

# **ICOA555: CHALLENGES TO AUTHENTICITY: EXPLORING THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF HISTORIC CHINATOWNS IN UNITED STATES FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE CASE OF SAN FRANCISCO**

## **Subtheme 01: Integrating Heritage and Sustainable Urban Development by engaging diverse Communities for Heritage Management**

**Session 3:** World Heritage, Regulations and Guidelines, Authenticity and Integrity

**Location:** Gulmohar Hall, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 14, 2017, 09:25 – 09:40

**Author:** Shuyi Xie

*PhD candidate on Urban Planning, Design and Policy, Politecnico di Milano, Italy. Visiting Scholar in Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley, the United States. Graduate on Master Degree in Architecture, Politecnico di Milano, Italy.*

**Abstract:** The last decades have witnessed plentiful historic Chinatowns in the world which have been becoming more diverse communities and facing challenges to authenticity. With the introduction of authenticity and transformation on the worldwide historic Chinatowns, especially in United States, this article focuses on the one in San Francisco, which could be dated back to the 1840s, and is the largest Chinese community outside Asia, with the longest history in North America. While, as more and more different groups of population with distinct cultural background settled there, this historic settlement, in the increasingly open and super-diverse society, has raised public concern on how it could be simultaneously authentic to Chinese heritage and also a multicultural space. Moreover, gentrification has sent considerable shockwaves to this once stable ‘old world’, bringing out the climbing rent and potential population displacement. Thus, it has been deteriorating into a touristic ‘thematic park’, resulting in a decrease of its original inhabitants and habitability conditions, against the sustainable urban development. Also, considerable local traditional community functions and small business have been struggling against some contemporary living styles and accompanying new consumption patterns. Last but not the least, as an aging community it is worthwhile to underscore the role played by the youth including the incoming diverse settlers, especially involving in inheritance, nostalgia, belonging and responsibility. To conclude, this article discusses the transformation and possible future of historic Chinatown of San Francisco, when facing the above challenges to authenticity, and further explores feasible and effective strategies to retain its historic authenticity within this increasingly diversified and fast-developing society for future sustainable urban development, in order to inspire following exploration to solve the similar dilemmas in other historic settlements in the world.

**Key words:** *authenticity, diverse community, Chinatown, sustainable urban development*

## 1. The concept of ‘authenticity’ and social transformation of historic Chinatowns in the US

The Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) proposed by UNESCO in 2011 demonstrated the extended focus on the entire human environment - not only the physical environment, involving in both tangible and intangible heritage<sup>1</sup>. And, one of salient issues on intangible heritage in the urban context is about cultivating and inheriting the cultural identity of local communities<sup>2</sup>, where authenticity plays a vital role, particularly for sustainable urban development.

In the modern context, the concept of ‘authenticity’ was shifted its focus from early scientific perspective on objects to sociology and anthropology, with close relationship to ‘heritage’ - as two reactions to the challenges of modernity<sup>3</sup>. As Zhu pointed out “authenticity is no longer a property inherit in an object, but a projection from beliefs, context, ideology or even imagination” and “authentic experience is associated with identity, individuality and self-realisation”<sup>4</sup>. Florida further defined ‘authenticity’ on dimensions of cities and places, characterized by “real buildings, real people, real history”, as a precondition for “unique and original experiences”<sup>5</sup>. Here, ‘original’ does not refer to the earliest settled group in a neighbourhood, but “suggests a moral right to the city that enables people to put down roots”<sup>6</sup>. In other words, authentic cities and places in most cases enable to provide a local authentic feeling, which is “a continuous process of living and working, a gradual build-up of everyday experience, the expectation that neighbours and buildings that are here today will be here tomorrow”<sup>7</sup>.

The growing globalization and gentrification have resulted in an unprecedented challenge of authenticity on traditional communities. Although, compared with other communities in the US, Chinatowns, particularly historic Chinatowns, have better maintained their distinctive authenticity. Recent years have witnessed a dramatic shrink of plentiful historic Chinatowns to ‘Chinese quarters’ and then to ‘Chinese corners’. Some Chinatowns in the rising cities, like Huston and Saint Louis, have become general urban areas that are not different from the surrounding. More and more ethnic Chinese have moved out from their former homeland. From 2009 to 2014, the amount of ethnic Chinese in Manhattan Chinatown decreased from 47,000 to 38,000; the proportion of ethnic Chinese in San Francisco (SF *thereafter*) Chinatown declined from 81% to 72% and from 74% to 48% in Philadelphia; in Washington DC, the proportion was 11% in 2014, less than 1/10 of the amount in the heyday (Fig. 1)<sup>①</sup>. As a result, specific living styles and experiences of historic Chinatowns, which have been inherited for over 100 years, are fading away.

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<sup>1</sup>UNESCO, 2011

<sup>2</sup>Van Oers, 2015

<sup>3</sup>Tuan, 1977

<sup>4</sup>Zhu, 2015

<sup>5</sup>Florida, 2004

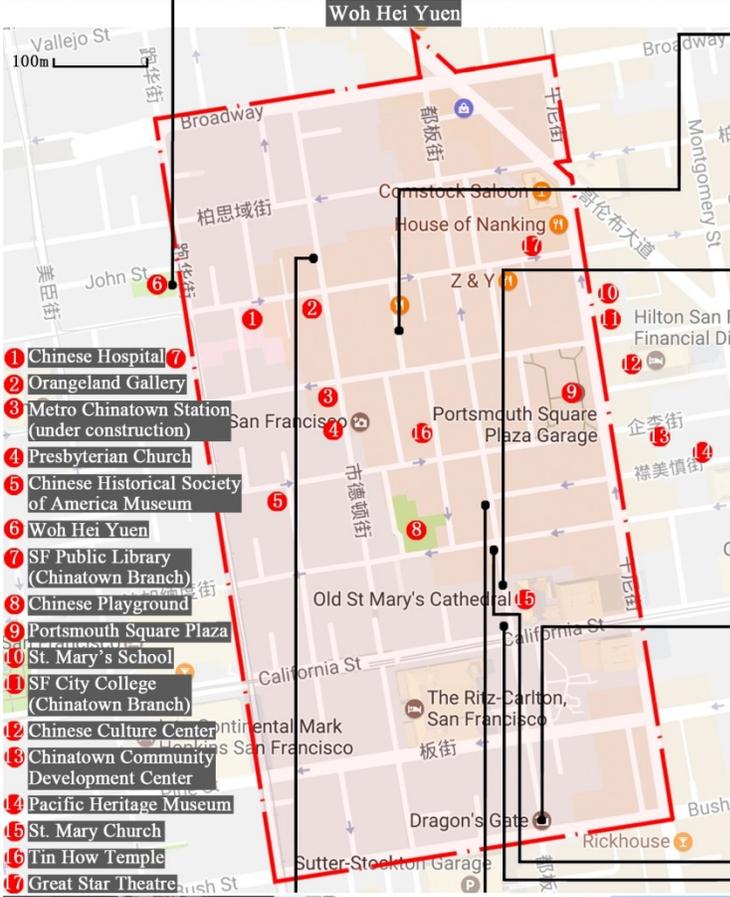
<sup>6</sup>Zukin, 2009

<sup>7</sup>Zukin, 2009

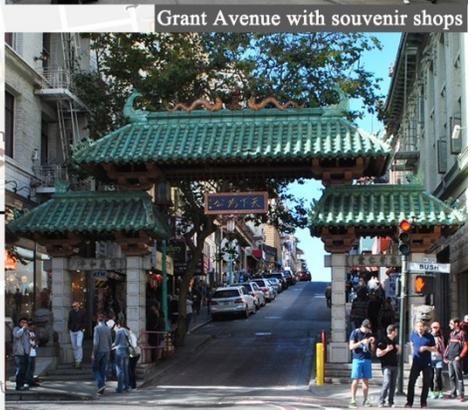
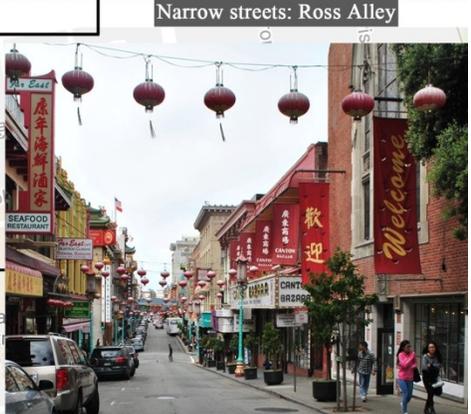


Fig.1– The proportion of ethnic Chinese in historic Chinatown in the US.

(Source: <http://www.vocativ.com/290583/the-fight-for-chinatown/>, edited by the author)



- 1 Chinese Hospital
- 2 Orangeland Gallery
- 3 Metro Chinatown Station (under construction)
- 4 Presbyterian Church
- 5 Chinese Historical Society of America Museum
- 6 Woh Hei Yuen
- 7 SF Public Library (Chinatown Branch)
- 8 Chinese Playground
- 9 Portsmouth Square Plaza
- 10 St. Mary's School
- 11 SF City College (Chinatown Branch)
- 12 Chinese Culture Center
- 13 Chinatown Community Development Center
- 14 Pacific Heritage Museum
- 15 St. Mary Church
- 16 Tin How Temple
- 17 Great Star Theatre



Fruit and vegetable shops extended to streets



Buildings with traditional Chinese features and elements



Buildings with traditional Chinese features and elements



Graffiti of traditional figures

Fig.2– San Francisco Chinatown (Source: by the author)



Fig.3– Lively Portsmouth Square Plaza in San Francisco Chinatown (Source: by the author)

## 2. The historic Chinatown of San Francisco

Located around the Financial District and Little Italy in the city centre, SF historic Chinatown<sup>②</sup> is the largest one outside of Asia and the oldest in North America, which has played a salient role in the history and culture of Chinese immigrants in the US and North America. Its history could be dated back to Gold Rush in the late 1840s. During the 1880s to the 1900s, a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts produced the end of immigration waves and an isolated and a self-sufficient Chinese community. After SF earthquake in 1906, the local municipality and Chinese business leaders took the chance to rebuild Chinatown for developing tourism<sup>8</sup>. In present Chinatown, nearly all buildings were built in this period. After WWII, Chinese Exclusion Acts were gradually called off. As the new immigrant act issued in 1965 and the subsequent second immigration wave after China's economic reforms of 1978, SF Chinatown became the highest density community in the US. In 2013, its population was 9, 998 and the density was 28, 896 person/km<sup>2</sup><sup>①</sup>.

Nowadays, SF Chinatown (Fig. 2) is still dominated by ethnic Chinese and their culture, where traditional Chinese architectural, spatial and cultural features enable, on the one hand, to form Westerners' imagination of China; on the other hand, to recall familiar spatial and cultural perception, flavour of life, or more precisely, the distinctive authentic experience of ethnic Chinese, particularly concerning the diversified and lively activities in Portsmouth Square Plaza (Fig. 3). Despite all this, due to the recent increase of land price and rent, crowded living conditions, lacking facilities (e.g. parking areas, elevators, fire evacuation routes, property management, etc.), and rapid touristic development, more and more ethnic Chinese have moved out.

## 3. The authentic experience of San Francisco Chinatown

This article attempts to outline the 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' experiences of SF Chinatown, through qualitative, informal and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were taken in July and August of 2016, each of which lasted from 20 minutes to one and half hour, and there were 30 interviewees in total (Table 1). Noticeably, the precise definition of 'authenticity' was not given to interviewees. In other words, interviews were developed based on interviewees' personal understanding of 'authenticity'. Only

<sup>8</sup>Li, 2011

when necessary, the author would highlight the two key points of ‘authenticity’, i.e., ‘original’ and ‘real’. Two questions are focused - “which elements are ‘authentic’/ ‘inauthentic’?” and “which elements decide the community’s ‘authenticity’ and ‘inauthenticity’?”, involving in four categories (built environment, population structure, community function and living condition and style). The responses from interviewees were summarized in Table 2, together with their evaluation of maintaining authenticity in three levels - A, B and C.

Table 1. The ages and races of interviewees (source: by the author)

Ages							Races	
0-14	15-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	≥65	In total	Non-Asian	Asian but not ethnic Chinese
1	4	6	6	6	7	30	4	2

Table 2. The summary of interviews (Source: by the author)

Categories	Authentic	Inauthentic
Built environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-High-density community (A)</li> <li>-Narrow streets (A)</li> <li>-Oriental styles and features (A)</li> <li>-Historic buildings/facades/details (A)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Demolished or destroyed historic buildings/facades and details</li> <li>-Abandoned historic buildings</li> <li>-Inappropriate functional changes on historic buildings</li> <li>-Inconsistent new buildings or landscape</li> </ul>
Population structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-High proportion of ethnic Chinese (B)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Other ethnic groups, particularly Westerners working in the surrounding</li> <li>-Tourists</li> <li>-The homeless</li> </ul>
Community function	<p>A traditional Chinese living community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Diversified independent small retail and catering business in high density (e.g. food, grocery, clothing, furniture, etc.) (A)</li> <li>-High-quality public spaces and places (A)</li> <li>-Full-equipped community facilities: schools, hospitals, museums, libraries, churches, temples, theatres, etc. (A)</li> <li>-Large and middle non-chain business: e.g. supermarkets and restaurants (B)</li> </ul>	<p>A modern middle-class community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Upscale housing and hotels</li> <li>-Shops and restaurants with chain brands</li> </ul> <p>A touristic thematic park:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Considerable souvenir shops</li> </ul>
Community living condition and style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Dominated by Chinese immigrants and culture (A)</li> <li>-Lively, crowded, dynamic (A)</li> <li>-Living in groups (A)</li> <li>-Strong community belonging (A)</li> <li>-Frequent interpersonal communication (A)</li> <li>-Only celebrating traditional Chinese festivals (B)</li> <li>-Lively nightlife (C)</li> <li>-Diversified public leisure activities: playing cards and chess, square dance, etc. (A)</li> <li>-Living and working relied on regional and tribal relationship (B)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Gentrification</li> <li>-Poor security condition</li> <li>-Celebrating other groups’ festivals</li> <li>-Non nightlife (shops are closed within 6 to 8 pm)</li> </ul>

Notes: A, B, and C represent the maintenance of authenticity in three levels:  
A-almost completely maintained, B-partially maintained, C-almost not maintained.

#### 4. Discussion: Challenges to authenticity in SF Chinatown

In general, most interviewees expressed their anxiety on the crisis of authenticity. According to above field survey and interviews, and relevant literature and documents, the challenges to authenticity in SF Chinatown could be summarized into four categories as below, together with the discussion of possible effective strategies.

#### **4.1 Immigration and diversified society**

Mainly from Canton Province, the early Chinese immigrants had low education and mostly communicated by Cantonese, with few contact to external society. Thus, the traditional Chinese community culture was inherited very well. The 1960s had witnessed considerable immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, other provinces in Mainland China and Southeast Asia, some of whom were the educated middle-class and enabled to use English. Since then, Chinatown has gradually walked out from the closed Cantonese community. In recent years, due to the increasing land price, plentiful Chinese immigrants have moved out, displacing by growing Westerners who work in surrounding areas (the rent of Chinatown is lower than the surrounding). Moreover, through the gradual integration of the surrounding 'Little Italy', some mixed-style shops and culture emerge. Thus, facing the more multi-ethnic population structure and more diversified and open community culture, how to maintain and inherit authenticity and reconstruct the identity is an urgent challenge. Possible corresponding strategies should involve in both maintaining ethnic Chinese, for instance, providing economic supports (e.g. giving preferential rent) and improving habitability (e.g. community environment, facilities, accessibility); and strengthening propaganda of its specific history and culture.

#### **4.2 Gentrification**

Since the end of the last century, aiming at improving urban image of SF Chinatown, and developing business and tourism, the local municipality has encouraged real estate developers to establish upscale housing, hotels and chain stores, etc., which, however, induces the soaring rent and living cost and the closure of many shops. Although some laws guarantee the long-term tenants could have lower rent, landlords often expel the tenants by all means and rent houses to the new with higher price or change them to commercial uses. Consequently, gentrification is produced with growing demographic displacement. Worse still, some areas in SF Chinatown have transformed from living communities to crowded and expensive touristic 'thematic parks', e.g. the main street, Grant Avenue, where plentiful souvenir shops are located, displacing original daily stores. Apparently, it becomes more prosperous and famous, and physical traditional Chinese features are maintained. However, both cultural spirit and the community's soul have been losing. In future, through providing economic and technical supports for Chinese retail business and controlling commercial types, particularly the proportion of upscale hotels, souvenir shops and chain stores, it may be possible to resist gentrification.

#### **4.3 Contemporary living styles**

The traditional Chinese retail business in most cases is small-scale with the workshop-style, which recently has been facing the challenge of new consumption patterns, e.g. electronic commerce, large-scale commercial complex, chain supermarkets, etc. In spite of lower price, shopping experience in Chinatown is less attractive, particularly compared with new supermarkets and shopping malls, which enables to provide neater and more spacious shopping environment, better public security, easier access and more parking areas, and one-stop shopping experience. Also, traditional working and living styles in the

Chinese community, which were greatly relied on regional and tribal relationship, are fading away. Traditional halls and joint associations have not been responsible any more for providing supports of seeking housing and job opportunities for new immigrants as before. Instead, they become symbolic signs for organizing religious and cultural folk activities. However, in contrast to contemporary living styles, since the last century, the lively nightlife has gradually disappeared, which once lasted until 2 or 3 am. Nowadays, after 8 pm, most shops are closed except some bars and nightclubs. In future, some strategies, involving in improving the community's sanitation and public security situation and accessibility of public transportation and parking, and holding celebrations of holidays/festivals and organizing summer/night markets, etc., may strengthen the competitiveness of Chinatown.

#### **4.4 Aging population**

In 2013, over 31.6% of population in SF Chinatown was senior citizens, over 60 years old<sup>①</sup>. Most of them have lived there for many years and been familiar with surrounding persons and environment. Due to age and health problems and limited English capability, they are neither willing nor able to leave Chinatown. One of interviewees, Mr. Qiu said, "We usually call Chinatown as an 'old town', meaning that it is the area of the old, since more and more young men have left here". In future, when the old leave, how Chinatown would be? Undoubtedly, Chinatown should take some measures for attracting the youth, e.g. improving the community image, introducing some commercial types that meet the young's taste and are also consistent with traditional context, etc. On the other hand, it is vital to develop cultural and education programs for the young. In recent years, Chinatown Community Development Centre has organized some non-profit young programs. For instance, Chinatown Alleyway Tours, which the author participated, were youth-led and guided by some high school students, who grew up in Chinatown, to visit alleyways for learning about the daily life, rich history and modern-day issues. Lisa Yu, the guider of the author's visiting, told the author in the past, she felt ashamed to let her friends know she was born and grew up in Chinatown; however, since joined the program, she better understood the history of Chinatown and elder generations, now she is very proud as a member of this community. In future, more similar activities should be developed for improving the young's understanding, belonging and responsibility on the community.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Once, Chinatown had maintained collective culture, memory and emotion of ethnic Chinese for providing sense of identity and cultural belonging. However, presently, its traditional vitality and cultural charms are increasingly degenerating and some areas even become 'touristic thematic parks' that is undoubtedly adverse to sustainable urban development. As "a tool of cultural preservation" and "space of flows" to connect to the motherland<sup>9</sup>, the authenticity of Chinatown is gradually losing. In fact, many historic cities and communities around the world are facing similar crisis of authenticity from gentrification, aging population and diversified society, etc. As Zukin pointed out, "If we don't confront the question of what we have already lost, how we lost it, and what alternative forms of ownership might keep them in place, we risk destroying the authentic urban places that remain"<sup>10</sup>. This paper is expected to enlighten future explorations on crisis of authenticity and potent strategies for protecting and incubating communities' authenticity towards sustainable urban development.

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<sup>9</sup>Pottie-Sherman and Hiebert, 2015

<sup>10</sup>Zukin, 2009

## Notes

<sup>①</sup>The data is from the US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/>).

<sup>①</sup>Except the historic Chinatown, there are some new Chinatowns in SF. On this paper, SF Chinatown particularly refers to the historic one.

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# ICOA555: L'AUTHENTICITÉ À L'ÉPREUVE ; L'EXPLORATION DES TRANSFORMATIONS SOCIALES DANS LES CHINATOWNS HISTORIQUES AUX ETATS-UNIS POUR UN DÉVELOPPEMENT URBAIN DURABLE ILLUSTRÉ PAR LE CAS DE SAN FRANCISCO

## Sous-thème 01: Intégrer le patrimoine et le développement urbain durable en engageant Diverses communautés pour la gestion du patrimoine

**Session 3:** Patrimoine mondial, Réglementations et directives, Authenticité et intégrité

**Lieu:** Hall Gulmohur, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 14 Décembre, 2017, 09:25 – 09:40

**Auteur:** Shuyi Xie

*Professeur, section du développement, du projet et du règlement, Institut Polytechnique de Milan, Italie. Professeur invité à l'institut de développement urbain et régional, Université de Californie, Berkeley, USA. Diplômé en Master d'architecture, Institut Polytechnique de Milan, Italie.*

**Résumé:** Les dernières décennies ont vu de nombreux Chinatowns historiques s'ouvrir de par le monde à d'autres communautés et ont dû faire face au défi de leur authenticité. Après une introduction aux notions d'authenticité et de transformation des Chinatowns historiques à l'échelle mondiale, cet article se concentre sur le cas de celle de San Francisco, dont la fondation remonte aux années 1840, et qui représente la plus grande communauté chinoise hors d'Asie, avec sa longue histoire dans le cadre de l'Amérique du Nord. Alors que des groupes de plus en plus nombreux de population avec leur propre héritage culturel, s'y installaient, cette implantation historique, dans une société de plus en plus ouverte et diversifiée, a posé publiquement la question de la recherche simultanée de l'authenticité et de l'aspect multiculturel de cet espace. Qui plus est, la gentrification a déstabilisé fortement ce qui représentait un « vieux monde stable », amenant une hausse des loyers et son inévitable déplacement de populations. Ainsi, on a vu une dégradation du lieu en un « parc thématique » à vocation touristique, résultat d'une décroissance du nombre de ses habitants originels et des conditions d'habitabilité, au détriment d'un développement urbain durable. De même, de nombreux usages de la communauté traditionnelle ainsi que les petits commerces ont dû lutter contre le mode de vie actuel, qui s'accompagne d'une nouvelle manière de consommer. Enfin, et ce n'est pas le moindre des facteurs au sein d'une communauté vieillissante, il ne faut pas sous-estimer le rôle joué par la jeunesse intégrant les apports des divers arrivants, spécialement en ce qui concerne l'héritage, la nostalgie, l'appartenance et l'implication. En conclusion, cet article analyse les transformations et les possibilités d'un futur pour le Chinatown historique de San Francisco, et au-delà, explore la faisabilité et les stratégies effectives qui permettraient de conserver son authenticité historique au sein d'une société qui se diversifie et qui se développe à vitesse accélérée, pour un futur développement urbain durable, afin d'inspirer une démarche similaire pour résoudre les dilemmes posés dans les autres implantations historiques dans le monde.

**Mots-clés:** *Authenticité, diversité des communautés, Chinatown, développement urbain durable*