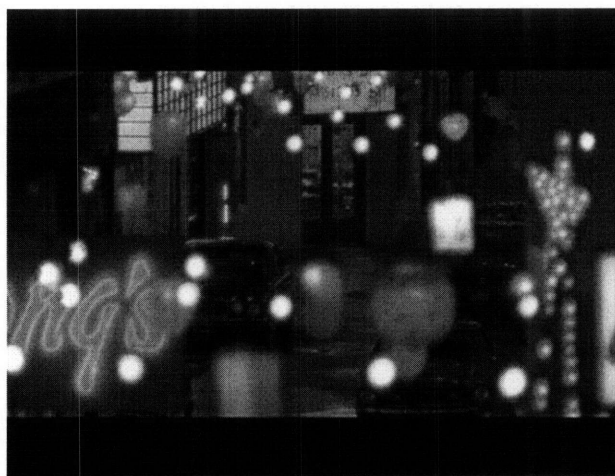
**Figure 2-19.** *Blade Runner* (1982) – The conglomeration of people and assortment of neon signs makes the environment of the film feel chaotic.

Another notable example of this ‘negation’ process can be seen in the film, *48 Hrs* (1982),<sup>104</sup> starring Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy. In the climactic scene of this action film, the protagonists race after a criminal in the streets of San Francisco’s Chinatown. Previously in the film, Chinatown was depicted as a normal, bustling city neighborhood with only the addition of Chinese signs and colored paper lanterns (Figure 2-20). However, in this scene, Chinatown becomes a set of winding dark alleyways with neon signs protruding from the walls (Figure 2-21). The presence of empty cardboard boxes, abandoned ice machines, and garbage cans clearly indicate that the alley is not a main thoroughfare of the neighborhood. The signs hang haphazardly from the wall and literally point to nothing; there are no visible entrances or doorways to businesses, nor any reason why businesses would advertise in this space. In this way, the individual signs end up meaning nothing; the space *seems* mysterious without actually *being* mysterious. Their effect, and therefore the threat of misunderstanding them or becoming confused, is diffused. While Nolte and Murphy are clearly disoriented in the space, it is not because they cannot read the neon signs that surround them, but rather as a result of their

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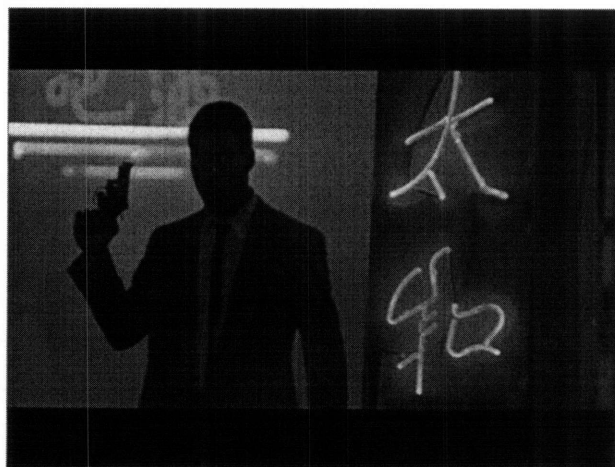
104 *48 Hrs*, DVD, directed by Walter Hill (1982; Burbank, CA: Paramount, 1999).

unfamiliarity with the geographic place, and because of the fog which continuously shrouds the set. Thus, the signs serve only as a backdrop for the action (Figure 2-22). By eliminating the need or possibility of understanding these signs, the filmmakers conceived and create a fun-house Chinatown environment, one that is seemingly dangerous, but actually safe.



**Figure 2-20 (left).** *48Hrs* (1982) – Chinatown is initially portrayed as a regular city neighborhood with only the addition of lanterns, lights, and neon signs

**Figure 2-21 (right).** In the climatic scene, Chinatown becomes a set of winding dark alleyways with dumpsters, broken ice machines, and neon signs projecting from the walls.



**Figure 2-22.** The neon signs become the backdrop to the main action.

This shift in Chinatown's portrayal in film can be placed into its historical contexts, especially in terms of how China (and the Asia in general) was viewed by the United States and its residents. James Naremore, in *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*, discusses how many film noirs of the 30s and 40s posit Chinatown (and the Far East in general) as places of inherent evil and depravity:

The Far East was repeatedly associated in film noir with enigmatic and criminal behavior, it was also depicted as a kind of aestheticized bordello, where one could experience all sorts of forbidden pleasures.<sup>105</sup>

The actual historical existence of Chinatowns and the real presence of opium dens and brothels in the community likely fueled this outlook. In the period of World War II, however, this understanding of the Far East was complicated by the United States' relationship to both Japan and China, which contradictorily positioned Asians as both enemies and allies:

In years of diplomatic alliance with China (during the years of Japanese expansionism), the ideological pendulum reversed, and sympathetic images of Chinese Americans on the side of law and order, such as the detective Charlie Chan, emerged.<sup>106</sup>

In the years following the war however, popular culture in the U.S. was infused with a new understanding about Asia, something which Christian Klein calls Cold War Orientalism. In her book of the same title, Klein argues that a new discourse on Asia and Asian relations emerged that "imagined the forging of bonds between Asians and Americans both home and abroad." Steeped in what Klein calls 'middlebrow sentimentalism,' this new paradigm had the "dual concept of integration – international and domestic – embedded in its core."<sup>107</sup> Films such as *Flower Drum Song*, which brought audience members into the everyday workings of the Chinatown community, and *The King and I* (1956), which promoted the harmonious existence of Asians and Westerners, began to appear as part of mainstream American cinema. In general,

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<sup>105</sup> James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 225.

<sup>106</sup> Lin, 172.

<sup>107</sup> Klein, 16.



filmic depictions of Chinatowns as sources of immorality or vice became less prominent. Instead, these spaces become the environments or backdrops (instead of a conglomeration of evil Asian people) where white Americans could fulfill their desires. Even with Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), the neighborhood becomes a metaphor or "white projection" of guilt and corruption rather than a center of evil in and of itself.<sup>108</sup> This trend, of course, is by no means the only mode in which Chinatown is depicted in film; however, historical treatment of Asia and Chinatowns in real life can serve as a map through which to understand the history of cinematic Chinatown depictions.

### ***The Dichotomy of Chinatown: Showy Surface and Hidden Depths***

In general, depiction of Chinatowns as both colorful play of surfaces and structures of depth requiring explanation speaks to a larger representational strategy of dealing with Chinatowns in popular culture, which I will categorize as the dichotomy of Chinatown. While ideas about Chinatown's mysterious and forbidding nature pervade many of the many depictions of Chinatown in popular culture, the concept of Chinatown as a brightly lit, showy, and glitzy neighborhood also infuse representations of the neighborhood. This dual pull is evident in filmic examples mentioned above; in *48 Hrs*, for example, the idea that Chinatown is both a collection of dangerous, foggy, winding alleyways and a receptacle for brightly lit neon signs illustrates this Chinatown dichotomy of representation.

In her article on literary and photographic depictions of San Francisco's old Chinatown, Emma Teng describes this dichotomy as the desire to portray both the "light space and dark space, showy surface and hidden depths." She states:

While many of [Genthe's] photographs features prominent 'daytime' touristic attractions,

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108 Naremore, 227.

or festive scenes of children in their holiday costumes, Genthe claimed that it was the 'darker spots' – the Street of Gamblers, and the Devil's Kitchen – that made his most interesting pictures.<sup>109</sup>

In general, the pull toward describing the dark, mysterious aspects of Chinatown has been a popular theme throughout the twentieth century. Oftentimes, this representational mode is used as a way to describe the criminal elements of Chinatown. Jan Lin states:

Chinatown is, after all, still commonly perceived as a district pervaded with organized crime, vice industries, and depravities associated with illegal immigrant smuggling and sweatshop activity. These images are continually reinforced by tabloid sensationalism, prime-time police and detective television serials such as *NYPD Blue*, and Hollywood films that feed societal demand for lurid sights and violent scenes.<sup>110</sup>

Often this moral otherness, compounded with the cultural otherness of the Chinese, manifests itself in physical portrayals of this urban enclave – inscrutable and mysterious environments that stand in stark contrast to the “familiar idealized images of ‘American’ communities.”<sup>111</sup> In early Manhattan Chinatown, as Sabine Haenni writes, “the hidden nature of Chinatown was accentuated by built space,” and in particular, “the narrow streets and the break with the grid system helped characterized Chinatown as labyrinthian.”<sup>112</sup> In particular, this concept of a moral ‘underground’ or ‘underbelly’ has manifested itself as a real physical entity in numerous stories and depictions of Chinatown. Legends about real Chinatowns’ subterranean passageways still pervade descriptions of Chinatown of North America today. While there has never been any real basis for this long-standing rumor, the idea has found life in many documentary and fictional accounts of Chinatown from pulp fiction to major Hollywood films. In her article “Pacific Entry, Pacific Century: Chinatowns and Chinese Canadian History,” Imogen L. Lim links the economic and urban conditions of Chinese in North America to why this myth was so pervasive even though it was often not true. Because of limited funds and building traditions, the Chinese

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109 Teng, 63.

110 Lin, 171.

111 K. Scott Wong, "Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain," *Melus* 20:1 (1995): 3.

112 Haenni, 27.

often developed and redeveloped multiple properties on small lots, at times leaving behind doorways and alleyways that were repurposed and incorporated into the new architecture. These spaces, she argues, were possibly misconstrued as part of a vast network of underground tunnels since they allowed quick entry in and out of buildings.<sup>113</sup> The power of myth persists even today; in November 26, 2007, the *LA Times* printed a story (“An urban legend has resurfaced”) about archaeologists searching for underground tunnels in the Chinatown district of Fresno, California. The story generated much online buzz (through blogs) and was also picked up by numerous other news sources at the time.

The linkage between Chinatown’s supposed underground settings and its reputed moral atmosphere was repeatedly stressed throughout the twentieth century. In her article, Teng suggests that ‘documentary’ sources, such as writers, guidebooks, and politicians at the turn of the last century explicitly connected the physical and moral space of Chinatown:

The dark spaces and alleys and hidden lairs called to mind the ‘dark side’ of Chinatown life: gambling, prostitution, the trade in slave girls, and opium dens.<sup>114</sup>

Many pulp narratives about Chinatown, notably the Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu series in the early part of the twentieth century along with its movie counterparts created decades later, equate Chinese use of trapdoor spaces, basements, and tunnels with the idea of sinister happenings, criminal and occasionally magical. In these, the connection between the *moral* underbelly and the *physical* underbelly of Chinatown is made clear.

The “hidden depths” idea of Chinatown has clearly influenced many fictional and nonfictional representations of the space, but the idea of Chinatown as a showy surface of color and exoticism has similarly pervaded popular culture. A quick look at contemporary American

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113 Imogen L. Lim, “Pacific Entry, Pacific Century: Chinatowns and Chinese Canadian History,” in *Re/collecting Early Asian American: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Josephine Lee, Imogene L. Lim, and Yuko Matsukawa (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 23-24.

114 Teng, 56.

city guidebooks shows that almost all of them use images of colorful neon signs and banners, Asian fruit and fish markets, and most popularly, of Chinese New Year festivals in order to advertise Chinatowns. In her discussion of literary depictions of New York Chinatown, Haenni similarly mentions this draw towards the light space of the neighborhood, saying: “Many magazine writers showed little interest in what might be found in the depths of Chinatown, but were captivated by Chinatown’s glitzy, gaudy surfaces.” She credits this dual interest with an ideological shift; using *The Deceived Slumming Party* as an example, she speaks about the move from thinking about Chinatown as “an obscure slum into a tourist attraction”:

This emphasis on fakery shifts the focus of attention within a sensational paradigm, from a fascination with the hidden dangers behind the walls of Chinatown, to a fascination with the “show” itself

This attraction to what she calls a “sensational surface aesthetic” led to tension; on the one hand, there was a pull toward to “glitzy, gaudy” surfaces of Chinatown, and on the other, a need to reveal its” hidden horrors.”<sup>115</sup> However, these two extremes may not be as diametrically opposed as they initially appear. If the Far East in film noir was associated with criminal behavior (as James Naremore infers), it makes sense that it would also be associated with “forbidden pleasures” especially as exemplified by prostitution, the drug trade, and gambling, industries which might be naturally associated with a kind of gaudy showiness. Haenni also makes another connection between these two poles of “light space and dark space,” by using Chinatown’s “cultural illegibility” as the conceptual bridge. According to Haenni, visitors’ inability to understand Chinese language or customs supports the idea of Chinatown’s inscrutability and unintelligibility, and thus its mysteriousness:

“Chineseness” itself signifies the ability to read what Americans cannot; conversely, Chinese surface decorations, to the degree that they remain ‘indescribable,’ have the capacity to explode the American linguistic system.

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115 Haenni, 27-29.

Logogrammic (rather than Western style alphabetic) Chinese writing, then, can be considered fundamental to how Chinatowns might be understood and consequently created and constructed by outsiders in popular culture. For many, this might be related to “the indescribability of the neighborhood’s identity, its incapacity – or unwillingness – to conform to commonly available concepts of identity itself.”<sup>116</sup> Non-Chinese outsiders to the community, then, might view Chinese language and culture as tied up within a system of signification that is fundamentally different, foreign and unknowable. In this incarnation then, Chinatown becomes a space not of *literal* darkness, but emotional confusion and *mental* darkness. Thus, the showy surface and hidden depths of Chinatown exist on a continuum rather than at opposite extremes.

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All the above examples speak about how Chinatown has been conceived of or constructed by outsiders, who are unfamiliar with the community and its everyday workings. These fictional representations of the space are obviously different when they arise from within the community itself. It remains to be seen how the new push toward self-representation in the Asian American community, and the growing number of Asians immigrants in the country will change the popular depictions of Chinatown. In the next chapter, I will address this question, starting by examining the canon of Asian American films made in the last 30 years, through a case study of the seminal Chinese American indie film, *Chan is Missing* (1981), which not only offers alternate version of Chinatowns on film, but also directly address and engages with the stereotypical depictions as seen in popular culture, through the dimension of lived space. This process of appropriating and reworking the stereotypes that surround Chinatowns in film will be

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116 Ibid., 28.

applied to the study of space as well, specifically the ways in which inhabitants and users of a space work dynamically against and within the Chinatown environment in order to contribute to an ever-shifting pattern of Chinese-American identity.

## CHAPTER 3 –

***Lived Space: Chan is Missing and a return to Boston's Chinatown***

In this chapter, I return to the actual spaces of Boston's Chinatown in order to see how these are lived through the interaction between the stereotypes (discussed in the previous chapter) and the actual physical environment (as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis). Here, I engage with Lefebvre's third category of spatial understanding, representational or lived space, which he explains as:

Space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'...This is dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.<sup>117</sup>

In this concept of lived space, it is not the actual activity conducted within the space or the material physical environment that is important, but rather the interaction between these two things: “The...virtual interchange between humans and their constructed, spatial worlds.”<sup>118</sup> In this way, representational space describes how places can be activated by the imagination, something which Giuliana Bruno discusses in relation to film. According to Bruno, film can also be thought of as an animating force that sets in motion, memories, bodies and *space*. As seen in early days of panoramic films:

The camera's own movement is augmented and multiplied as it is coupled with the city's vehicles of transport... in turn, film animates the city as a real means of transportation.

The still camera therefore becomes a moving camera, “a means of ‘transport’” through which spaces can be put in motion and, thus, activated.<sup>119</sup>

Because film can be considered the vehicle through which the imagination can change or appropriate space, I begin this chapter by examining *Chan is Missing* (1981), an Asian

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117 Lefebvre, 39.

118 Rogers, 35.

119 Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion* (New York: Verso, 2002), 24.

American<sup>120</sup> independent film directed by Wayne Wang, which is largely considered seminal in blazing the trail for subsequent Asian American cinema.<sup>121</sup> In his book, *Identities in Motion*, Peter Feng, analyzes *Chan is Missing* through the lens of Lisa Lowe's "immigrant acts" of Asian American identity formation, and thus shows how the film exemplifies negotiations of identity through engagements with stereotypes in film. In my examination of the film, I expand on Feng's discussion by looking at how director Wang additionally interacts with the spatial stereotypes of Chinatown in order to activate the setting of the film (which is San Francisco's Chinatown). In the second part of the chapter, I apply Lowe's idea of immigrant acts to actual Chinatown environments (instead of film) by engaging with the idea of everyday performance. By repositioning the physical and material space of Chinatown as actor, I look at how it assumes particular identities for outsider audiences. I focus more specifically on Boston's Chinatown in this respect, looking at the décor and advertisement of two former restaurants in the neighborhood for the purposes of analyzing how they set the scene for the "virtual interchange" between people and their environments. Following this analysis, I return to the case of Empire Garden restaurant in present-day Boston Chinatown (as discussed in the Introduction), and make conclusions about the nature of lived space in contemporary Chinese neighborhoods, thus positioning the physical environments of these spaces as both the medium and the product of the active negotiations of Chinese (or Asian) American identity.

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120 While previously I discussed Chinese and Chinese American identity, in this chapter, I begin to use the term Asian American. In addition to being aligned with the work of Peter Feng and Lisa Lowe, two scholars whose work I draw from in this document, this term "Asian American" also reflects the current *lived* experience of Chinatown. Though the location of Chinatown is named after a particular ethnic group (a reflection of its history as discussed in previously), the actual neighborhood is frequented and inhabited by people of numerous Asian backgrounds, something which reflects the post-1965 Chinatown environment. In addition, as previously discussed in chapter 1, the trans-Asian migration patterns (people moving from one country to another, especially the Chinese to Southeast Asia) promotes a new kind of Asian identity in the U.S., one that is not bound by a particular nationality, but rather based in a shared way of viewing and living in this country.

121 Peter Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 84.



### *Chan is Missing*

While the last chapter used outsider-created representations of filmic Chinatowns in order to consider conceived space, I use the insider-created *Chan is Missing* in order to understand lived space<sup>122</sup>. By engaging with San Francisco's Chinatown on film, *Chan is Missing* activates the space of the neighborhood through the process of quoting, appropriating and playing with previous representations of Chinatown – those dominated, images and symbols that Lefebvre speaks about – or in particular, those stereotypes of Chinatown as discussed in the previous chapter. The story itself is a take on a typical Charlie Chan mystery<sup>123</sup>. Two San Francisco Chinatown cabbies (Jo and Steve, stand-ins for the detective and his Number One Son) are looking for their partner, Chan Hung, who is in possession of \$4,000 of their money. The more they delve into the life of Chan (and the general Chinatown community) the less they seem to know. Clues compound upon clues that lead nowhere. In the end, their quest becomes a futile existential plight; while they eventually recover the money, they never find Chan or the 'truth' behind his disappearance.

*Chan is Missing* actively plays with the stereotype that Chinatown is a mysterious, disorienting, dark space; the characters are trapped in an unending conundrum in which they are trying to find a clear path through the district but cannot. In their search for Chan, the characters become more embroiled in the underside of this ethnic enclave, which is not filled with opium dens or joss houses, but instead Chinatown activist offices, restaurant kitchens, English language classrooms,

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122 Though Wayne Wang was born in Hong Kong in 1949, I (and many) consider him a member of the insider community of Chinatown. Wang attended college in California in the 1960s, and after a brief respite working in Hong Kong television, he returned to San Francisco where worked as an English teacher for a Chinatown community organization, and on a local Chinese American kids' television show.

123 Charlie Chan mysteries are not specifically referenced as part of the Chinatown representational canon in the previous chapter, however, they can be considered akin to the "light" side of the Chinatown dichotomy. Offering an alternative to the dark and mysterious Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan was a benevolent, puzzling, but wise detective that helped Westerners solve their mysteries.



**Figure 3-1 to 3-3.** *Chan is Missing* (1981) – (left) An ESL class in Chinatown; (center) Seniors dancing at the Manilatown Senior Center in San Francisco, California; (right) Cooks in a Chinese restaurant kitchen.



**Figure 3-4, 3-5, and 3-6 (from left to right).** *Chan is Missing* (1981) – Jo moves through the space of San Francisco's Chinatown, activating the chase of the unknown specter.

and cultural recreation centers (Figures 3-1 to 3-3). The film noir-ish aspect of the story is continually referred to throughout the movie and in one memorable sequence in the film:

Jo walks and drives through the Chinatown street with the fear that he is being followed. With gripping music and a series of quick cuts – a glance in the rearview mirror, a close-up of feet walking, a look over the shoulder directly into the camera – Wang has constructed a suspenseful chase scene in which the camera perspective is that of the pursuer. This pursuer, whether a figment of Jo's imagination or a real person, is, like Chan Hung, a “negative” character whose presence is felt but not seen.<sup>124</sup> (Mark 8).

While this negative specter of doom is often present outsider conceptions of Chinatown, in *Chan is Missing*, this feeling is activated through Jo's physical movement through the space (Figures 3-4 to 3-6). Jo's *lived* experience of Chinatown is a hybrid one; lived Chinatown space involves

124 Diane Mei Lin Mark, introduction to *Chan is Missing*, by Wayne Wang (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1984), 1-9.

a complex interaction between the idea of Chinatown as perpetuated in American popular culture (and selectively embraced by the Chinatown community) and the real environment. Instead of being merely a shell in which outsiders are playing out their fantasies, the Chinatown space in *Chan is Missing* is animated in this instance by the characters interaction with it.

In his book *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video*, Peter Feng discusses Asian American films' engagement with the known stereotypes of the space. He states that Asian American filmmakers "remobilize" previous texts and engage in a "process of citation" in order to create a cinema that is "more meta-fiction than fiction."<sup>125</sup> In *Chan is Missing*, for example, both Steve and Jo self-consciously refer to themselves as Charlie Chan and his Number One Son, and (as Feng states) "seem aware that they are trapped in a pop culture stereotype... purveying and challenging their position."<sup>126</sup> In this argument, Feng invokes Homi Bhabha's understanding of stereotypes – the idea that they are simplifications, not because they are false, but rather because they are an "arrested, fixated form of representation" that denies the play of difference, and thus create a problem in signifying "psychic and social relations."<sup>127</sup> As Feng argues, *Chan is Missing* and the canon of Asian American films fight against this fixity of representation by putting identities "in motion" through the filmic medium:

Identity emerges from the friction between cited cinematic texts and the Asian American movies that incorporate them, which is to say that identity is produced by the friction between movies that arrest identity...and Asian American movies that construct identity.<sup>128</sup>

As Marc Hayashi, the actor playing Steve, says in the documentary "The Making of *Chan is Missing*" (which is included in the 2006 DVD Koch Lorber release of the film): "We were always engaged as young artists in trying to change the cultural paradigms, change the

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125 Feng *Identities in Motion*, 4.

126 *Ibid.*, 158.

127 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994, 75, quoted in Peter Feng, introduction to *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter Feng (Chapel Hill: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1-18.

128 Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 4.

stereotypes.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, Hayashi, his co-actors, and Wang not only critique these representations, but also appropriate and put them “in motion” through film in order to subvert them. One instance of this engagement, for example, occurred in post-production for the film, when Wang added a continuous voice-over for the film. While Wang’s stated goal was to clarify the narrative of the film,<sup>130</sup> he also ended up playing with and commenting on the mysterious nature of Chinatown: the voice-over is a classic film noir trope, and Jo’s narration casts a noirish tint over still shots of his apartment, Chan’s empty hotel room, and other Chinatown cityscapes. In the scene following the specter chase discussed earlier, Jo is seen sitting alone at a table with a drink. His voice-over is heard:

It’s easy to see how someone can get paranoid. I feel like I’m in the same mess Chan Hung was in, except I’m not even sure what the mess is or how much of it is in my own mind.<sup>131</sup>

The known ‘mysteriousness’ of Chinatown, as perpetuated by the media, is thus added to what might be usually perceived as the prosaic or everyday – the “dominated space” as described by Lefebvre. This voice-over activates and allows articulation of that “virtual interchange” between the character and his environment – the ways in which the imagination engages and controls perception of the space. As he states: “Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre...it embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations”.<sup>132</sup>

Feng’s concept of ever-shifting relations between Asian American “makers” and their identities also invokes Lisa Lowe’s ideas of “immigrant acts”, where Asian American identity is shaped in opposition to dominant American identity.<sup>133</sup> While Asian Americans have been placed within the “U.S. nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets”, Lowe argues they are still

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129 Dir. Debbie Lum. “The Making of *Chan is Missing*.” *Chan is Missing*, DVD. directed by Wayne Wang (Port Washington, NY: Koch Lorber Films, 2006).

130 Ibid.

131 *Chan is Missing*, DVD, directed by Wayne Wang (1982; Port Washington, NY: Koch Lorber Films, 2006).

132 Lefebvre, 41-42.

133 Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 7.

positioned “linguistically, culturally, and racially” as foreign and outside of the mainstream.<sup>134</sup> Feng expands upon this, pushing beyond the “merely oppositional” and instead focuses on Asian American filmmakers’ engagement in “an ambivalent critique of cinematic convention [itself].”<sup>135</sup> Thus, these filmmakers do not only challenge and appropriate the fixed or static stereotypes seen on film, but also the conventions that shape the entire cinematic apparatus. In “The Making of *Chan is Missing*,” Curtis Choy, the sound recordist for the film, states that Wang consciously set out to create an “anti-film” that inverted and turned inside-out, not only the prevailing Chinatown and Chinese stereotypes, but the conventions of filmmaking itself.<sup>136</sup> Wang did so both narratively – by providing a stream of seemingly condemning clues that ultimately lead to no real conclusion – and through film form – by playing with documentary-style film conventions such as the use of black and white 16mm film and handheld, single camera production techniques, which made people feel as if they were getting a nonfiction look into Chinatowns,<sup>137</sup> even while creating a whimsical, farfetched film noir.

The mobilization of Asian-American identity is further emphasized by the production of the film. *Chan is Missing* is largely improvised, based on a loose narrative thread set in place by Wang and his co-screenwriters (Issac Cronin and Terrel Seltzer). Many of the people seen in the film (extras *and* speaking roles) were non-actors who were actually San Francisco Chinatown residents. Additionally, the few actors who were in film were locally cast from the San Francisco Asian American theater scene and also familiar with Chinatown and its community. As described in “The Making of *Chan is Missing*”, the production process was as follows:

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134 Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 8.

135 Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 7.

136 Lum “The Making”

137 From Roger Ebert’s review of the film in 1982: “CHAN IS MISSING is a small, whimsical treasure of a film that gives us a real feeling for the people of San Francisco’s Chinatown. And at some point while we’re watching this film, we may realize that we have very little idea of Chinatowns, in San Francisco or elsewhere, that haven’t been shaped by mass-produced Hollywood clichés like the Charlie Chan movies.”

MARC HAYASHI (“Steve”): I’d get a call [saying] we’re going to this Rec Center...and like, [I would ask] what are we doing? Well, you’re looking for Chan. And he would give us the specific story points right there before we shot, ... and we’d let it fly.

WOOD MOY (“Jo”): And most of the people there that he filmed were not actors. He got them involved and he told them to just do what they wanted to do [in the space]...and it was up to the actors to fit into the thing.

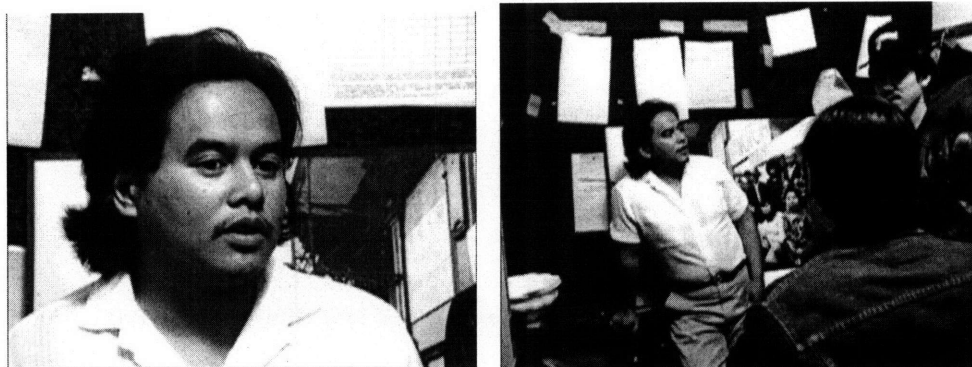
CURTIS CHOY (Sound Recordist): And everybody was live, everybody was using their intuition to interact...[it was a] very different quality from having... five A.D.s [Assistant Directors] yelling... queuing them when to walk. I mean, what you got [on film] was...because of your instinct.<sup>138</sup>

By relying on the instincts of the filmmakers as well as actual people who inhabited and used the real life San Francisco spaces, Wang captured how people naturally interacted with their environments, and thus how they performed their everyday identities – whether it is the dutiful role of ‘student’ taken on by a new Chinese immigrants in an ESL classroom (refer back to Figure 3-1), or the role of everybody’s favorite partner at salsa nights in the Manilatown Senior Center (refer back to Figure 3-2). This fluid, occasionally unconscious role-taking is not only assumed by the non-actors (such as Presco, seen in Figure 3-7, who is both a Manilatown staffer, and an occasional philosopher),<sup>139</sup> but also the actors, who assume dual roles – one that is invoked consciously by the filmmakers, and one that is spontaneously provoked at those moments when they had improvise and “fit into” the scene (Figure 3-8). In dealing with the actual “inhabitants and “users” of these Chinatown spaces, Hayashi and Moy end up using their own familiarity (or unfamiliarity) within the situations in order to fuel their acting. As a result, many of the “mistakes’ made during filming – including Moy’s actual initial confusion when speaking to other actors who decide to go off-script, and Hayashi’s accidentally calling himself Chan, instead of his character name, Choy – are not only captured on film, but incorporated in the rest of the performance. Erving Goffman describes this kind of subtle and occasionally spontaneous performance in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*:

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138 Lum “The Making”

139 Lum “The Making”



**Figure 3-7 and 3-8.** *Chan is Missing* (1981) – (left) Presco, a staff worker at the Manilatown Senior Center; (right) The actors Marc Hayashi and Wood Moy “fit into” the scene.

The way in which the individual in ordinary...situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them.<sup>140</sup>

Wang thus activates San Francisco’s Chinatown as seen on camera through the filming of actual people functioning and moving within these spaces; for example, the Manilatown Senior Center (refer back to Figure 3-2) only becomes a lived space on film by the inclusion of actual members of the club into the shot, who are seen dancing and talking inside the room. Wang also captures the fluid switching of roles as inspired by surroundings, including Presco (seen in Figure 3-7) who assumes the role of Manilatown staff worker when placed inside its offices (shown through his official stance and speaking tone) but also a Filipino spokesman in the presence the Jo and Steve (who are both Chinese characters). Presco also becomes an amateur philosopher when questioned (during an improvised moment in the scene) about the nature of Chan Hung’s identity while on camera (speaking in hushed tones about the “puddle” that defines Asian American identity). Wang manages to capture the playing of roles as spurred on by the interchange between subjects and their surroundings on film, and thus, the continually shifting process of

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140 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), xi.

identity formation and everyday performance. In the end, to use Marc Hayashi's words, Wang ends up accomplishing the somewhat impossible task of "trapping lighting in a bottle."<sup>141</sup>

### *Space as the Medium – The Chinese Restaurant*

If filmmakers use the cinema as a medium to play out these negotiations between Asian Americans and their Chinatown identities, then we might consider how the medium of Boston's Chinatown and its physical, tangible space illustrates the negotiations between Chinatown 'inhabitants' and 'users' and their surroundings on the plain of lived space. While Feng categorizes filmmakers' active critique of stereotypes within Lowe's group of "immigrant acts", we might also think about the everyday performance of Chinatown people within the same locus. In order to do this, we must first unpack Lowe's use of the phrase itself, and its two connotations. First, the term immigrant acts "invokes the history of Asian immigration to the United States since the mid-nineteenth century," or in particular those "immigration exclusion acts that restricted and regulated the possibilities of Asian American settlement and cultural expression."<sup>142</sup> Second, this phrase also "names the *agency* of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans," which include "the *acts* of labor, resistance, memory, and survival as well as the politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification."<sup>143</sup> The act of everyday performance might also be added to this list, since it can be constitutive of those categories of labor, resistance, memory and survival. A description of performance as such can be seen in Jan Lin's discussion of contemporary Manhattan Chinatown:<sup>144</sup>

The subtle irony of Chinatown as touristic presentation is that the creative and culinary activities of ethnic insiders (including artists, preservationist, and restaurant workers) are

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141 Lum "The Making"

142 Lowe, 6-7.

143 Ibid., 9.

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not just a matter of functional cultural practices internal to the enclave but a *performative* repertoire of cultural displays that increasingly serve the consumptive and spectating demands of outsider audiences. Within the tourist economy, then, ethnicity and community are *dramaturgical* phenomena emanating from daily and seasonal rituals of conduct among enclave participants, self-consciously enacted in the presence of non-enclave observers.<sup>145</sup>

Three issues are evident in Lin's description of New York City's Chinatown. First, Lin seems to expand the definition of performance beyond the idea that it belongs to a single person; performance can also be assumed by an entire community (which includes people and their surroundings), and made into a "performative repertoire of cultural displays." Thus, the physical space, through shaping of the "cultural display," becomes a part of the everyday performance of Chinatown. Second, there exists a self-consciousness about the performance of a role (or stereotype) for outsiders, which is reminiscent of the early Chinatown rubbernecking tours<sup>146</sup> described in the previous chapter and their influence on subsequent filmic Chinatowns. In particular, this self-consciousness highlights the agency (as discussed by Lowe) of the performers in assuming these roles. Finally, Lin's connection between the "functional cultural practices" of the community (which can be thought of in terms of spatial practice or perceived space) and its "*performative* repertoire of cultural displays" (which falls into the realm of lived space) allows us to connect the analysis of Boston Chinatown's physical, tangible environment seen in the first chapter with an examination of the everyday performances of the same space in this chapter.

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145 Lin, 205.

146 This might be evidenced by the previously discussed example of rubberneckers in a Chinatown theater. As discussed by Haenni, when theater performers in Chinatown at the time were made conscious of rubberneckers on tour, they stopped their regular rehearsal and instead performed something more suitable from their "performative repertoire of cultural displays" that was specifically designed for limited consumption by tourists. Though this performance is more literal, one could imagine a more subtle performance by others in Chinatown, such as grocery clerks or restaurant waiter, who might behave differently (consciously or not) when they know they are being watched by outsiders to the community.

In this analysis then, it becomes useful to examine the period in Boston Chinatown when these presentations were first consciously devised, and how these eventually began to shape lived space. While tourists started visiting American Chinatowns in the late nineteenth century (through rubbernecking tours), these excursions only began to actively form the physical and aesthetic spaces of the neighborhood once people began looking for Chinese food. I return, then, to the perspective used to analyze perceived space in the first chapter: namely, how visitors decide which restaurants to frequent. In his paper “Dinner at the Den: Chinese Restaurants in Boston 1900-1950”, Todd Stevens discusses how Chinese restaurants in Boston (following trends occurring New York) began catering to outsider audiences in the 1920s.<sup>147</sup> Previously, Chinatown restaurants were only frequented by sojourning Chinese workers from throughout New England during holidays and days off. In the 1920s, however, it became clear that Chinese restaurant owners were attempting to attract a more diverse customer base through their use of the phrase “CHOP SUEY” (purely an American invention<sup>148</sup>) in their menus and their advertisements.<sup>149</sup> However for the most part, décor of these spaces still resembled other American restaurants<sup>150</sup>. Only in the late 1930s and after World-War II did Chinese restaurants begin to “orientalize” their physical environments for the purposes of attracting Western customers, presumably after popular interest in the East began to rise and Asian décor became

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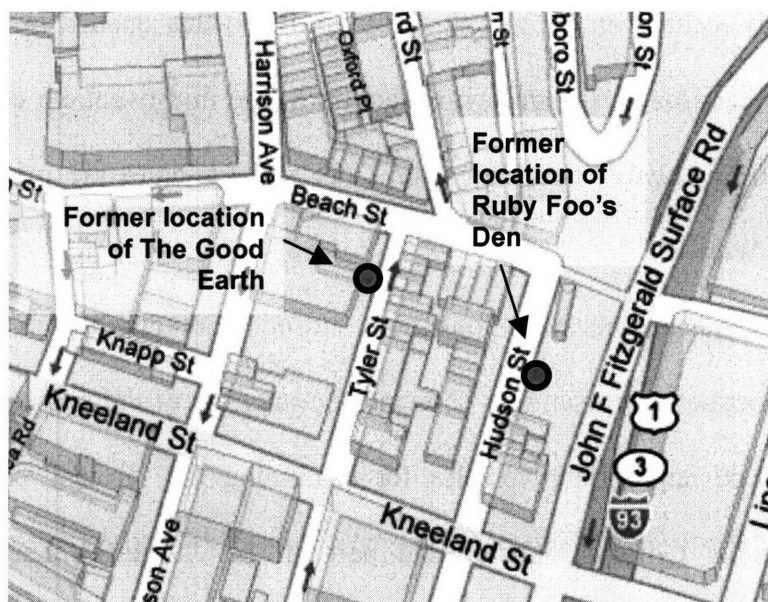
147 Todd Stevens, “Dinner at the Den: Chinese Restaurants in Boston 1900-1950” (research paper, Princeton University, 1998), 12-14.

148 Stevens describes the origin of this dish: “Chop Suey...was a uniquely American phenomenon, [which]... consisted of a mixture of vegetables, usually bean sprouts, and noodles, boiled into a soupy mixture flavored mildly with soy sauce. This bore little resemblance to traditional Chinese cooking with cooked meats and vegetables by stir-frying or quick sautéing in a thin metal wok. With the exception of preparing rice, food in China was seldom boiled or stewed in the Anglo tradition due to chronic fuel shortages” (Ibid., 10).

149 Ibid., 12. For more information on Chop Suey ‘joints’ of the same time in New York City, see Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 66.

150 According to Stevens, “most chop suey houses [of the 1920s and 1930s] were distinguished by the low cost of the food and...[the] spartan surroundings [designed for]...a working class clientele. By contrast...[Chinatown] clubs [which occasionally served Chinese food] dripped with traditional representations of luxury. And in the late 1920s and early 1930s, luxury did not include imagery of China” (Ibid., 22).

more well-known in the United States.<sup>151</sup> Thus, while I examined the physical, tangible environments of Chinatown in chapter 1 as products of business competition and spatial practice, here I consider how signage and other decorative elements of the space can be thought of integral parts in the performance of “Chinese-ness”.



**Figure 3-9.** Map of Chinatown with former locations of The Good Earth and Ruby Foo’s Den (from Google Maps)

In returning to Boston’s Chinatown, I highlight two notable examples of these performative Chinese environments: Ruby Foo’s Den and The Good Earth Restaurant. Both of these spaces were former Chinese restaurants that specifically focused on outsider audiences, and located in Boston’s Chinatown in the period of the 1930s-1950s. Ruby Foo, one of the first Chinese female restaurant owners in the country, began her chain of Chinese restaurants in Boston with Ruby Foo’s Den in 1929, which was located on 6 Hudson Street (Figure 3-9). The restaurant quickly became popular, and was “heralded as the first Chinese restaurant to

<sup>151</sup> This explosion of all things Asian after World War II is further discussed further in Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism*, cited earlier.

successfully cater to non-Chinese clientele.”<sup>152</sup> The restaurant also had a steady stream of celebrity guests through the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, Ruby Foo herself became a city-wide celebrity and socialite until her death in 1950.<sup>153</sup> The Good Earth restaurant, named after Pearl S. Buck’s famed novel on Chinese peasant life, was another Chinese restaurant in Chinatown (formerly located on 5 Tyler Street, Figure 3-9) that opened in 1944. Along with Cathay House (another Boston Chinatown restaurant of the mid-twentieth century), The Good Earth “symbolized Chinatowns’s new image” on Tyler Street as an exotic, orientalized restaurant district after World War II.<sup>154</sup>

Though these restaurants have long been closed, photographs of their exteriors, and newspaper and magazine advertisements showing the interiors of the spaces are still available. These images provide appropriate vehicles for examining the “fronts” of these restaurants performances, or what Goffman labels “that part of the ... performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.”<sup>155</sup> Goffman mentions two main elements of the front, which include the “appearance”, or “those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s...status”, and the “manner”, “those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation.”<sup>156</sup> In this analysis, I compare the exterior and interior décor of the space to the “appearance” of the performance, and I compare the print materials of the space (i.e. the newspaper advertisements and the menus), as well as any information about the happenings within the space, to the “manner” of the front. Both the

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152 Wing-kai To and the Chinese Historical Society of New England, *Images of America: Massachusetts, Chinese in Boston, 1970-1965* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 81.

153 Stevens, 26-27. Also, “Ask the Globe” *The Boston Globe*, August 2, 1996, Friday, City Edition.

154 *Ibid.*, 36.

155 Goffman, 22.

156 *Ibid.*, 24.

appearance and the manner set the stage not only for the physical, social and economic interactions that will occur within the space, but also the mental (“virtual”) interactions that occur between people and their surroundings.

The physical environment of these two restaurants were similar in that they both appropriated and assumed stereotypical images of “Chinese-ness” that circulated throughout popular culture during the times of their existence. The Good Earth restaurant, for example, appropriated the title of Pearl S. Buck’s good-willed novel on Chinese peasants, and Ruby Foo’s Den employed a visual image, reminiscent of the nefarious Chinese villain Fu Manchu in its décor. However, while the appearance of the performances for these restaurants seems opposed, they actually project a similar manner of performance. This manner, projected in the print advertisements for the spaces, promotes the idea that visiting these restaurants is akin to visiting a foreign land or embarking on an exciting adventure.

### *Ruby Foo’s Den*

During its existence, Ruby Foo’s Den prominently featured an image of a slanty-eyed, goateed Chinese man in both its neon signage (Figure 3-10), and its print advertisements (Figure 3-11). While this image might not have specifically represented the character Fu Manchu, it was certainly evocative of the “monstrous Mandarin” villain, which was well known in its time. In his discussion of Asians in early American film, Eugene Franklin Wong traces the lineage of this face, especially its “drooping mustache, later to be known as the Fu Manchu mustache” from the days of the Yellow Peril. Wong states:

The anti-Asiatic, that is, anti-Sinitic, efforts of the industry were beginning to crystallize throughout the 1920s into the 1930s, with the Chinese, and the Japanese to a lesser degree, serving as representatives of all Asiatics. In the evolution of perhaps the most famous and infamous of all Asian serial characters, Fu Manchu, at least two earlier

cinematic characters were subsumed in rapid sequence before the final product was presented to the American public.<sup>157</sup>

As products of the Yellow Peril, these characters were also ‘orientalized’ villains with sinister faces. However, it was only after the Fu Manchu films became popular, that people began to associate the “gaunt, feline,...high-shouldered” being with drooping mustache and goatee with a particular personage. Created by Sax Rohmer in 1913, the character of Fu Manchu was a diabolical, Chinese villain who resided in London’s Limehouse district. The stories of Fu Manchu “depict[ed] detectives of Britian’s Scotland Yard confronting this ‘evil force from the East’ who led an international outlaw organization of non-white peoples, the ‘Si-Fan and the Council of Seven,’ in their quest to overthrow and dominate the West through conspiratorial means.”<sup>158</sup> Patrons of Ruby Foo’s were probably as familiar with the visage of Fu Manchu as the adventure stories that accompanied it, which were released in print starting in 1913, and that later inspired films and television shows from the 1920s-1950s. Though Fu Manchu represented the “epitome of Chinese treachery and cunning” and the ultimate “Asian enemy”<sup>159</sup> many of his stories highlighted the mysteriousness and exoticism of their location – the Limehouse District (or London’s Chinatown) – as much as its villain<sup>160</sup>. As Rohmer once stated: “I MADE MY NAME ON FU MANCHU BECAUSE I KNOW NOTHING ABOUT the Chinese...I know something about Chinatown. But that is a different matter.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, more than referencing an evil character, the use of the Fu Manchu image in the décor of Ruby Foo’s Den might have

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<sup>157</sup> Eugene Franklin Wong, “The Early Years: Asians in American Films Prior to World War II,” in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter Feng (Chapel Hill: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 56.

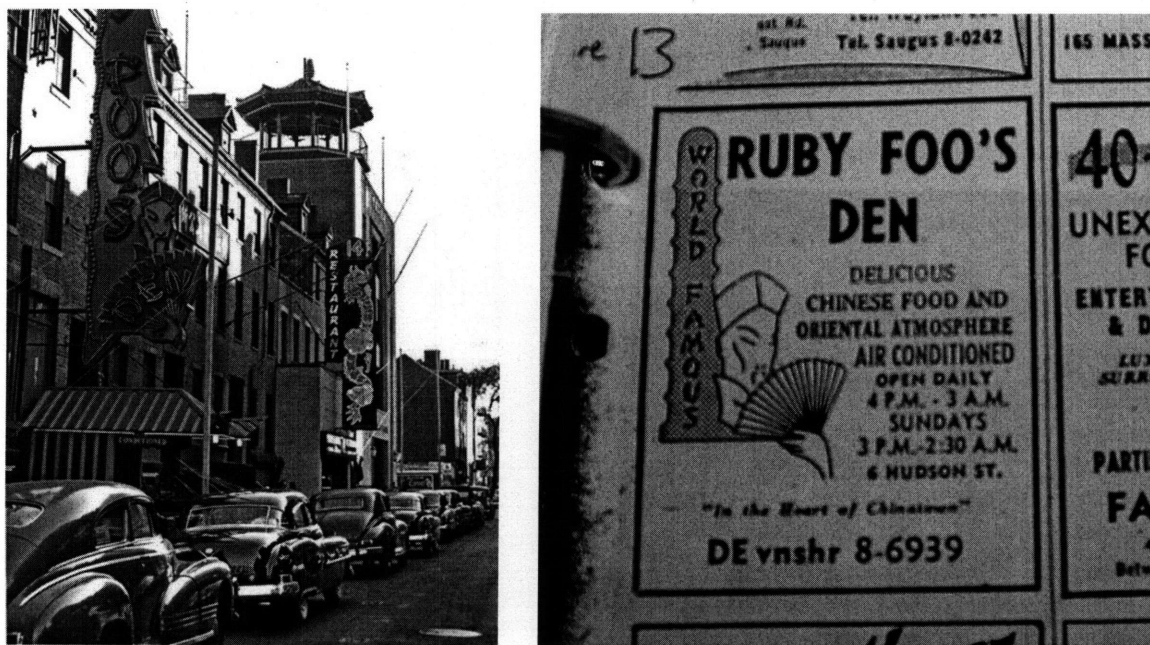
<sup>158</sup> Lin, 177.

<sup>159</sup> Wong, 56.

<sup>160</sup> Eugene Franklin Wong discusses Sax Rohmer’s preoccupation with Chinatown: “To Rohmer, Chinatown represented, as it did to most white Englishmen..., a living mysterious filled with the enchantments, dangers and wonders of the ancient East. And like many whites, Sax was preoccupied with the more seamy aspects of Chinatown, both real and imagined’ (Wong 57).

<sup>161</sup> Cay Van Ash and Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, *Mastery of Villany: A Biography of Sax Rohmer* (London: Tom Stacey, 1972), 72.

conjured up ideas of visiting and experiencing unfamiliar locales. The experience of being in an exotic environment is supported by “manner” of the restaurant’s performance, as illustrated in the print advertisements for the restaurant; the ad for Ruby Foo’s Den below features statements such as “Oriental Atmosphere” and “In the Heart of Chinatown” thus stressing the décor and environment in addition to the food itself (Figure 3-8). Potential customers of Ruby Foo’s Den who saw these advertisements in the newspaper were thus already positioned as tourists about to embark exciting excursion to the space.

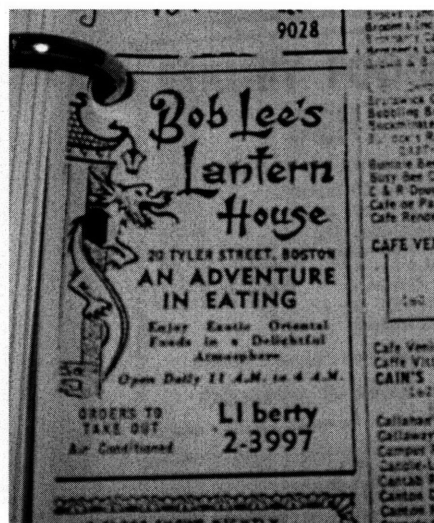


**Figure 3-10 (left).** The exterior of Ruby Foo’s Den in 1950. The neon sign features a Fu Manchu-like character (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*)

**Figure 3-11 (right).** A newspaper advertisement for Ruby Foo’s Den

The interior space and business practices of Ruby Foo’s Den also reinforce this idea of dining as foreign adventure. As can be seen in the menu cover (Figure 3-12) of the restaurant, the dining room is exoticized by the addition of Chinese lanterns, dragon figurines, and a fake pagoda. In Stevens’ discussion of Ruby Foo’s Den, he also mentions the restaurant’s unique

practice of encouraging its customers to try new and authentic Chinese foods (as instigated by the waiters). Whereas previously visitors to Chinatown had only been accustomed to Americanized Chinese foods such as chop suey, Ruby Foo's Den developed a specialized menu that included traditional Cantonese cuisine along with new tastes (such as "dark sauce" or Oyster sauce), which was thought by Foo and her staff as both authentic and pleasing to its patrons.<sup>162</sup> The culinary adventure or eating authentic Chinese food was also highlighted by other Chinatown restaurants during that time; an advertisement for Bob Lee's Lantern House (Figure 3-13) called a visit to their location "An Adventure in Eating," where one could "Enjoy Exotic Oriental Foods in a Delightful Atmosphere".



**Figure 3-12 (left).** An image of the Ruby Foo's Den interior as printed on their menu cover (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*)

**Figure 3-13 (right).** A newspaper advertisement for Bob Lee's Lantern House.

The presence of celebrity clientele and the general atmosphere of Ruby Foo's Den further underpinned the idea that the restaurant was not only a place to eat, but also a place to be. The

<sup>162</sup> Stevens, 25.



stylishness of the locale (at least as it was projected by the restaurant itself) was announced on the menu of Ruby Foo's Den (refer back to Figure 3-7) with the phrase: "Chinatown's Smartest Restaurant". As the writer of "The Wisdom Box," a daily feature in the *Record American* in the 1930s, journalist George MacKinnon recorded Boston's social life and often reported on celebrity sightings in Ruby Foo's Den. MacKinnon once noted that Ruby Foo herself was also a draw for potential customers, speaking of her as "Boss lady Ruby," a woman with "aplomb" who'd be "unfeared if Hitler and Rabbi Wise strolled in arm-in-arm."<sup>163</sup> Her social clout within the city was stressed in numerous stories about the restaurant: "Her charisma and social standing brought her recognition from one corner of Boston society and, most likely, *new customers to her Chinatown restaurant.*"<sup>164</sup>

### *The Good Earth*

Following in the footsteps of Ruby Foo's Den, The Good Earth restaurant also reinforced its décor and atmosphere as much as its food. However, while the former restaurant appropriated the visage of Fu Manchu-like character for its own use, The Good Earth relied on Pearl S. Buck's sympathetic look at Chinese peasant life in her novel of the same name. Released 1931, the book was extremely popular in its time (it was later made into both a successful play and film), and was for many Americans of the period the pre-eminent representation of Chinese culture.<sup>165</sup> If Fu Manchu was "a representation of... the global threat posed by the Yellow Peril...in the interwar period following the collapse of the Manchu (Qing) dynasty,"<sup>166</sup> then Buck's story reinforced her own efforts to "create the sense of friendship, identification, and

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163 Stevens, 27.

164 Ibid., 27.

165 Klein, 4.

166 Lin, 177.

solidarity that many Americans felt toward China in the 1930s and 1940s.”<sup>167</sup> The contrary nature of these popular culture images (Fu Manchu and *The Good Earth*) seems also to manifest itself within the décor of both spaces. While Ruby Foo’s Den clearly relied on orientalized décor and aesthetics, The Good Earth restaurant relied on a more ‘Western’ aesthetic and modern amenities such as air-conditioning (a rarity in the 1940s when the restaurant opened) in order to attract customers (see the exterior of The Good Earth in Figure 3-14). The restaurant, built in 1940<sup>168</sup>, had a distinctive curved glass block façade that reflected the Moderne Style of Art Deco.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, the interior of The Good Earth was also was for the most part ‘Westernized’ and modern, with individual booths and sleek interior with only a few added ‘Oriental’ flourishes such as Chinese-style murals on the walls (Figure 3-14).



**Figure 3-14.** A newspaper advertisement for The Good Earth restaurant. (borrowed from *Images of America: Chinese in Boston 1870-1965*)

<sup>167</sup> Klein, 123.

<sup>168</sup> There is some confusion about the architect of The Good Earth as well as the year it was built; whereas some documents cite Archie Raskin 1940, others mention Harvard and MIT-trained Eddie Chin Park in 1944. It is possible however that the confusion arises because these architects designed different parts of the façade and the interior and thus, at different times.

<sup>169</sup> Krim, 18.

While the décor and the chosen markers of Chinese identity differed between Ruby Foo's Den and The Good Earth, they both projected the similar idea that a visit to these restaurants would be an adventurous and exotic experience. An advertisement for restaurant (refer back to Figure 3-14) announces that it is "Boston's Most Unusual Eating Place", invoking Lisa Lowe's idea that Asian American identity is formed in opposition to a dominant American culture; a 'most *usual* eating place' implies an American-style restaurant that does not serve any kind of 'ethnic' food. The use of this phrase additionally highlights the idea of eating out as an event in and of itself; the restaurant as the site of a potentially "unusual" experience that includes not only the food but also the ambiance of the space. Ironically, the physical styling of The Good Earth restaurant probably did resemble other American restaurants at time, at least as compared to the more highly-orientalized Ruby Foo's Den. However, the previously mentioned "manner" of the space (defining itself as an alternative, "unusual" venue) seems to hark back to Sax Rohmer's declaration about his knowing "nothing about the Chinese" but knowing "something about Chinatowns." Like Rohmer, the spaces of Ruby Foo's Den and The Good Earth are somewhat unmoored to any ideas about the actual Chinese (save the presence of Ruby Foo herself, as a well-known celebrity), but instead both seem to comprise two imaginary versions of Chinatown – one hyper-exotic, and the other futuristic – both of which (along with the food offered at these places) create fantasy spaces where one could experience a Chinese exotic adventure. Thus, the physical decor and its advertisements set up a framework for lived space, not only how inhabitants (the staff of the restaurant) and the users (the customers) physically interact within the space, but also how this space is lived through these "associated images and symbols"<sup>170</sup> of tourist and guide.

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170 Lefebvre, 39.

*Layers of Performance – A Return to Contemporary Boston Chinatown*

The above examinations of the “fronts” of Ruby Foo’s Den and The Good Earth tell us that both spaces are set up as places of foreign excursion. Of course, this scenario determines the “codes” of the space, or the systems of signification that dictate relationships between people and their “constructed, spatial worlds,” which are, according to Lefebvre, specific to particular historical periods and groups of people.<sup>171</sup> These codes, as set up by the restaurateurs and agreed to by the visitors, shape not only how the host, waiters, busboys, and customers act within the space, but also how they mentally perceive this interaction as it occurs within this particular space. An important element of this code, then, is the self-awareness (of all the parties involved) of the projected ‘exotic’ nature of the environment. While the performance of “Chineseness” by restaurant workers and restaurant décor may seem false, the inclusion of these stereotypes into the everyday life seems to contradict this judgment. This assumption of projected-Chineseness can be seen through the addition of a ‘fake’ Chinese food dishes such as General Gau’s Chicken into the menu of a restaurant that also serves authentic Cantonese dishes like Shark Fin Soup, or by designers who use the “Shanghai” font (seen in China Pearl’s signage in Figure 1-15 in chapter 1) alongside Chinese text in restaurant signage, even though this typeface was originally an attempt at making Western alphabetic letters look more ‘Chinese.’ In his analysis of everyday presentation Goffman describes this “cycle of disbelief-to-belief” in performance, or the move from cynicism about one’s act to sincerity. He states:

I have suggested two extremes: an individual may be taken in by his own act or be cynical about it. These extremes are something a little more than just the ends of a continuum. Each provides the individual with a position which has its own particular securities and defenses, so there will be a tendency for those who have traveled close to one of these poles to complete the voyage.<sup>172</sup>

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171 Lefebvre, 17-18.

172 Goffman, 18-20.

In the case of *Chan is Missing* and the Boston Chinatown restaurants, then, how do performers end up completing the voyage between cynicism and sincerity? In *Chan is Missing*, it seems that the cynical (and therefore conscious) performance of stereotypes is exemplified by the characters Steve and Jo (who assume identities such as Charlie Chan and his Number One Son) and the space of San Francisco Chinatown (which is made by director Wayne Wang into a dark, foreboding environments). However, the actual people seen in the film seem to embody more closely the sincere, unconscious everyday performance of lived space – where roles like the philosopher of Asian American identity (taken on by Presco), or the Filipina salsa dancer (refer back to Figure 3-2) are taken on within cynicism. While this group includes the non-actors, it also, at some points, includes the actors as well, whose previously mentioned spontaneous reactions and improvisations as required to “fit into” the Chinatown scenes, can be considered another kind of everyday performance (as opposed to an overtly theatrical one). This can be seen, for example, in the instant where Marc Hayashi, when accidentally calling himself Chan instead of Choy (his character name), ends up, in the moment, incorporating the blunder (he says “Chan – Choy – Chan – Choy!” and then chuckles) into his everyday speech. Though he is on camera in this moment, he is not playing the role of Steve Choy, he is instead performing his everyday, ‘sincere’ role of improvisational actor on the set of the movie, *Chan is Missing*. The move between disbelief and belief, then, might be examined through the lens of these actors, who, while “cynically” playing roles, break into “sincere” moments of improvisation.

In the case of Boston’s Chinatown, how do the stereotypes and roles cynically performed by Ruby Foo’s Den and The Good Earth eventually become sincere parts of the neighborhood’s everyday life? At what point did this shift occur? In the case of the restaurants, it seems likely that the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act might have spurred a change in self-positioning.

With a general increase in the Chinese population, the clientele for all Chinatown restaurants began to expand. Not only were there more people available to work in or own these restaurants, there were also more Asians, and specifically Chinese, to frequent them. Today, there are barely any restaurants in Boston's Chinatown that cater specifically to a non-Chinese audience; a look through most restaurant windows or their menus show that they are prepared for all sorts of audiences: Chinese, non-Chinese, people familiar with the particular cuisine, people who are not familiar with the particular cuisine, people who read Chinese and people who do not.<sup>173</sup> Of course, these categories are not exclusive; they all overlap. A recent PRC (People's Republic of China) arrival from Northern China, for example, might read Chinese but might not be familiar with the Southern Chinese (or Cantonese) cuisine served in a particular restaurant<sup>174</sup>. In general, there is an increased diversity of Asian nationalities present in the U.S., as well as diversity regarding different regions in China. Before 1965, the immigrants from China were mostly homogenous; Chinese in America were all from either Taishan or Canton province in Southern China<sup>175</sup>. Today, incoming immigrants come from all parts of the PRC. Diversity has also increased generationally; before the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act, there were few families in Chinatown (mostly because of the restrictions immigration for women) and thus few children as well (many Chinese immigrants before 1965 were actually born in China and brought in as paper sons, as discussed in the "Chinatown Basics" Section). Today, however, there has

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173 Evidence of this is the multiplicity of menus usually available in Chinese restaurants: one in Chinese with set meals, for those most familiar with the cuisine, one in English and Chinese used for picking individual dishes, for those who are interested in exploring, and a set menu of dinner and lunch printed in English for those who are novices of Chinese cuisine.

174 This distinction can be taken even further; though many of the Boston Chinatown restaurants serve Cantonese food, this might not be "authentic" to someone recently arriving from Hong Kong because of the time lapse. It is possible that a Chinese chef in a Boston cooks in a style that might be years older than what is currently seen in Asia. It should also be noted that many Chinese cooks in the U.S. were likely not professional chefs in Asia and therefore prepare food in a more casual, home-cooked style than one might be accustomed to in restaurants in Asian cities.

175 This was mostly due to immigration patterns at the time – with the "paper son" route, the only Chinese entering the country were directly connected to the population that was already in the U.S.. Even if they were not really relatives of the sponsors, they were certainly from the same village or region of China.

been a great increase of second-generation Chinese, born in this country, who are familiar with both Chinese *and* American culture. Like many other visitors to Chinatown, these American Born Chinese (ABCs for short) also were exposed to those stereotypes of the Chinese and Chinatown as perpetuated in the media, and may be as familiar with ‘fake’ Chinese dishes (General Gau’s Chicken and Egg Foo Young) and stereotypes (Detective Charlie Chan spouting “Confucius say” statements) as “sincere,” authentic Chinese culture and cuisine. With the increased fracturing of the Chinese community in the U.S. then, the roles and performances assumed by Chinatown inhabitants and the Chinatown environment can no longer be focused on the “consumptive and spectating demands” (as previously described by Lin) of just one specific outsider audience. Instead, there is the simultaneous acting of multiple roles and stereotypes aimed toward multiple audiences, not only by the *people* of Chinatown, but by the *spaces* as well.

Returning to the space of contemporary Boston Chinatown, then, we might reframe our analysis of the Empire Garden Chinese Restaurant as discussed in the introduction through the perspective of everyday performance and the idea that the physical space of the restaurant is actually the simultaneous enactment of multiple roles. Beyond its extravagant interior, it announces through its “front” exterior signage (see Figure 0-1 in Introduction) that it serves “Dim Sum”, “Chinese Delicacies”, and “Exotic Cocktails” – foods that all cater to different audiences, whether they be Chinatown residents and Chinese families looking for Saturday morning fare (“Dim Sum”) or Boston tourists looking to experience the exoticism of Chinatown (“Chinese Delicacies” and “Exotic Cocktails”). The hybrid décor of the interior does not only announce the history of the physical space (a burlesque theater-turned-Chinese banquet hall) but also performs roles for its patrons. For the people of Boston’s Chinatown, it has become *the*

location for large community events both because of the enormity of its dining room and elaborate décor. The restaurant has hosted everything from weddings to major celebrations for Chinatown organizations (including annual New Year celebrations, as well as a party honoring the historic Kwong Kow Chinese School of Boston in 2007). Additionally, the restaurant (and the supermarket on the first level of the complex) has political meaning for Chinatown residents since it was constructed in defiance of the growing Combat Zone (as mentioned in the introduction). This space also works to resist stereotypes of Chinatown generally; as discussed by Eric Schaefer and Eithne Johnson, the Combat Zone was often framed within rhetoric of the body (i.e. the place “down there,” or containing the “city’s low,”),<sup>176</sup> thus creating a real-life manifestation of the moral ‘underbelly’ or ‘underground’ that was usually imposed upon imaginary Chinatowns (mentioned in last chapter). Of course, the space also assumes these stereotypes as much as it detracts from them; for Chinatown visitors (as announced on the review site Yelp.com), Empire Garden remains a fun, adventurous destination for dining that holds no particular political weight. One reviewer writes in her comments (on January 29, 2008):

The restaurant itself was the coolest aspect of this experience. The interior is creepy in a fun way, and as I was eating I couldn't help but look around at the crazy murals and large groups of families eating alongside me.

Thus, the physical environment of the space includes not only the décor, but also other people engaged in their own performance of using and inhabiting the space. Consequently, the people, the space, and the interactions between the two as seen and experienced within Empire Garden restaurant are all essential parts of that “*performative repertoire of cultural displays*” which form the everyday performance of Boston’s Chinatown.

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176 Schafer and Johnson’s article on the Combat Zone specifically employs Stallybrass and White’s idea of the city as body (seen in Stallybrass and Whites’ book, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*), for more please see Eric Schaefer and Eithne Johnson, “Quarantined! A Case Study of Boston’s Combat Zone” in *Hop on Pop*, ed. Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 430-453.



## *Conclusion*

As seen in this chapter, Chinatown, rather than being an “imagined community” (as defined by Benedict Anderson), is shown to be an *enacted* community, where the “performative repertoire of cultural displays” becomes the binding element that unites the group. This association is not merely formed through physical activities or action, but also through these sites of these performances, whether it is film (as in *Chan is Missing*), or a physical environment (as in Boston’s Chinatown). These sites can be the medium through which identities and hence performances of such are negotiated, as well as the sites that record these negotiations – a palimpsest of differing Asian, and Asian American identities. These sites therefore become “social space”, which is, according to Lefebvre, produced by every society.<sup>177</sup> This space is not just “a collection of things,” “an aggregate of (sensory) data,” or “a void packed...with various contents”<sup>178</sup> but instead something that is actively produced through the process not of only living *in* a space, but living *through* it, through the roles of everyday life. As suggested by sociologist Robert Ezra Park (as quoted in Goffman):

In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons.<sup>179</sup>

Thus, the enactment of these roles not only involves a change in attitude from cynicism to sincerity, but itself becomes the impetus for the development of an entire identity, which is, to paraphrase Stephen Gong, the result of a cultural collision (between new and old immigrants, and among the perceived, conceived and lived notions of itself), as well as the awareness of these distinctions, and thus, the “emergence of a new [Chinatown] generation.”<sup>180</sup>

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177 Lefebvre, 31.

178 Lefebvre, 27.

179 Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950), p.249, quoted in Goffman, 19-20.

180 Lum, “The Making”



## **CONCLUSION –**

In this thesis, we have seen the usefulness of Lefebvre's spatial triad in making transparent the construction of Visual Chinatowns in the perceived, conceived and lived realms. However, Lefebvre himself might take task with this, since as he states in *The Production of Space*, this theory may not be generalizable across different types of locales. In particular, he discusses how the triad might not apply to East Asian, or particularly Chinese spaces, because of their logogrammatic writing system. Because Chinese writing developed from single pictorial symbols (that wholly represent a word rather than alphabetical units that come together to form a word), written Chinese is more closely linked to its initial symbolic meaning. For example, the radical (or visual components of Chinese characters) for "woman" plus "child" represents "good," whereas "woman plus "birth" means "surname." Thus, in Chinese, the symbolic experience of the space (lived space) is still enmeshed within the written representation of it (conceived space). In this case, Lefebvre asks himself whether or not the separation between conceptualized space and lived space, which is clear in Western language and therefore Western space, is as clear in Asian spaces. This thesis therefore might be considered a test of the Lefebvre's spatial triad in an Asian context.<sup>181</sup>

In defining my three categories of spatial understanding, however, I was necessarily influenced by my own hybrid experience of Chinatowns. In the first chapter, I perceived the space of Tyler Street in Boston's Chinatown using my personal understanding of Chinese culture, reading for spatial (and thus economic and cultural) practices I have become familiar with during my sojourns through the space – whether it be eating Cantonese-prepared lobster in a Flushing, Queens (a satellite Chinatown of New York City), or getting my hair styled in the newest salon Boston's Chinatown. Through a visual examination of the signage and architecture

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<sup>181</sup> Lefebvre, 42.

of Tyler Street, I arrived at a more thorough understanding of the systems of production (especially as related to rental practices and competition between businesses), as well as the social interactions (between visitors and inhabitants, and stratified members of the Chinatown community) that govern the Chinese restaurants on the street.

In the following chapter, however, I redefined Lefebvre's category of conceived space (namely those official, 'frontal' representations) within the thesis, in order to provide greater alignment with my personal experience of growing up in the United States. For me, the 'scientific' explanation of Chinatown (as gained through aggregated statistics, facts, and figures) or the overt political positioning of the neighborhood (through city plans or legislation about the space) was not as dominant as the popular culture representations of it that I was subject to through science fiction television shows, adventure stories or television news specials. In this way, the shifting of this term to encompass the 'Western' aspects of (or perspectives on) Chinatown already takes the thesis away from examination of a purely 'Eastern' space. Also discussed in this chapter is the fact that most media representations of Chinatown additionally frame it within the lens of tourism, and therefore perpetually in a state of foreignness.<sup>182</sup> Thus, the theoretical shift made here, which already moves further from Lefebvre's initial spatial triad, already begins to conflate the symbolic understanding of the space by visitors (as foreign or Other) with the representations of it within popular culture.

The last chapter of the thesis consciously mixes together the representations (conceived) and representational (lived) realms of Chinatown most closely. Involved in a continual "virtual" interchange with stereotypes, real Chinatown people and spaces (such as those as seen in the film *Chan is Missing* – in its use of actual San Francisco Chinatown inhabitants – or seen the physical

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<sup>182</sup> Sabine Haenni's discussion of the fundamental unknowability of Chinese logogrammatic writing as discussed in chapter 2 further highlights this idea.

spaces of Boston's Chinatown – including the restaurants, Ruby Foo's Den, The Good Earth, and Empire Garden) are seen to be engaged in a cycle of constant performance. This performance not only encompasses the images and symbols (or representational aspects) of Chinatown stereotypes, but also involves self-consciousness about such, which is foundational in developing its identity. Thus, enactment of these stereotypes in real life (and the collision between these two realms of conceived and lived space) seems to yield a new spatial understanding about hybrid spaces (i.e. the Chinese American site of Chinatown) apart from Lefebvre's spatial triad, which cannot be as easily separated into its component parts.

This thesis then is not an exact application of Lefebvre's ideas onto the space of Chinatown. As such, it does not accomplish the goal of creating a comprehensive picture of the whole production of space; instead, my perception of Boston Chinatown (seen through the deciphering of the physical environment of Tyler Street) is conflated with my imagined understanding of it (as formed by the interpretation of certain films through the lens of tourism), as well as my lived experience of it (as seen through the dissection of the space of the film *Chan is Missing*, as well as those historic locales of Ruby Foo's Den and The Good Earth). I do not, therefore, generate information about the unanimous social space of Chinatown, of which true 'knowledge' can be produced by hitting all its constituent parts (spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space), but instead I produce knowledge about a personally known Chinatown, which is created within the purview of one's own lived experience within the space.



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