

Can the Arts Combat the Negative Effects of Gentrification?: The Pao Arts Center in Boston's Chinatown

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Thanks to grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA grant 17-3800-7009), ArtsPlace America (NCPF-2016-17898), and Tufts University through "Tufts Collaborates," an interdisciplinary team is investigating whether an arts center in Boston's Chinatown can mitigate the negative effects of gentrification in that community.

What follows is a summary of our work so far. This project could be extended or might suggest other projects in other settings.

The research team incorporates humanists: Noe Montez (Tufts Department of Drama & Dance), Yizhou Huang (Drama and Dance), and Peter Levine (a philosopher in the Tisch College of Civic Life). It also incorporates social and health scientists: Ginny Chomitz (Tufts Department of Public Health and Community Medicine), Carolyn Rubin (Public Health and Community Medicine), Susan Koch-Weser (Public Health and Community Medicine), Ju Ying Hung (Tufts Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning) and Annie Chin-Louie (Tufts Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute). And it includes community members: Joyce Chen and Kaiyan Jew. Peter Levine is the Principal Investigator.

The team has collected survey data from audiences, interviews with community members, interviews with artists and other Art Center stakeholders, surveys of community-members, surveys of audiences, and expert analysis of artistic events at the Pao Arts Center, which ranged from Cantonese Opera performances to spoken word poetry events and readings.

Background

The story of Boston Chinatown is part of larger urban narrative of rapid demographic changes going on in cities today. These changes can be seen in the rise of luxury commercial and residential development as well as the closing of older businesses, being replaced by new and "hip" places. There is no disagreement that the content and character of the neighborhood is changing. Social services are being forced to open satellite offices in the outlying, newer, suburban Chinatowns, such as Malden and Quincy. New housing is being built in modern, contemporary architecture.

The Asian population of the neighborhood has declined, the median income of Whites in the neighborhood has more than doubled, but the percentage of Asian households living in poverty has increased.¹ These could be seen as signs of gentrification. The Pao Arts Center is a new

¹ Li, B.Y., Leong, J.D., Vitiello, D., & Acoca, A. (2013). Chinatown Then and Now: Gentrification in Boston,

“multi-functional arts space with a performance theater, an art gallery, classrooms, an artist-in-residence studio, and other public meeting space[s].” It has been created within a very large, multipurpose new building that includes affordable housing along with expensive apartments (which have a separate entrance). The building reflects the shift toward more expensive, modernist, large-scale development in Chinatown.²



The Asian Community Development Corp. was the nonprofit developer of the building. Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), a second nonprofit, leases space for the Pao Art Center. Overall, BCNC offers programs to about 2,000 families and is committed to retaining the cultural heritage of the neighborhood and combating dislocation, isolation, and conflict.

At the same time, there is a “spirit” to the land. The land on which the Pao Arts Center is built is land that has been reclaimed by the community after it was taken away from Chinatown during urban renewal in the 1950s.

Hypotheses

The team’s original research proposals asserted the following premises, which are consistent with logic models and other documents from BCNC:

1. Chinatown has been a *community* that has offered social and health benefits to Chinese-American or Asian-American residents due to its community cohesion, which could also be conceptualized as social capital or as a cultural resource.

New York, and Philadelphia. New York, NY: Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF). <http://aaldef.org/Chinatown%20Then%20and%20Now%20AALDEF.pdf>.

² Sacchetti, M. (2015). Chinatown, immigrant haven, fights for its future: Neighborhood confronts a construction boom. Boston Globe. April 1, 2015.

2. Gentrification disrupts community cohesion, which causes harmful social outcomes (apart from any other outcomes, positive or negative, that gentrification may have). *But ...*
3. The arts can strengthen community connections, thus mitigating the damage done by gentrification.

Preliminary Findings

To some extent, our data confirm these hypotheses. (In what follows, quotations are taken from interviews.)

First, Chinatown is often called a “gateway” or a “cultural hub.” Collectively, the stakeholders point to the role of Chinatown as an ecosystem for the local Chinese American and broader Asian American communities. Chinatown serves many purposes. It can be a place of residence, a place of employment, a place of consumption of goods, a place to get services. It can be a central gathering place for the broader Asian American community. It can be difficult to pinpoint the significance of Chinatown given that “its greatest asset is itself.”

Chinatown has had an important role both in the past and in the present. It helps with the “survival” of the community. Even “outsiders” to the community recognize that Chinatown is a community and there is a sense of connection. The older, traditional family associations, the newer organizations and businesses, and the stable, affordable housing units maintain Chinatown as a vibrant, stable community. While some feel that Chinatown is under “attack” right now, stakeholders also recognize that the community is fighting for self-preservation. At the same time, stakeholders recognize that Chinatown is changing and evolving.

Chinatown has been a cohesive community, at least for some residents. Community members who were interviewed for this project reported feeling “warm” about Chinatown, being able to find friends there, and having access to institutions and programs that served their family. They reported a sense of belonging.

Second, gentrification does cause a sense of disruption. Some community members who were interviewed reported rising rents and an increasing supply of housing for middle-income residents but not enough housing for others. Some interviewees saw the neighborhood becoming more open to outsiders while also losing its identity.

Immigrant families are under a lot of stress, which can put a strain on the parent-child relationship. Parents worry that their children will lose their cultural heritage. In being an immigrant in the US, one often feels like the “other.” Asian Americans face discrimination in everyday acts that can make them feel like they do not belong. For some, this sense of not belonging is “trauma” which can be exacerbated by neighborhood pressures of displacement. The loss of community memory can lead to isolation. Being the “other” in society can cause stress, anxiety, and a sense of isolation. The sense of belonging can affect one’s emotional well-being.

Third, some community members endorsed the community-building role of the arts, in general, and of the Pao Arts Center, in particular. No one seemed to think there was a dearth of artistic and cultural offerings in the neighborhood, though one person observed that some offerings fly “under the radar.” Some arts events and products represent traditional Chinese culture, such as Chinese opera, calligraphy and lion dancing. Others represent newer Asian American culture, such as the Boston Asian American Film Festival.

Some said that artists are storytellers who connect people to community. Others cited the role of the arts in healing. A repeated theme was the ability of the arts to bridge gaps among generations. Particularly in immigrant communities, parents and children may have trouble communicating, but the arts cross those boundaries. One respondent described art as a “universal language.” There was enthusiasm for events that draw whole families, such as karaoke nights. Interviewees specifically cited the Pao Arts Center as a place that can bring families together and help people explore their roots.

Fourth, there are potential health impacts of the arts. Because of the lack of Asian American representation and/or the static representation of Asian Americans in the arts, one stakeholder noted the power of seeing images through art that reflect her experiences. The arts had helped her feel valued and confident. It enabled her to share with others who she is and process her experiences as a Chinese/Asian American. This is particularly important for immigrant families. Though they are often working and focused on survival, art gives one time to reflect and to connect to oneself and others. Using art to highlight the community’s history can help to instill a sense of pride. “Placekeeping” can help to anchor the neighborhood and “reassert” its identity. Art can help improve one’s emotional well-being.

On the other hand, the emerging data also complicate the hypotheses of this study.

First, some community members noted aspects of Chinatown that are challenging, calling it dirty, unsafe, short on parking, and disorganized. While some praised the availability of services and programs, one person viewed the non-profits “tripping over each other”.

Second, by no means everyone in Chinatown embraces the concept of “gentrification.” That word is almost always defined as a negative trend, a process of disruption or displacement caused by outside forces and suffered by residents of a neighborhood. In *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Ta-Nehisi Coates calls gentrification “a more pleasing name for white supremacy.”³ However, there is a different discourse that emphasizes economic growth and development and upward-mobility. Some people in Chinatown see rising rents and residents moving out to suburbs as signs of progress, attributable to their own success rather than outside forces.

³Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (One World, 2018), p. 86; but see also Ta-Nehisi Coates, “A Hard Look at Gentrification,” *The Atlantic*, July 21, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/07/a-hard-look-at-gentrification/242286/>

Finally, the Pao Arts Center is a complex entity that doesn't have one unified influence. It hosts discrete events and exhibitions that draw various demographic groups and have diverse purposes and impact. For example, the space was full for a screening of a socially conscious Philippine documentary film entitled *Sunday Beauty Queen* (directed by Baby Ruth Villarama, 2016). Most audience members surveyed at this event said they had attended Pao on other occasions and frequently attend artistic events at other venues. Their most common reasons for attending were to "celebrate cultural heritage and identity" (29%), "explore new cultural traditions" (21%), and be moved/inspired (16%)." The most common words they provided as reactions to this serious work of social commentary were "sad" (5), "proud" (3), and "aware" (3). In contrast, the Kundiman Literaoke Night was billed as a "night of readings and music as writers take the stage to read their work and sing their fave songs."⁴ This event also filled the room but very few members of the audience had been to Pao before, and they most commonly said they had come to "see the work of a specific presenter" (23%), to "energize their own creativity" (19%), or to be "moved and inspired" (19). The most common words they offered to describe their own reactions were "joyful/happy" and "moved/touched" (5 each). These two examples demonstrate that the same space can have very different impact on the community, depending on how it is used.

As an entity, the Pao Arts Center is very new, just developing an audience and brand. In interviews of community members, some said that they had heard of the Pao Arts Center but didn't know much about it, or were even leery of attending. A local business owner expressed an interest in connecting with Pao in the future.

Discussion

A neighborhood is dynamic. People move in and out as both a cause and a consequence of economic change. It's possible for an individual to remain in Chinatown and move on a trajectory of upward (or downward) mobility, while assimilating (or not assimilating) to the dominant culture. It's also possible for an individual to leave in order to take advantage of a desired opportunity—or as a matter of necessity, due to rising rents.

The whole of Chinatown could be characterized as historically Chinese-American. It was never like a traditional community in China; it was an enclave of Victorian tenement buildings, manufacturing plants, and restaurants catering to outsiders in an East Coast US city. One evident change is that it's becoming much more pan-Asian. Does that preserve its heritage as an ethnic enclave or spell the end of "Chinatown" *per se*?

The neighborhood is certainly changing its physical form. Even presuming that most tenants of the new high-rise are Chinese-American former residents of other Chinatown buildings, the sheer design and aesthetic of their home are new. There are similar buildings in modern

⁴ <http://kundiman.org/announcements/2018/4/18/chinatown-presents-literaoke-night-at-the-pao-arts-center>

Shanghai (and in modern Dubai and Mexico City), but not in a traditional Chinese-American neighborhood in a Northeastern city like Boston. Is this preservation? Development?

Likewise, the Pao Arts center is devoted to Asian arts, but its minimalist and functionalist architecture could be seen as modernist, cosmopolitan, placeless, or specifically “Western,” depending on your interpretive frame. Pao probably feels different to people of different backgrounds.

Some people see value in an historic Chinese urban enclave and maintaining it as a vibrant neighborhood for the local and broader Asian American community. At the same time, others acknowledge the arrival of other Asians and non-Asians in Chinatown as an inevitable result of urban change and point to the positive effects that occur when Chinatown residents move to suburbs. These two distinctions produce four possible stances, but in real life, many more options are possible.

	PRESERVATIONIST	INTEGRATIONIST
PRO-GROWTH	Happy for Chinatown to develop, as long as it remains Chinese.	Happy for the area now known as Chinatown to develop economically.
SKEPTICAL OF GROWTH	Opposes gentrification as a threat to the traditional neighborhood.	May be happy to see people move in and out of Chinatown if there’s space for working class residents, artists and others.

A series of events at Pao could reconnect people who have moved away from Chinatown to their former neighborhood, give local Chinese residents a reason to stay in Chinatown or mitigate the stress caused by changes in the area, connect people of different Asian backgrounds or of different races to one conversation and one affective community, or serve a diverse set of audiences from the Boston metro area without really having much to do with connections or the immediate vicinity. Pao could contribute to neighborhood economic development, thus accelerating gentrification, or it could consolidate Chinatown’s function as an ethnic enclave. It could do more than one of these things for different people at different times.

It is too early to tell which of these effects will predominate, but there is potential for any or all of them. Much will depend on how the Pao Arts Center builds its programming and its overall reputation and audience.

Recommendations

The Pao Art Center has the potential to be an important civic and cultural space in the neighborhood. The Pao Arts Center as a permanent space for the community holds the promise to be a “bridge” and “broader umbrella” in a neighborhood that is divided by politics, race, income, and language.