



**Yellow
Pages**

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OUR MISSION

Yellow Pages is a Duke Asian/Asian American issue magazine written, designed, and edited completely by Duke students. Its goal is to be a showcase for Asian American commentary on race, identity, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Memories of Chinatown

EXPLORING MANHATTAN'S ETHNIC ENCLAVE

BY RACHEL LENG



Photo by dcJohn

My personal impression of New York's Chinatown was colored with a distinct perspective of the locality due to my background.

My personal impression of New York's Chinatown was colored with a distinct perspective of the locality due to my background: I was born in Singapore, but grew up in Shanghai, China, where I eventually established a sort of base that I could call "home." Now that I am living and studying in the U.S. in the hopes of attaining an education and career, I have become part of the Chinese diaspora here. Reflecting on my own experiences, I was able to sympathize and connect on a more intimate level with many Chinatown residents than a typical tourist would. Given that I was also able to communicate in Mandarin, many people, particularly the majority of first-generation Chinese immigrants who were not fluent in English, were much more confident about expressing themselves in their mother-tongue and thus more willing to tell me about their lives in Chinatown and perspective of the U.S. in general. However, given the limited time I was able to spend in Chinatown itself, the information I gained may still

be quite superficial and restricted.

The air in New York's Chinatown rings with rhythms of a language that is sung, not spoken, and the narrow street is full of the smells and sights of an idyllic China. As one who has had personal experience living in China, the "Chinese" sights in Manhattan's Chinatown were simultaneously comforting and familiar yet foreign and awkward. Something about the overwhelming spectacle of rustic push-cart sellers, over-sentimentalized landscape paintings and archaic Chinese fortune-tellers reading horoscopes behind booths seemed strange and out of context: in my time in China, I had yet to come across a venue so heavily saturated with an amalgamation of various distinct Chinese cultural stereotypes. In other words, the sights and streets of Chinatown were so superficially Chinese that it served less as a representation of China itself and more a medium that captured the bare essence of a traditional culture, one that is not even found on the mainland anymore.

Chinatown, in effect, came across to me as an artificial repository of hyper-Chineseness: as a tourist attraction, shopping district, popular dining destination, recreational hub, ethnic enclave and cultural artifact all rolled into one.

Most people visit a Chinatown with a preconception of what to expect, and the perennial sights of Chinese restaurants, supermarkets, street vendors and pagodas are familiar to most of the Western world. As I made my way down Mott Street, it constantly struck me how visitors to Manhattan's Chinatown would be severely disappointed if they would then expect to find the same sights in mainland China. After a few hours observing the buildings and restaurants in Manhattan's Chinatown, I realized the extent to which so many stores, such as the primeval herb shops and obscure pharmacies, were only able

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1997: WU DEFENDS ASIAN AMERICANS IN DNC SCANDAL.

Howard University Law School Professor Frank Wu suggested in a Monday afternoon speech in Von Canon Hall that Asian-Americans have been unfairly targeted in a scandal involving inappropriate donations to the Democratic National Committee. Wu said that as a result of the coverage generated over the past six months, "Asian-Americans have been in the news as never before." Amid laughs from the audience, Wu said that this biased media attention has made it seem like Asian-Americans, in general, are agents of foreign influence, having unbelievable

to attract business inasmuch as they were caricatures of a traditional China and revived Chinese cultural myths that had long been dissipated with the influence of globalization in the East. However, beneath the façade of a thriving tourist industry and commercial district, Chinatown is also home to generations of immigrants. It is in the lives of these residents, hidden from the public eye, that the true diaspora of New York's urban Chinatown is revealed.

Despite the first impressions of many tourists, Manhattan's Chinatown is a surprisingly ethnically diverse neighborhood. Historically, the district has always been home to the highest number of immigrants in New York. In the mid-1800's, the Irish, Germans and freed slaves resided here and a new wave of immigrants brought in Eastern European Jews, Chinese and Italians by the early 1900s. Today, the majority of Chinatown's inhabitants are from China's Guangdong, Taishan and Fujian Provinces, as well as a significant population from Hong Kong. Chinatown is a self-sustaining Chinese municipality for new immigrants who see the area as a port of entry providing job opportunities and social services through long-established institutions and a familiar community.

The majority of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. are sojourners, strangers who "cling to the cultural heritage of [their] own ethnic group" and spend "many years of [their] lifetime in a foreign country without being assimilated by it" (Siu 34). However, after exploring Chinatown and meeting residents, it soon becomes obvious that the Chinese immigrants are not concerned with assimilation into American culture at all. Instead, they have a very strong work ethic and focusing on earning money is their top prior-

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ity. New York, then, represents a city of opportunity for them to escape poverty and assist their family financially through hard work. Many immigrants start out as street peddlers or factory workers, and once they manage to save up enough capital in a few years they move into better jobs or even start their own small businesses. While Westerners may find their determination and willingness to endure difficult working conditions baffling, this phenomenon would probably not surprise those familiar with Chinese culture and the poverty in China that these immigrants have left behind.

While Manhattan's Chinatown still serves an important role for new immigrants with lower education or skills seeking entry-level work, rising property costs and urban gentrification are threatening the traditional existence of Chinese residents: many new and poorer immigrants cannot afford the high rents and have been moving to secondary areas with Chinese communities instead. Still, a traditional Manhattan Chinatown is not necessarily going to disappear. Unlike Little Italy or Korea Town which serve customarily as tourist attractions for food and entertainment, Chinatown will endure as a dynamic bastion of ethnic pride and accomplishment for years to come. It has established itself in the midst of an ever-changing metropolis as a Chinese enclave that continues to function as a storehouse

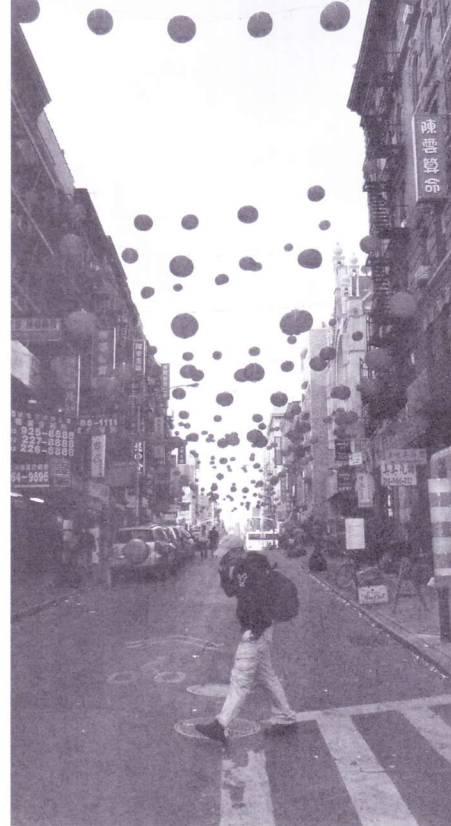


Photo by vige

for the languages, customs, religions and cuisines that immigrants have brought to America with them. In the next few decades, more and more Chinese will emigrate to profoundly change American society and the landscape of Chinatowns in major U.S. cities. Nevertheless, although economic and societal pressures have invariably commercialized Chinatown as a tourist destination, the district is still a place where the mystic of ancient Chinese traditions are preserved and celebrated. Manhattan's Chinatown is inevitably yielding to modern realities, but the borough's distinct flavor will likely be sustained as a portal to a romanticized old China embodied through extravagant window displays and hyperbolic Chinese-ness, fueled by the insatiable American appetite for a distinct cultural immersive experience.

personal influence and threatening to take over the White House, if not the world. Wu encouraged his audience to question how these assumptions have come about, saying, "This is a crucial moment... to reflect on Asian-American activity in political life." In closing, Wu called on his audience to take action. "Asian-Americans have been silent for too long and we cannot afford to be silent now... If we do not speak we will be ignored or others will speak for us." Powerful words that still need to be acted upon

