

Modern Transformation of Chinatown's Traditional Functions

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ABSTRACT

This article starts with the role of Chinatown in its history and explores its traditional functions in depth. The authors believe that Chinatown is a concentrated embodiment of Chinese cultural elements overseas, carrying the historical and cultural imprint of Chinese immigrants in time and space, and is a microcosm of Chinese society overseas. However, in modern times, the functions of Chinatown have begun to change, becoming "commercialized," "blurred," and "pan-Asianization" trends. As a result, the proportion of people in Chinatown has become imbalanced, and the living space of Chinatown has been squeezed by capital. Moreover, in the process of globalization and anti-globalization, there is a phenomenon of "Chinese culture" being marginalized in Chinatown.

Keywords: *Chinatown, Chinese culture, Functional transformation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a bridge for Chinese people to go global and a gathering place for Chinese culture overseas, Chinatown has played a positive role in the dissemination of Chinese culture. Although Chinatown in history has different forms of expression in different countries, its basic functions are generally similar. However, in the process of globalization, although Chinatown has developed to a certain extent at a certain point, its functions have also begun to undergo significant changes. The Chinatown, once centered around Chinese people and Chinese culture, has either been replaced by Asians and Asian culture, or fiercely impacted by local culture. Currently, under the anti-globalization thinking in the West, Chinatown has become the main target and object of the wave of "de-sinicization". Nowadays, Chinatown is facing the problem of being either banned, or its functions being restricted or transformed.

2. THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF CHINATOWN

As a historic and cultural district with strong Chinese cultural characteristics, Chinatown is the second hometown of countless Chinese overseas, an important window for transmitting Chinese culture to the world, and an important platform for cultural exchange and collision between China and foreign countries, which plays an important intermediary role in promoting the integration and development of Chinese cultural characteristics and world cultural diversity. It can be said that Chinatown around the world, no matter where, is a microcosm of the struggle of Chinese people to survive and develop overseas, and also a landmark witness to the coexistence of diverse cultures.

Firstly, Chinatown is a shared hometown and a reflection of the development history of overseas Chinese. With the increasingly close communication between countries since the Tang and Song dynasties, as well as the diversified development of the world in modern times, more and more Chinese people have gone abroad to seek development. Naturally, more and more Chinese people have started to settle overseas, accumulating

over time and passing down from generation to generation, ultimately forming the true "Chinatown". So, today's Chinatown, which is spread all over the world, is actually a cultural space where Chinese people gather, providing spiritual motivation for Chinese people who are new to exploring foreign lands to overcome the most difficult times. Over time, Chinatown has condensed the journey and spiritual guide of every Chinese person's overseas struggle, becoming a common spiritual homeland for overseas Chinese. It can be seen that "Chinatown", as the starting point for the development of Chinese overseas, the initial support for living in different places, and also as a reason for Chinese people to express their homesickness, undoubtedly occupies a crucial position in the hearts of every overseas Chinese. The history of Chinatown is the history of entrepreneurship, struggle, merit, and development of overseas Chinese.[1]

Secondly, Chinatown is a natural microcosm of Chinese civilization and culture. The reason why "Chinatown" is called "Chinatown" is inseparable from the "Tang culture" of the heyday of ancient China. During the Tang Dynasty, China was not only in a stage of social and economic growth, but also in a stage of social stability and prosperity. It was also a period of significant cultural and technological exports from China to neighboring countries in history. It is precisely because of the tremendous influence of Tang culture and technology on overseas countries that "Tang" has become a synonym for China. Until now, some overseas Chinese still refer to themselves as "Tang Chinese", and their settlements in overseas cities are called "Chinatowns". In the eyes of foreigners, Chinatown is "Little China" and it continues Chinese culture.[2] In fact, Chinatown contains not only rich Tang culture, but also a long and profound Chinese culture. From the perspective of most traditional buildings in Chinatown, there are always the cocked eaves, red wall memorial archway, arch of wooden architecture crisscross, carved beams and painted rafters, and the splendid buildings and jade pavilions. Moreover, indoor couplets such as "Farming, Reading and Inheriting the Family" and "The World Is Public" will be posted, which all contain profound traditional Chinese culture and reflect the charm of Chinese culture everywhere. In fact, every gathering of overseas Chinese thoughts is the inherent culture of Chinatown, which is Chinese culture.

Thirdly, Chinatown is a special product of the collision of Chinese and foreign cultures.

Chinatown is not a natural result of Chinese immigrants landing on foreign land, but rather has been established after decades of continuous immigration and racial exclusion. Being in a foreign land, it is inevitable to be constrained by others, and the origin and development of Chinatown are naturally deeply influenced by the local society. Its formation is closely related to the strong anti-Chinese racism in the local society, in addition to the inherent Chinese love for hometown and community settlement.[3] So, whether it's Chinese or Chinatown, one of the important treasures for long-term survival and development overseas is to integrate with local culture, and become a cultural or material existence that can be accepted by the local people. For example, the "China Taiping Archway" located in Chinatown, London, has two plaques in front of and behind it, namely "China Taiping" and "Britain's Auspiciousness". The copper cast couplets on the two pillars read "In the prosperous era of China, the sun and moon shine together for thousands of years to pass down the cultural heritage, and the peaceful world and people share the beauty of generations." This archway not only reflects the profound cultural heritage of China, but also witnesses the fusion and exchange of Eastern and Western cultures, and is a product of the collision of Chinese and foreign cultures. Archways are like this, and Chinatown is also like this.

3. THE TRADITIONAL FUNCTIONS OF CHINATOWN

Chinatown is the transplantation and epitome of traditional Chinese social forms in foreign countries, and is an overseas landmark and core symbol of Chinese culture. After experiencing changes in times, Chinatown has evolved from an initial gathering place for overseas Chinese entrepreneurs to a window for countries around the world to understand Chinese culture and history. It has undoubtedly become the most intuitive source of impression for people around the world of China and a "cultural business card" worth cherishing in every city. Although the functions of Chinatown have undergone subtle changes in the historical development process, overall, the traditional functions of Chinatown have never changed.

Firstly, Chinatown provides a carrier for the overseas dissemination of Chinese culture. Culture is a product of the spiritual level, and its downward and outward dissemination requires not only ideological support, but also material bridging.

Some people believe that Chinatown, located in a foreign country, is an independent entity and a separate place dedicated to the lives of overseas Chinese. However, this is not the case. The Chinatown, which is spread all over the world, should be a bridge for Chinese people in China and overseas to spread Chinese culture overseas as descendants of the Yellow Emperor. Chinatown plays an irreplaceable role in promoting the overseas spread of Chinese culture. From the initial simple settlements, to the later "billboards" of Chinese culture, and even the "museums" of Chinese fighting spirit, this kind of down-to-earth Chinatown is converging into "cultural business cards" of Chinese people, showcasing the brilliance of Chinese civilization to the world. From the macro level to Chinese spiritual civilization and culture, and from the micro level to Chinese music, dance, art, etc., all go overseas through Chinatown. During traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, Chinese people in Chinatown use traditional Chinese methods to celebrate the festival, while also showcasing Chinese folk customs and traditions to the world. This not only brings joy to the local people, but also continuously accumulates the popularity and influence of Chinese culture. Meanwhile, some Chinatown offer Chinese language schools, either full-time or Sunday. The schools are not only places for children to learn Chinese language and culture, but also propaganda fronts and platforms for cultural exchange in China.[4] In many European countries, Chinatown has become a tourist destination that global tourists cannot miss. More and more people come to admire it, and then linger and forget to leave, ultimately indulging in it and being moved by the excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Secondly, Chinatown provides shelter for the survival and development of overseas Chinese. To this day, Chinatown has been spread all over the world. It can be said that wherever there are Chinese people, Chinatown will gradually form. It is like an invisible web, tightly connecting the Chinese people. Chinatown is "a microcosm of Chinese society and a showcase of Chinese wealth".[5] This attribute actually determines that Chinatown will provide a geographical, cultural, linguistic, and economic ethnic community for Chinese immigrants to a large extent. With its unique economic structure and organizational model, Chinese immigrants can live in it for a long time without interacting with the outside world, greatly avoiding racial discrimination and persecution from mainstream society. [6] Moreover,

especially in modern times, for overseas Chinese at that time, Chinatown was not only a common homeland overseas, but also a symbol of their motherland. At least psychologically speaking, the existence of Chinatown is like a reassuring presence for overseas Chinese. This ethnic community not only provides a safe haven for their survival and development, but also a spiritual comfort and belonging.

Thirdly, Chinatown provides a platform for cultural exchange and mutual learning between China and foreign countries. Chinatown is the most important historical and cultural district for Chinese culture overseas. "Chinatown" is not only a geographical term, but also a social and cultural term. Chinatown embodies an extremely rich traditional Chinese culture, and its formation and development play an important role in promoting cultural exchange between China and foreign countries, promoting integration, mutual understanding, and respecting its cultural values. With the development of the times, Chinatown in different regions has undergone earth shaking changes. The transformed Chinatown not only carries the culture of the Chinese nation, but also integrates into the souls of various cities. Today's Chinatown, in addition to its unique Chinese architecture, cuisine, exhibits, and more, is a complex formed by integrating local cultural characteristics, reflecting the diversity of world cultures. In the process of continuously absorbing and accommodating the local culture, Chinatown strives to explore a small cultural complex positioning that does not lose its Chinese cultural attributes but fully reflects the local cultural characteristics. This process of cultural collision between China and foreign countries itself further promotes deeper cultural exchange, mutual learning, and common prosperity.

4. THE MODERN TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITIONAL CHARACTERS AND FUNCTIONS IN CHINATOWN

In the depiction of Chinese media in China and overseas, Chinatown has always appeared with a positive and thriving attitude, playing a role in consolidating the centripetal force of overseas Chinese. However, the survival status of overseas Chinatown is not as positive as what the media promotes. After all, Chinatown cannot be a closed environment, let alone a small circle completely

isolated from the local society. It must be influenced and impacted by the local culture. Especially in today's rapidly developing society, with the promotion and popularization of urbanization worldwide, Chinatown is facing problems such as aging and decline in various countries. Traditional Chinatown objectively no longer meets the needs of modern society, and it is facing huge challenges and crises that are difficult to avoid in the process of transitioning from tradition to modernity.

4.1 The "Commercialization" Transformation of Traditional Characters in Chinatown

From the initial simple residential areas, to the later life oriented commercial areas, and now to the bustling tourist areas and commercial centers, the functions of Chinatown are constantly approaching the general sense of commercial streets. On the one hand, the increase in the number of mobile people in Chinatown has provided soil for its commercial transformation, while the enhancement of commercial functions has also led to continuous changes in the consumer group of Chinatown. Under the interaction of the two, Chinatown has gradually transformed from a historical and cultural district dominated by Chinese to a modern commercial district that gathers people from all ethnic groups and countries around the world. Now, looking around, Chinatown seems to be no longer a traditional "Chinatown", but a "global street" with modern style.

On the other hand, the commercialization transformation of the functions of Chinatown is also reflected in the changes in business operations. In addition to traditional catering and other industries, Chinese people in various Chinatowns have also started operating hotels, various import and export businesses, insurance, accounting firms, specialty stores, duty-free shops, film and television stores, and other businesses; The variety of products is no longer limited to selling Chinese goods, and Chinese are beginning to introduce products from all over the world to meet the consumer groups outside of Chinese. At this point, Chinatown is no different from ordinary commercial streets, and its unique cultural characteristics are being eroded by its commercialization process. Alternatively, Chinatown is no longer playing the role of a unique historical and cultural district with Chinese characteristics, but is transforming into a

commercial district with gradually weakening Chinese elements.

4.2 The "Blurring" Transformation of Traditional Functions in Chinatown

In recent years, with the integration of Eastern and Western cultures and the rooting of overseas Chinese in their host countries, Chinatown has also undergone changes: the construction of high-end apartments, the expansion of Chinatown, the influx of non-Chinese residents, and changes in the social functions of Chinatown have all sparked people's thinking.[7] Many traditional functions of Chinatown are gradually disappearing, and even facing the problem of how to maintain rather than promote them. If traditional Chinatown was a community that was isolated and had both residential and commercial functions, today's Chinatown is just a gathering place for Chinese people and Chinese shops, or a tourist destination with Chinese cultural symbols. Throughout the Chinatown distributed around the world today, some specialize in serving as intermediaries in the process of cultural adaptation. New immigrants learn about local society through education and also benefit from a series of intermediary services established in the Chinatown, such as clubs, employment guidance, language training, and real estate services; Some Chinatowns play the role of labor intermediaries, some aim to become retail and distribution centers, while others assist local politicians, especially second-generation Chinese politicians, in garnering votes.[8] It can be seen that with the advancement of the modernization process of Chinatown, its original economic, social, and cultural functions that are different from other commercial streets in various regions are being blurred and marginalized, gradually sliding towards the uniform functional positioning of traditional overseas streets.

4.3 The Extension of the Traditional Positioning of Chinatown as "Asianization"

As the name suggests, "Chinatown" is a historical and cultural district mainly inhabited by Chinese people. However, under the promotion of economic globalization, traditional Chinatown is gradually transforming from a single Chinese neighborhood to an "Asian community" neighborhood mainly composed of Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and other Asian countries. As more and more people from Asian countries

integrate into Chinatown, "Chinatown" is no longer a traditional "Chinatown", but an "Asia Pacific Street" that combines Chinese culture, Japanese culture, Korean culture, as well as Southeast Asian culture and other Asian cultures. The transformation of the role positioning of "Chinatown" towards "Asia Pacific Street" or "Asian Community" blocks is actually a common generalization of traditional Chinatown in politics, economy, society, culture, and other aspects.

Chinatown is a collection of overseas Chinese cultural elements, and Chinese culture is one of the main representatives of Asian culture. A considerable number of foreigners' understanding of Asian culture originates from their understanding of Chinese culture. So, Chinatown is not only a window for transmitting Chinese culture, but also a breakthrough for other Asian countries to expand their influence outside the Asia Pacific region. In today's world where connections are so close, using Chinatown as a key window to expand its own reputation and enhance its international status in the process of exporting its own characteristics and integrating into the world can be a special channel for some Asian countries to further open up to the world. In a sense, the transformation of Chinatown's traditional positioning towards "Asianization" is actually an inevitable stage in the process of globalization and pan-Asianization.

5. THE CAUSES OF TRADITIONAL FUNCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN CHINATOWN

The transformation of traditional functions in Chinatown has become a reality, which is an inevitable historical development and a practical challenge that Chinatown must face. Chinatown has maintained its traditional functions for thousands of years, and its rapid transformation between modern and contemporary times is closely related to the trend of economic globalization and the voices of anti-globalization under unprecedented changes in a century. It can be said that the disappearance and transformation of the traditional functions of Chinatown is the result of the joint action of various factors in the context of global economic globalization and political multipolarity.

5.1 The Imbalance in the Proportion of Population Structure in Chinatown

The population structure of Chinatown is undergoing changes, forming an imbalance in the proportion of population structure. On the one hand, the decrease in the number of Chinese people is causing more and more overseas Chinese born and raised in Chinatown to leave and integrate into the local society. This has created an awkward situation where "old overseas Chinese are gradually leaving the world, and new overseas Chinese are unwilling to come in". Moreover, the problems faced by Chinatown in this regard generally occur in many cities in Europe and America. For example, Detroit in the United States used to have Chinatown, but with the deterioration of the city's security situation and the construction of highways, a large number of people moved northward to the suburbs. [9] Faced with the fragmented situation of intergenerational inheritance among Chinese people in Chinatown, many elderly overseas Chinese find it difficult to accept, believing that this is a sign of the gradual disappearance of Chinatown. On the other hand, an increasing number of non-Chinese residents are moving into Chinatown. There are many professionals among them who work as lawyers, doctors, designers, etc. The changes in the population will inevitably have an impact on the original regional ecology. In fact, this is the true positioning of Chinatown in the modern sense. Because nowadays, it can be said that there are Chinatowns everywhere in overseas regions, and Chinese Americans have gained a lot of opportunities for normal development, which are relatively equal. Regardless of language, education, or ability, they are all incomparable to the past, and no longer need the closed space with strong regional and blood ties. With the further improvement of the knowledge level of Chinese society, greater changes in occupational structure, and an increase in economic status, more Chinese will be prompted to leave Chinatown instead of gathering back in the opposite direction. From this perspective, the decline of Chinatown has its positive significance. But Chinatown, as the main venue for Chinese activities, will also exist for a long time. Some of its functions are still effective under new historical conditions, and it remains an important stronghold for Chinese people to maintain their ethnic characteristics and cultural traditions.

5.2 *The Limited Living Space of Chinatown Squeezed by Capitalization*

Traditional Chinatown is often associated with slums and filth. [10] However, in the context of globalization and modernization, many Chinatowns have been listed as key landmarks for the city's renovation and development. Therefore, the land prices in Chinatown have skyrocketed, and the Chinatown community is unable to continue to survive. Moreover, with the need of China's "the Belt and Road" construction, mature overseas China parks have become a pilot field for capital utilization, industrial transfer, and mutually beneficial cooperation between China and foreign countries.[11] So, some people believe that Chinatowns are disappearing because they are either gradually being assimilated by larger communities or being integrated into city states. Many old immigrants in Chinatown complain that new immigrants arrogantly rent some obviously overpriced shops and decorate them at high prices, but they only operate for a period of time before closing down, disrupting market order and making the old shops, which have already suffered from rapid rent increases, even more uncomfortable.[12] Under the suppression of commercialization and capitalization, the living space of Chinese people is being compressed, and Chinatown is no longer a refuge and overseas homeland for Chinese people. It is gradually becoming a battleground for businessmen from various countries to engage in capital games.

5.3 *The Impact of Globalization and Anti-globalization*

Firstly, under the trend of economic globalization, the surge of commercial waves is pushing Chinatown towards the forefront of economic competition. As a relatively closed historical and cultural district, the economic development of Chinatown in the past was also in a relatively independent state. However, with the acceleration of urbanization and economic globalization in various countries, Chinatown inevitably needs to be involved in the local economic construction process. At the beginning of globalization, Chinatown can be seen as an important advertising and sales platform for Chinese products in terms of commercial positioning, and its business model has obvious cultural characteristics. But with the acceleration of globalization, Chinatown has gradually become a "treasure trove" contested by businesses of various

countries, brands, and sizes. It is hoped that Chinatown can be used as an important source of customers to open up or expand the market. That is to say, although economic globalization once provided a platform and impetus for the expansion of the influence and enrichment of functions of Chinatown, in the process of economic globalization and the modern social transformation with the concept of prioritizing economic development, the original space of Chinatown has become an arena for multiple commercial forces to compete with each other, and multiple commercial cultures and models to compete, losing its original commercial role positioning and functions.

Secondly, under the anti-globalization thinking, the "de-sinicization" has led to the weakening or even disappearance of the traditional functions of Chinatown, which are particularly based on Chinese culture. Anti-globalization is manifested in "de-sinicization", which includes the weakening or cancellation of the function of "Chinatown". As the historical and cultural district with the richest content of Chinese elements overseas, Chinatown is inevitably the primary goal in the process of anti-globalization and sinicization. Especially under the manipulation of foreign commercial capital, the Chinese cultural elements in Chinatown are gradually being squeezed and worn out, and the survival of traditional functions such as cultural dissemination, cultural exchange, and spiritual homeland based on Chinese culture is not optimistic.

5.4 *The Increasingly Severe Problems of Role Generalization in Chinatown Caused by the Intertwining of Disguised Globalization Tendencies in the Process of Anti-globalization Operations*

The disguised globalization driven by the anti-globalization concept is specifically manifested in the cultural diversity driven by the de-sinicization concept in the issue of Chinatown. That is, in order to weaken the uniqueness of Chinese cultural elements contained in Chinatown, a large amount of local culture or various regional cultural characteristics other than Chinese culture are injected into traditional Chinatown through commercial games, cultural shocks, policy guidance, etc., in order to achieve the goal of de-sinicization. Essentially, this operational approach is not a true "de sinicization", but rather a generalization of the role and function of

Chinatown. Although its starting point and foothold are de sinicization, which serves anti-globalization, it is actually a disguised contribution to the development of globalization. Nevertheless, for Chinatown alone, this disguised globalization has still caused irreparable cultural damage to it.

6. CONCLUSION

Whether traditional Chinatown has declined is not a conclusive topic. With the increase of new immigrants, new Chinatown or Chinese communities are also constantly forming. Therefore, the functions of traditional Chinatown may weaken or disappear, but the role of Chinese people will continue. Overseas Chinatown is caught in the game of globalization and anti-globalization, and may face the dilemma of having to move towards "distortion" or "decline". How to make Chinatown continue to face the world and become the "intersection point" of Chinese and overseas cultures? What kind of persistence and choice should be made between the development and transformation of traditional Chinatown and Chinese neighborhoods, or between change and unchangeability? There will be common issues faced by Chinese people worldwide.

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