

chinatown

Community Organizing amidst Change in SF's Chinatown



CENTER FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION
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Community Organizing amidst Change in SF's Chinatown

Case Study on Gentrification and Displacement Pressures in Greater Chinatown of San Francisco, CA

Introduction

As one of the oldest ethnic enclaves in the US, San Francisco's Chinatown has been a major immigrant gateway as well as a cultural, economic and residential hub for the Bay Area's Chinese American and Asian American communities for over 150 years. Since establishment in 1848, it has experienced constant transformation as nexus of complex transnational sociopolitical forces—from immigration laws and trends to global movements of capital—that have evolved alongside Chinese American identity in the San Francisco Bay Area (Tan 2008; Li 2011).

Chinatown's current location (Map 1) was established after the original neighborhood was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire that razed over 80 percent of San Francisco. To this day, the official Chinatown neighborhood remains a relatively small land area of approximately 30 city blocks. With the rapid growth of the Chinese American population beginning in the 1960s, neighborhoods adjacent to the core area became home to many Chinese American families, and businesses and institutions serving the Chinese American community likewise began establishing themselves beyond the boundaries of Chinatown.

With this expansion, Chinatown has deeply influenced the evolution of these neighboring areas, which include portions of the historically affluent neighborhoods of Russian Hill, Nob Hill and Polk Gulch, as well as tourist hotspots like North Beach, which is known as San Francisco's Little Italy. For the purposes of this case study, we use the term "Polk Gulch" to refer to the western portion of Greater Chinatown, which includes sections of Nob Hill and Russian Hill between Van Ness Avenue and Leavenworth Street. We also use the term "Chinatown North" to refer to the areas

directly North and Northwest of the official Chinatown boundaries, including portions of North Beach and Polk Gulch. The area officially

recognized as Chinatown is referred to as "Chinatown Core" in this case study. Though each of these areas has maintained their own distinct character and identity, each of their individual neighborhood changes have been deeply informed by development and market pressures in the others. As we analyze this intricate relationship between the Chinatown core and peripheral communities throughout this case study, we examine this entire geography as "Greater Chinatown."³

Historically, tensions between Greater Chinatown's core and periphery have manifested through competing demands on the City's limited housing stock – in particular, the vast need for affordable housing for low-income residents in Chinatown and the ever-increasing desirability of San Francisco real estate. The following case study explores the roots and impacts of this dynamic, seeking to elucidate possible implications for future neighborhood change and residential displacement throughout the different communities within Greater Chinatown.



Map 1: Greater Chinatown Boundaries

³ Greater Chinatown is a term that we use specifically to refer to the case study area. It should be noted that this is term is not colloquial. Though neighborhood boundaries and names are varied and contested, San Francisco residents generally use neighborhood names of Nob Hill, Polk Gulch and North Beach to refer to the geographies that we include in the term Greater Chinatown.

Overview and Historical Context

Since the 1960s, Greater Chinatown's population has included a large percentage of foreign-born, low-income Chinese American and Asian American families. Elderly residents have also consistently made up a significant share of the population; between 2009 and 2013, approximately 17 percent of Greater Chinatown's residents were age 65 and over (US Census Bureau).⁴ While the Asian population's overall number has decreased over time, its influence remains present to varying degrees within all three neighborhoods. In 2009-2013, 55 percent of households within Greater Chinatown were Asian (Geolytics 2014).

Greater Chinatown is situated at the center of San Francisco's booming real estate market, with close proximity to the Financial District, Downtown, and affluent neighborhoods such as Russian Hill. Due to its prime location, it has consistently endured pressures of development and speculation that have transformed surrounding areas and much of San Francisco. Differing land use regulations between Chinatown Core and the rest of Greater Chinatown have led to varied patterns of neighborhood change throughout the area. While the Chinatown Core community has largely resisted displacement and gentrification, increasing market pressure and ongoing neighborhood improvements, such as the construction of the Chinatown Central Subway Station that is scheduled to open in 2016, may profoundly impact the area's affordability and further shift its demographics.

Chinatown's History

The area's built form is rooted in the early history of discriminatory policies directed at Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s, including the 1882 Federal Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited further migration of individuals from China until it was repealed in 1943 (Yip 1985). With this institutionalized halt in migration for nearly an entire century, Chinatown's built environment did not evolve from the influence of its earliest cohort of settlers, who were predominantly male contract laborers from Chinese provinces near Pearl Riv-

er Delta. These men arrived in California in search of wealth during the Gold Rush and later also took on jobs in the railroad industry (Yip 1985). Few arrived with the intention of permanent settlement; rather, San Francisco, "was merely the point of arrival" (Yip 1985). Instead of a residential community, Chinatown initially functioned as a "provision station" for Chinese workers (Li 2011).

Within this context, much of Chinatown's housing was built as single room occupancy (SRO) residential hotels or small rooms in commercial structures or community spaces. Chinese immigrants, who were barred from property ownership, were subjected to discriminatory housing practices by absentee landlords seeking to maximize profits. Housing was thus poorly maintained and often overcrowded (Yip 1985).

After the US Civil War, anti-Chinese sentiment driven in part by labor disputes led to thousands of Chinese immigrants relocating to Chinatown for protection from racialized violence, which resulted in the neighborhood transforming into a permanent residential community (Li 2011). The Chinese community's spatial segregation and social isolation contributed to the development of "an impenetrable social, political, and economic wall" between Chinatown and the rest of San Francisco (Wang 2007). While the neighborhood's insularity allowed for the formation of strong social networks and a self-sufficient system of community institutions, small businesses and cultural activity (Yip 1985), it also reinforced a language barrier that still presents a challenge for socio-economic integration and contributes to persistently high poverty and unemployment rates (Wang 2007).

When Chinatown was rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake, Chinese immigrants were able to lease land from white landowners, who dictated the parameters of building design and construction (Asian Neighborhood Design 2008). With the goal of attracting tourists and outsiders, new Chinatown buildings were deliberately designed by white architects using elements intended to signify the community's heritage, with the hope that Chinatown would generate increased revenue for the City through commercial activity (Li 2011). During this period, much of the housing was reconstructed as SROs, which were considered economically efficient

In the 1960s, the liberalization of US immigration policy led to a population boom and subsequent shortage of affordable housing. Chinatown quickly became one

⁴ This percentage of residents age 65 and over is a bit higher than in San Francisco as a whole, where 14.2 percent of residents were age 65 and over between 2009 and 2013 (US Census Bureau).

of the densest neighborhoods in the country, with an overwhelming majority low-income renter population. SROs and other small residential units were often overcrowded, in poor condition, and yet still expensive for very low-income residents (Tan 2008).

The influence of Chinatown Core on portions of North Beach (Chinatown North), Nob Hill, and Russian Hill (Polk Gulch) manifested between 1970 and 1990, when the Chinese American populations, mostly made up of families with US-born children, in these areas grew as previous immigrant communities moved out (Fujioka 2014). The incremental dispersal of the Chinese community during this period was informed by social changes brought about through the Civil Rights Movement, which facilitated challenges to norms of racial segregation (Li 2011). By 1990, the large proportions of Asian households in Chinatown North and Polk Gulch—73 and 49 percent, respectively—signified the establishment of the areas' connection to the Core Chinatown community.

Today, Greater Chinatown is still primarily renter-occupied, though the share of owner-occupied housing units has grown in recent years. With an estimated residential density of 85,000 people per square mile in the Chinatown Core (Tan 2008), overcrowding and housing affordability remain pressing issues for the community. Although most of Greater Chinatown has maintained its relative affordability in relation to the rest of San Francisco, the dramatic rise in real estate values and the cost of living in surrounding neighborhoods has driven increasing “rent gaps,” or disparities between what existing residents pay and the amount landlords could charge in the current market (Smith 1979). This has spurred a resurgence of concern over possible residential displacement. This case study seeks to address these concerns by deconstructing the unique forces that have allowed the neighborhood to remain affordable and analyzing the implications that these factors may have for potential displacement and gentrification.

Case Study Methods

The case study relies on mixed methods to examine demographic and housing changes in Chinatown since 1980. The data presented is derived from eight census tracts that comprise “Greater Chinatown.” They cover the core of what is traditionally defined as Chinatown (“Chinatown Core”) as well as portions of two

surrounding neighborhoods, North Beach (“Chinatown North”) and Polk Gulch. Chinatown Core consists of tracts 113 and 118; Chinatown North is defined by tracts 106, 107 and 108; and the Polk Gulch area consists of tracts 109, 110 and 111.⁵

The geographic boundaries for each of these communities were determined with guidance from the Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), a community-based organization that has led efforts to improve the quality of life for Chinatown residents through organizing, advocacy and affordable housing production since 1998. CCDC served as a core partner in the development of this case study, providing valuable insight into the dynamics of change throughout the neighborhood.

The indicators selected for this case study to represent this change are those associated with processes of gentrification and residential displacement, and/or thought to influence susceptibility to such processes (Chapple 2009).

Quantitative data are from the decennial Census for the years 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010, and from the American Community Survey for the period 2009-2013. Data from 1980 to 2010 is from the Geolytics Neighborhood Change Database, normalized to 2010 Census Tracts, which allows for standardized comparisons across the years.

Data regarding real estate sales trends are based on records from the San Francisco County Assessor's Office, which were obtained through Dataquick, Inc. Validity of these data was evaluated through a “ground-truthing” methodology that involved a systematic survey through visual observation of all residential parcels on a sample set of three blocks within the case study area. The data gathered through ground-truthing was subsequently compared to Census figures and sales data from the San Francisco County Assessor's Office, which was obtained through Dataquick, Inc.

⁵ Polk Gulch is not recognized by San Francisco Planning neighborhood boundaries and overlaps with the official neighborhoods of Russian Hill and Nob Hill. The research team found it challenging to define Polk Gulch's boundaries by census tracts and debated the inclusion of Tract 109, which presently has very different demographic characteristics from Tract 110 and 111. However, given its immediate proximity and significant Asian population in 1980 (34%), the decision was made to include it.

This comparison showed that of the sample blocks' 161 parcels recorded in the assessor dataset, field researchers were able to match the parcel numbers of 89 percent.⁶ Of the matched parcels, land use designation matched for 85 percent and total number of units for 71 percent. These results suggest that some error may exist in either the Census or Assessor's reported count of housing units and unit type, likely due to rapid or unpermitted changes to parcels that may go unaccounted for within either dataset such as condominium conversions. In order to account for possible errors, we cross-referenced our analyses of these datasets with qualitative field observations, archival research, and interviews with key informants.

The Changing Chinatown Community

Chinatown residents make up approximately 4 percent of the San Francisco population. Though its density remains incredibly high, Chinatown's population decreased slightly since 1980, in contrast to a 21 percent increase in the overall San Francisco population (Table 1). This can be explained by the growing densification of other San Francisco neighborhoods, while by the 1990s, parts of Greater Chinatown were largely built out, with high rates of overcrowding.

Table 1. Total Population in Greater Chinatown and San Francisco, 1980-2013

Year	Chinatown	San Francisco
1980	34,607	677,678
1990	35,938	723,959
2000	34,891	776,733
2009-2013	34,557	817,501
% Change, 1980 to 2009-2013	-0.1%	21%

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000. (Geolytics, 2014). 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

⁶ The discrepancy between assessor records and what we observed through ground-truthing is primarily due to assessor entries for condominiums that did not appear in the dataset we used to map parcel numbers. Excluding these cases, the percentage of parcels matched is 86 percent.

However, as shown in Table 2, the population decline was not distributed evenly throughout Greater Chinatown. While Chinatown North experienced a population decline of 8 percent, Polk Gulch and Chinatown Core's populations increased by 4 and 12 percent, respectively, between 1980 and 2009-2013.

This discrepancy exemplifies a broader difference in degrees and types of neighborhood change between Chinatown North, Polk Gulch and the Chinatown Core, which will be explored further throughout this case study.

Greater Chinatown's general population decline coincides with a drop in its average household size between 1980 and 2009-2013, which fell across all three neighborhood areas, as shown in Table 3. In contrast, San Francisco's average household size increased nominally.

Table 2. Population Change in Chinatown by Area, 1980 to 2009-2013

Area	1980	2009-2013	% Change, 1980 to 2009-2013
Chinatown Core	4,464	5,012	12%
Chinatown North	15,315	14,067	-8%
Polk Gulch	14,830	15,478	4%
Greater Chinatown	35,938	33,018	-4%

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Table 3. Average Household Size in Greater Chinatown and San Francisco, 1980 to 2009-2013

Year	Chinatown	San Francisco
1980	2.22	2.27
1990	2.30	2.37
2000	1.97	2.36
2009-2013	2.03	2.31
% Change, 1980 to 2009-2013	-9%	1.8%

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

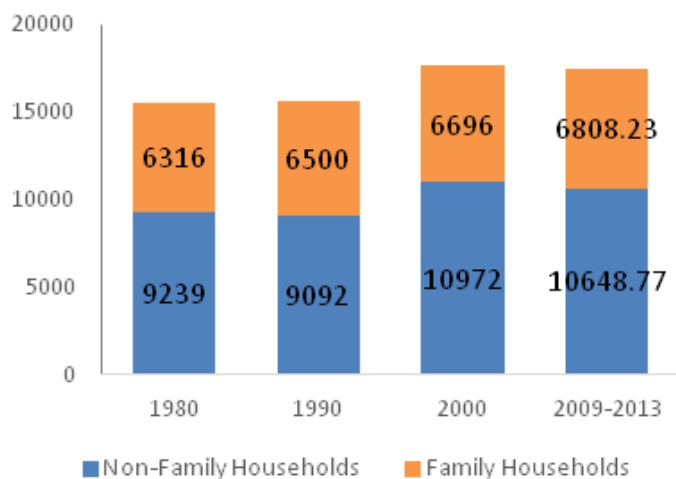


Figure 1. Households in Greater Chinatown, 1980 to 2009-2013

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

This trend also correlates with the slight growth in the share of non-family households in Greater Chinatown. Between 2009 and 2013, 61 percent of the neighborhood's 17,457 households were non-family households, up from 59 percent in 1980.

Greater Chinatown also saw a drop in the share of overcrowded households between 2000 and 2009-2013, as shown in Figure 2. Despite this decrease, its rate of overcrowding in 2009-2013—defined as more than one person per room—was still over twice that of San Francisco, which had 3 percent overcrowded and 3.3% extremely overcrowded units.

Combined declines in family households, average household size and overcrowding are often associated with the process of gentrification, and changes in Chinatown's racial/ethnic composition, further reinforce that possibility. Between 1990 and 2013, the share of Asian households in the neighborhood decreased by 11 percentage points, corresponding with a growth of 5 percentage points in the share of white households. The largest change, however, occurred between 1990 and 2000.

Though the concentration of Asian residents between Chinatown North, Polk Gulch and Chinatown Core varied greatly during the baseline year of 1980, all three areas reflected a broader trend of a declining share of Asian households in the following decades.

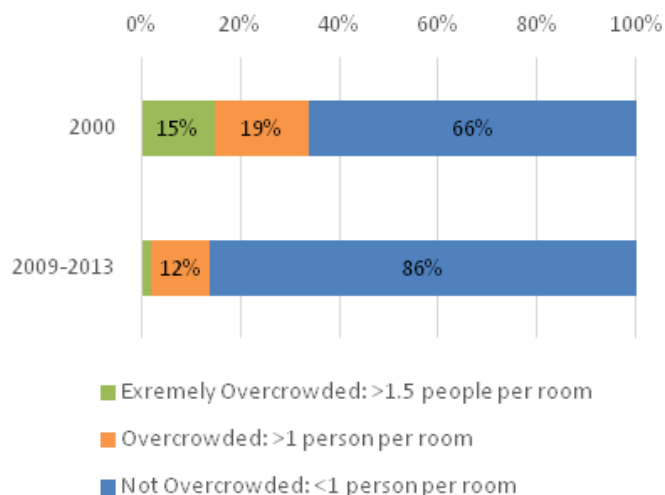


Figure 2. Overcrowded Households in Greater Chinatown, 1980 to 2009-2013

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

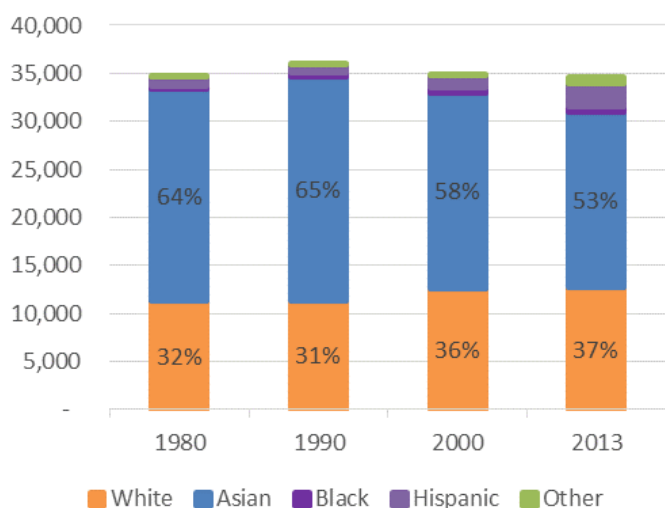
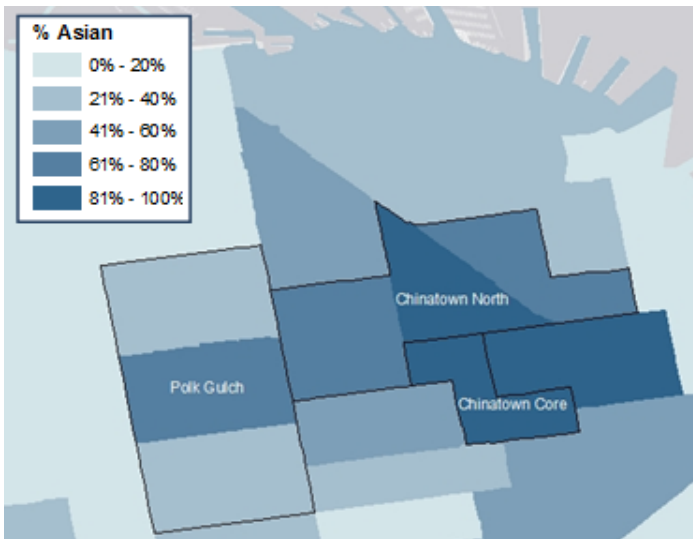


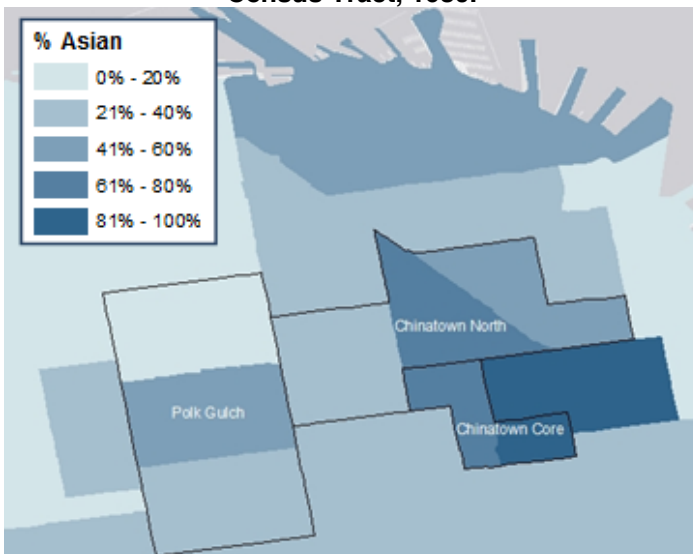
Figure 3. Racial/Ethnic Composition of Greater Chinatown Households, 1980-2013

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

By 2010, the share of Asian households dropped by 10 percent in both Chinatown North and Polk Gulch, alongside a 7 and 6 percent increase, respectively, in the share of the white households. Chinatown Core showed a much slower rate of decline in the share of Asian households; by 2010 it fell by only 5 percentage points to 83 percent. Maps 2 and 3 depict these varying rates of change in concentration of Asian households across Greater Chinatown's census tracts.



Map 2: Asian Households as a Percentage of all Households in Greater Chinatown by Census Tract, 1980.



Map 3: Asian Households as a Percentage of all Households in Greater Chinatown by Census Tract, 2010.

Source: US Census 1980, 2010 (Geolytics, 2014).

Educational attainment among Chinatown residents also increased as the share of white households increased, as shown in Figure 4. By 2013, 48 percent of the population 25 and older had a college degree or higher. Polk Gulch is driving this figure; there, the same figure was 61 percent, compared to 21% in Chinatown Core.

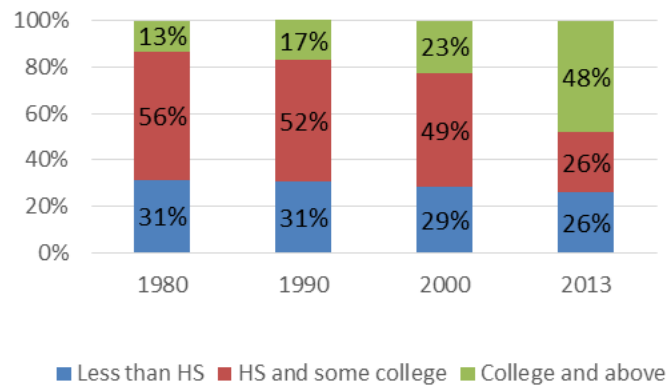


Figure 4. Educational Attainment in Greater Chinatown, 1980 to 2009-2013

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Since the increase in educational attainment was concurrent with significant shifts in the population's racial/ethnic composition, this increase may signify new residents moving in, rather than existing residents achieving higher levels of education.

Data also show another key difference among the areas regarding the change in proportion of foreign-born residents. Between 1980 and 2013, the percentage of foreign-born individuals decreased by over 10 percentage points in Chinatown North and Polk Gulch. Meanwhile, the same figure decreased by only 4 percentage points in Chinatown Core. This suggests that the Chinatown Core has served as the primary immigrant gateway in Chinatown as the other two areas have become less accessible to first generation immigrant households.

This shift is likely attributable to changes in rental prices, which have deviated significantly by area. Figure 5 shows that in contrast to other areas and San Francisco overall, median rent in the Chinatown Core has remained exceptionally stable since 1980. This is primarily due to the large number of subsidized and rent-controlled units in Chinatown Core. By 2013, median rent in Chinatown North and Polk Gulch had approximately doubled the median cost of rent in the Chinatown Core.

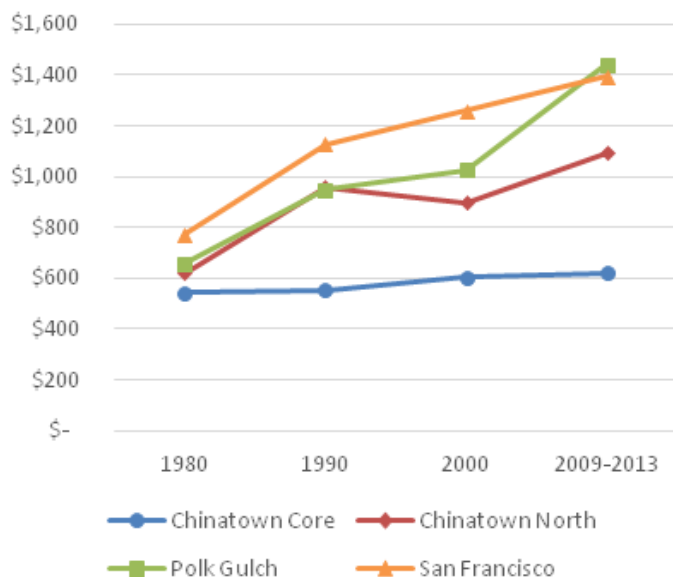


Figure 5. Median Rent in Chinatown and San Francisco (in 2010 dollars), 1980 to 2009-2013.

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014). American Community Survey 2009-2013.

An even closer look at the spatial differentiation in rental prices shows wide disparities within each of Chinatown's three areas at the tract level. The spread of Chinatown North's distribution is most notable; in 2013, Tract 107's median rent was only \$575, compared to \$1,455 in adjacent Tract 108.

Although Greater Chinatown's rental prices on average have maintained their affordability, data suggest that its community was deeply impacted by the recession, and as a result, the neighborhood has grown increasingly unaffordable for its residents. Between 2000 and 2009-2013, Greater Chinatown's median household income fell by 36 percent, and its poverty rate increased by 4 percentage points to 18 percent. Again, disaggregation by area shows that the recession's impact varied significantly by geography. As shown in Figure 6, Chinatown Core's poverty rate had more than doubled the rate of Polk Gulch's by 2009-2013.

Polk Gulch is the only area that saw an overall growth in median household income from 1980 to 2013.

Amidst increasing income stratification in Chinatown, low-income residents are very vulnerable to displacement. The extreme rise in percentages of rent- and mortgage-burdened households between 2000 and 2009-2013, as shown in Figure 8, serves as an indicator of this.

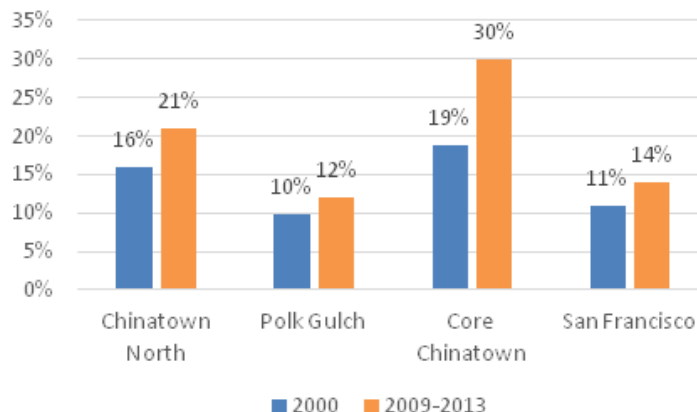


Figure 6. Poverty Rates in Greater Chinatown and San Francisco, 2000 to 2009-2013.

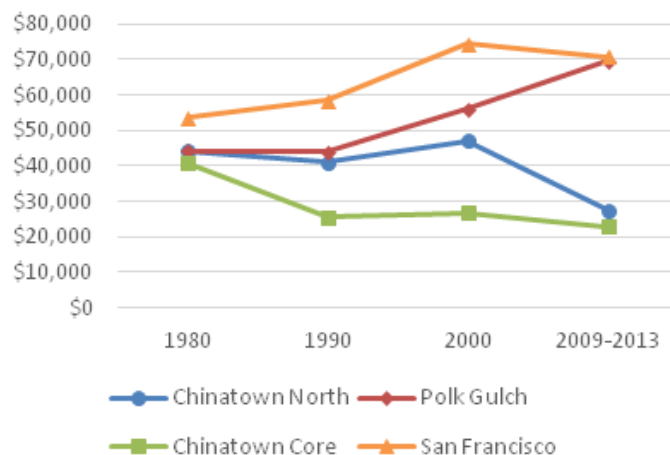


Figure 7. Median Household Income in Greater Chinatown and San Francisco (in 2010 dollars), 1980 to 2009-2013.⁷

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014). American Community Survey 2009-2013.

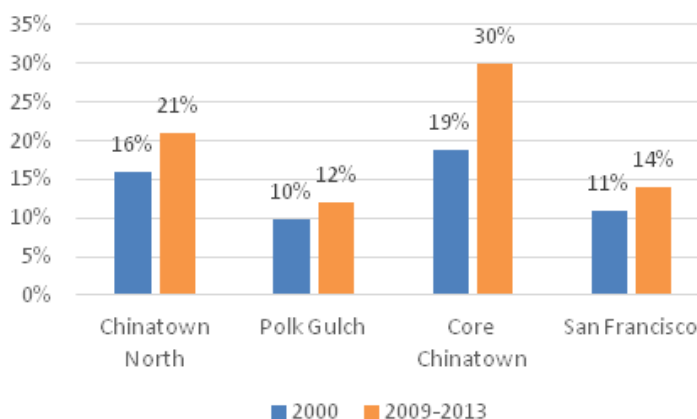


Figure 8. Rent- and Mortgage-Burdened Households in Greater Chinatown, 1980-2013.

Source: US Census 1980, 1990, 2000 (Geolytics, 2014); 2009-2013 American Community Survey. Burdened means paying more than a third of income towards housing costs.

⁷ Data for 1980 is the average rent rather than the median rent.

Given the lower cost of housing in Chinatown than the City on average, displaced residents from Chinatown would likely struggle to find more affordable housing elsewhere in San Francisco and thus be forced out of the City as a whole.

The threat of displacement, which appears to have already impacted portions of Polk Gulch, seems to be rising in Chinatown North and inward toward Chinatown Core, which has largely resisted gentrification up to this point. If patterns of change in Polk Gulch and Chinatown North continue to diverge from those in Chinatown Core, the geography of what is considered Greater Chinatown may shrink as residents' connections to the Core community weaken.

Chinatown Housing Policy and Planning

In the face of external pressures of gentrification, a number of key policies and planning efforts have uniquely allowed Chinatown Core to maintain its historic character and accessibility to low-income San Franciscans. One of the most influential and comprehensive policy changes took place in 1986, with the adoption of the City Planning Department's official Chinatown Rezoning Plan as an amendment to the General Plan, which resulted in the designation of Chinatown as a mixed use area distinct from the downtown.

CCDC's predecessor, the Chinatown Resource Center, led this planning effort with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Asian Neighborhood Design. In the years prior, Chinatown Resource Center had worked tirelessly to stave off infringing developers, many of whom sought to purchase land for office uses (Chinn 2014). Between the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, approximately 1,700 residential units in Chinatown were converted to office use, and at the same time, an influx of capital from Asian firms drove up both commercial and residential rents (Li 2011). As these factors exacerbated the threat of displacement, the Chinatown Resource Center realized the unsustainability of this project-by-project approach and switched course toward advocating for structural changes to the neighborhood's land use policy in an attempt to slow development (Chinn 2014).

They organized residents behind a proposed set of zoning regulations that were originally conceived of as part of a Chinatown community planning process that took place over several years prior (Chinn 2014), during which the San Francisco Planning Department had proposed a new Downtown Plan and housing advocates across the city sought to limit the proliferation of office buildings to preserve affordable housing (Li 2011). With the growing threat of speculation and encroaching development from the downtown, residents, community-based organizations, and City officials all exhibited political will for policy change, agreeing that action must be taken to preserve Chinatown's character and culture for its existing residents (Chinn 2014). The proposal, which specifically addressed the core portion of Chinatown, sought to downzone the neighborhood by setting lower height limits that would curb the neighborhood's development potential. Previous zoning had set limits at much higher than the prevailing scale of most existing buildings. This was due to the fact that Chinatown had originally been zoned as "a creature of downtown," resulting in regulations that did not align with the neighborhood's distinct character (Chinn 2014). The community's proposal was broadly viewed as a necessary, sensible shift toward land use policy that was indigenous to Chinatown (Chinn 2014).

The 1986 Rezoning Plan's central aim was to protect what the Planning Department acknowledged was a "virtually irreplaceable" resource of affordable housing in Chinatown. The plan effectively prohibited demolition, allowing it only "if that is the only way to protect public safety or for a specific use in which there is a high degree of community need," and furthermore banned conversion of residential buildings into different uses (San Francisco Planning Department).

Chinatown's large stock of SROs was granted further protection by the 1980 citywide Residential Hotel Ordinance, which made it very difficult for developers to convert residential hotel rooms to commercial use by requiring replacement of lost affordable units and mandating that 80 percent of the replacement cost be paid by developers to the City for conversions or demolitions (Fribourg 2009).

With these requirements in place, approximately 50 percent of the Chinatown Core's housing stock has remained SRO hotels (Tan 2008), and an estimated 92 percent of units are protected by the 1979 San Francisco Rent Control Ordinance (San Francisco Department of Public Health).

Nearly 30 years later, the 1986 effort can thus be considered to have essentially achieved its policy objectives to “preserve the distinctive urban character of Chinatown” and “retain and reinforce Chinatown’s mutually supportive functions as a neighborhood, capital city and visitor attraction.” (San Francisco Planning Department) However, some would problematize the lack of new development in Chinatown Core amidst the City’s affordable housing shortage (Tan 2008). County Assessor data shows that since 1987, only 22 residential buildings have been constructed in Chinatown Core (Dataquick 2014). By comparison, 65 buildings in Chinatown North and 353 residential buildings in Polk Gulch have been built within the same time frame (Dataquick 2014). Construction of affordable housing in Chinatown Core has also been limited; the small stock of 342 subsidized and public units has not increased since 1990, despite increasing need (CHPC 2014). Thus, the neighborhood’s land use policy has given rise to other unresolved challenges of supplying sufficient housing in San Francisco.

With few new housing units built in Chinatown Core after 1986, the vast majority—75 percent, compared to 61 percent in San Francisco overall—were built before 1949 (pre-World War II). A combination of age and weak code enforcement has led to many buildings falling into disrepair (Chinn 2014). Consequently, two mutually reinforcing phenomena have emerged in Chinatown Core: a shortage of supply and a declining quality of housing as buildings have deteriorated (Chinn 2014). With low profit potential, particularly for rent-controlled units, and exceedingly high demand throughout the neighborhood, owners are disincentivized to rehabilitate their rental units (Chinn 2014). In some cases, they have opted to take units off of the market to avoid necessary maintenance costs, which has further contributed to the broader housing crisis that most severely impacts lowest income individuals (Tan 2008).

Further pressure was placed on the housing stock as developers often opted to build commercial rather than residential buildings. By 1992, an estimated 25 percent of land was used for commercial activities, which led to a lack of parking and open space, while 50 percent was used for residential purposes. Landscape architecture scholar Chuo Li notes that these proportions differed greatly from New York and Chicago’s Chinatowns, which had dedicated 70 percent of land to residential uses and 20 percent to commercial uses (Li 2011).

These constraints surrounding both redevelopment and rehabilitation have made Chinatown Core somewhat less desirable to residential real estate speculators (Chinn 2014). Since many buildings would likely require major rehabilitation and potentially demolition to allow for conversion into condos or tenancies in common (TICs), a conversion project would be a much more difficult and costly undertaking in Chinatown Core compared to other San Francisco neighborhoods that have been systematically impacted by such types of redevelopment. In some senses, then, Chinatown Core has avoided gentrification because other areas were—and continue to be—more susceptible to gentrification and/or lucrative for speculators seeking to flip residential properties (Chinn 2014).

Signs of Displacement

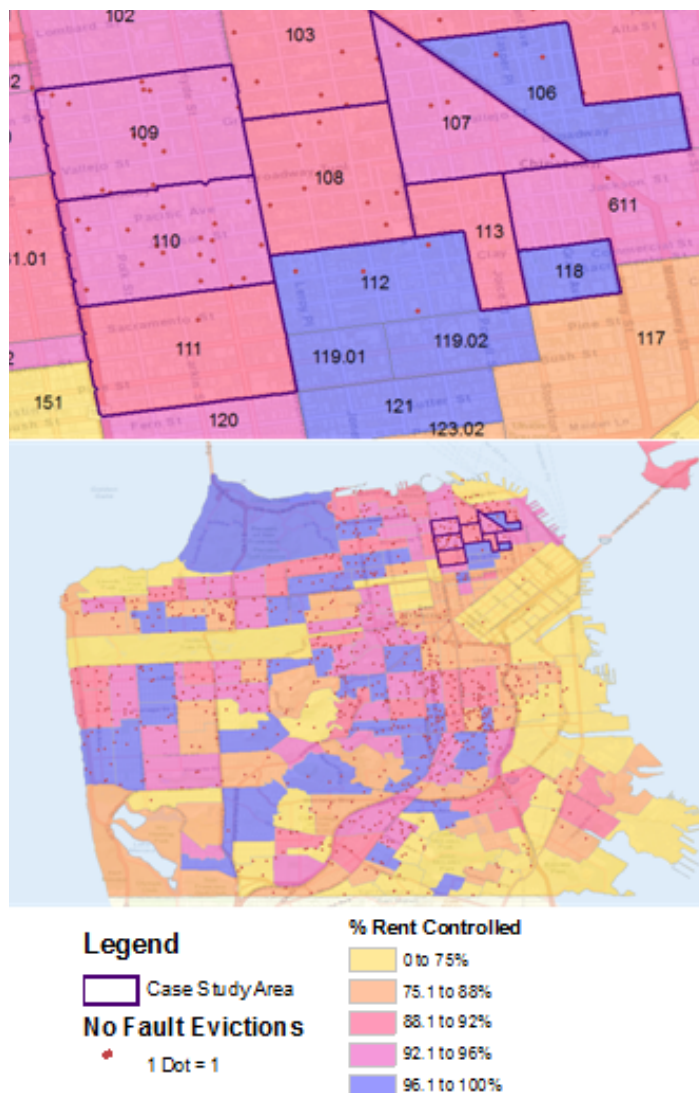
Despite Chinatown Core’s ability to resist gentrification in the past decades, the threat of displacement looms large for the share of residents facing unemployment, poverty and rent or mortgage burdens. Gen Fujioka, Public Policy Manager at CCDC, notes that even the modest increases in rents for SRO units have led to both economic and exclusionary displacement. Though occurrences of eviction have been rare, these other factors suggest a tenuous future for the Chinatown Core.

Trends in other areas of Greater Chinatown present a starkly different picture of change. Fujioka explains that the Chinatown North and Polk Gulch communities have experienced “reoccurring waves of evictions,” including Ellis Act and Owner-Move-In evictions, as well as “many more under-the-table evictions that are unrecorded” (Fujioka 2014). With a growing number of accounts from Chinese American residents of informal threats of buyout or eviction in these areas, anxiety over displacement runs high.

Without the force of the 1986 rezoning policy that applies only to Chinatown Core, the Chinatown North and Polk Gulch areas have not been immune to the proliferation of TIC or condo conversion. Tract level census data suggests that much of this activity is primarily occurring in Polk Gulch, where the share of owner-occupied units has gone from 9 to 16 percent between 1980 and 2013. According to an analysis of the San Francisco Department of Public Health of no-fault evictions during the period 2009-2012, approximately 34 no-fault evictions – which include evictions due to the Ellis Act, owner move-in and demolition—

have occurred in Polk Gulch, compared to 12 in Chinatown North and 1 on the border of Chinatown North and Chinatown Core (San Francisco Public Health Department 2014).

Census figures also show that this trend has generally corresponded with declines in the number of Asian households and increases in the number of white households. For example, in Tract 110 (in Polk Gulch), the number of Asian households decreased from 3,519 to 2,527 between 1980 and 2013—a decrease in share of total population of 22 percentage points. This corresponds with an increase in the share of white residents by 17 percentage points over the same time period (Geolytics 2014).



Map 4: Instances of No-Fault Evictions and Percentage of Rent-Controlled Units in San Francisco by Census Tract (zoomed in to case study area).

Source: San Francisco Department of Public Health

In addition to the pressure of evictions and conversions, changes to the culture and dynamic of the Chinese American community have contributed to the shifting demographic composition of Greater Chinatown. As the foreign-born population that moved to Polk Gulch and Chinatown North in the 1970s has aged and passed on, some second generation Chinese Americans are not returning in adulthood to the neighborhood to establish their own homes (Chinn 2014). It is unclear whether this is due to exclusionary displacement or simply shifting preferences and/or circumstances among the second generation. Many are deciding to sell their parents' properties, which have often appreciated enormously in value, and are thus regularly purchased for conversion into condominiums or TICs (Chinn 2014).

Resistance to Displacement

Multiple layers of transformation signify a changing social fabric throughout Greater Chinatown. Nevertheless, a profound sense of community identity persists among Asian American residents as well as a broader set of Asian American individuals who live outside the area yet remain deeply connected to Chinatown's culture, institutions, and spaces. The driving force behind this sense of cohesion is a high rate of civic engagement, which has continued to shape Greater Chinatown's built environment since the 1986 rezoning victory. (Fujioka 2014)

With affordable housing as an unceasing concern in Greater Chinatown as well as all of the Bay Area, the Chinatown Community Development Center and other community-based organizations have formed resilient organizing networks with citywide reach. They have also brought their resident base into the broader movement around the right to the city. Recent campaigns have taken on the uptick in owner-move-in evictions that singled out elderly residents as well as Ellis Act evictions. Informed by a commitment to community-based neighborhood planning from the ground up, CCDC, together with tenant groups such as the 1,000 member Community Tenants Association, have won new eviction protections for seniors and residents with disabilities.

In preserving community spaces and connections throughout Chinatown, strong political engagement has also preserved tight social networks among Chinese American residents. These social connections have also played a key role in the neighborhood's ability to resist gentrification. For example, with apartment vacancies often posted only within local Chinese language newspapers rather than more broadly utilized forums such as Craigslist, information on housing availability is not widely accessible to the public. Property sales also typically occur within existing social networks, resulting in many real estate ownership turnovers occurring within the Chinese American community. Within Chinatown Core, these dynamics have maintained the racial and ethnic composition in spite of many other neighborhood changes.

Conclusion

The unique history of land use politics and policy in Chinatown—from the earliest days of forced segregation through to recent years of housing rights activism—has given rise to a complex set of challenges as well as community assets to address them. New infrastructure initiatives, such as the Chinatown Central Subway Station construction project, alongside ongoing work by community based organizations, will have a major impact on the community's future.

Data and information from residents suggest that while housing in Chinatown Core has been preserved for low-income individuals, many of whom are foreign-born Asian Americans, all of Greater Chinatown faces significant pressure as rates of rent- or mortgage-burdened households have skyrocketed since 2000.

Different factors within each area have driven this pressure. In Chinatown Core, they include internal circumstances such as high rates of poverty and unemployment among residents. On the other hand, pressures in Chinatown North and Polk Gulch appear to be rooted in external market forces, which have caused significant increases in rental costs.

While part of the broader picture of San Francisco's affordability crisis, the unduplicated factors that shape Chinatown's built form require a locally-tailored approach to preserving the neighborhood's livability and vibrancy.

As with the 1986 Rezoning Plan, the neighborhood's effectively mobilized resident base allows for potential solutions to be indigenous to the community. Continued organizing efforts by community groups like CCDC will be critical as both the population and the neighborhood's infrastructure continue to evolve.

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Appendix: Ground-Truthing Methodology and Results

Because visual indicators of neighborhood change most likely vary from block to block – and even parcel to parcel – the three blocks selected as a sample for visual observation were chosen based on the likelihood that we would be able to systematically observe indicators of neighborhood change and/or vulnerability to gentrification.⁸ Criteria used to select blocks included higher than average percentage change in tenure (from owner-occupancy to renter-occupancy or vice versa),⁹ percentage of white residents, and percentage of parcels sold since 2012.¹⁰ Researchers further narrowed the sample pool by working with the project’s CBO partner, Chinatown Community Development Center, to identify specific blocks that, based on the organization’s work with the Chinatown community, staff know have experienced recent change. Finally, logistical considerations, such as land area as well as number of parcels on each block, were also taken into account.

On December 11, 2014, one researcher from the Center for Community Innovation (CCI), along with one staff member of CCDC surveyed one block, Block 3002 in Tract 108. On January 15, 2015, the CCI researcher went back to survey two additional blocks, Block 2003 in Tract 113 and Block 2001 in Tract 110. As part of the ground-truthing exercise, researchers observed and recorded a range of variables for all parcels¹¹ on three different Census blocks in three different tracts within the Greater Chinatown case study area. These include the primary land use, building type (multi-family, single-family, business, etc.), the number of units it appears to hold, and indicators of recent investment such as permanent blinds and updated paint. Re-

⁸ The same survey tool (Appendix, page 18) was used to ground-truth all nine case study areas. Prior to observation in the field, researchers refined the tool and calibrated their responses by conducting two rounds of pilot observations.

⁹ According to 2000 and 2010 Census data.

¹⁰ According to County Assessor Data.

¹¹ The parcel numbers used to organize this data come from the Boundary Solutions data set, which is current as of March 7, 2012.

searchers also looked for signs of concern over safety, such as security alarm signage or barred windows, as well as signs of disinvestment, such as litter or debris, boarded windows, or peeling paint. The data gathered through this process is referred to in this memo as “ground-truthing data.”

The ground-truthing exercise is meant to provide an additional set of data to verify conclusions reached through analyzing assessor and Census data. Complicating this effort is that the data sets do not have the same set of parcels (Table 1). All data reported from the assessor data (Dataquick) includes all parcels in that set; likewise, all data reported from the ground-truthing data collection includes all parcels in that set (which is based on parcels from Boundary Solutions). For two variables—land use and number of units—comparisons are made on a parcel-by-parcel basis; only parcels that appear in both data sets are used for this comparison. Census data is not provided on a parcel level, and so includes all households surveyed by the Census.

Table 1: Parcel Mismatch Among Datasets

Block and Tract	# Parcels in Assessor But Not Ground-truth
Block 3002 Tract 108	4 / 47
Block 2001 Tract 110	2 / 49
Block 2003 Tract 113	12 / 66

Table 2: Sales History of Parcels since Construction

Block	Median Year of Construction	Median Year of Last Sale	Median Sale Price	Median Sale Price Per Square Foot
3002	1921	2004	\$702,500	\$341
2001	1910	2005	\$900,000	\$441
2003	1963	2004	\$665,000	\$711

Source: Dataquick, 2014. These figures refer to all parcels in the area, including non-residential uses.

Table 3: Sales History of Parcels Sold Since 2007 and 2010

Block	Percent Sold 2007-2014	Percent Sold 2010-2014	Median sales price per square foot if sold 2007 or later	Median sales price per square foot if sold 2010 or later
3002	31	22	\$762,500	\$762,500
2001	40	20	\$1,325,000	\$1,244,000
2003	42	33	\$1,074,500	\$1,050,000

Source: Dataquick, 2014. These figures refer to all parcels in the area, including non-residential uses.

Table 4: Summary of Parcel Matches and Primary Land Use

Block	Primary Land Use, based on Ground- truthing data	Percent Land Use Matched	Total Number of Units on Block			Percent of Parcels whose Number of Units match between Assessor Data and Visual Observation
			Assessor Data – Dataquick	Visual Observations on Ground- truthing	Census Data: Total Housing Units – 2010	
3002	Multi-family and condos	92%	218	211	231	81%
2001	Multi-family mixed use and condos	70%	167	163	176	42%
2003	Condos and mixed use	93%	150	227	238	89%

Note: Percent Land Use Matched and Percent Units Matched take as their denominator only those parcels for which a land use or number of units was indicated by both assessor data and ground-truth data.