



Institute of Urban Studies

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Winnipeg's Chinatown: A Summary

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Introduction

Chinatown is a small neighbourhood in Winnipeg's downtown area, bounded by Logan Ave. to the north; Main St. to the east; James Ave. to the south; and Princess St. to the west.

Dating back to the early 1900s, Chinatown survives today as the home of numerous Chinese residents, businesses, and cultural institutions. In 2011, Chinatown had a population of 620 persons.

In spite of decline and changes in the 20th century, Chinatown remains an important part of Winnipeg's cultural fabric. Today, Chinatown has the opportunity to attract new development and become a more vibrant and colorful downtown neighbourhood.



Above: Chinatown (outlined in white) and surrounding area (Source: IUS)

Left: Johnstone Block on Pacific Ave., 1986 (Source: The University of Manitoba's Architecture and Fine Arts Library)

Cover photo: corner of King St. and Pacific Ave., 1986 (Source: The University of Manitoba's Architecture and Fine Arts Library)



Formation and early years

By 1910, a small cluster of Chinese businesses had developed on King Street between Pacific and Alexander Avenues a few blocks north of Winnipeg's city hall and market square. Similar to many other Chinatowns in North American cities (Li and Li, 8), Winnipeg's Chinatown developed just outside the core of the central business district. As the Chinese population in Winnipeg grew, this became the centre of life for the city's Chinese community. Immigration restrictions to Chinese people kept Winnipeg's Chinese population relatively small and predominantly male, and the community was largely organized as a "bachelor society" (Baureiss and Driedger, 1982).

Change and challenge in the postwar years

Restrictions on Chinese immigration ended with the repealing of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947. This allowed Winnipeg's Chinese population to grow rapidly, as new Chinese immigrants settled in the city. These new arrivals were increasingly better educated and more upwardly mobile, and many settled outside of the old Chinatowns (Li and Li, 2011). Many residents already living in Chinatown left because of poor housing quality and a lack of housing for families, and by the late 1960s, only 4% of Winnipeg's Chinese population lived in Chinatown. Despite population decline, Chinatown retained importance as a shopping and cultural centre, and a few Chinatown restaurants, such as the New Nanking and the Shanghai, were popular with non-Asian Winnipeggers (Bullamore, et al, 1971).

By 1970, Chinatown was in a state of decline, with many of its older buildings in disrepair, or being demolished for parking lots. Nearby, urban renewal projects were occurring, including the Disraeli Freeway and a new civic centre and concert hall on Main St. The Chinatown community did not want to see Chinatown destroyed by new real estate development or another freeway, and in 1971 they formed the Chinatown Development Corporation, who created a large-scale development plan for much of Chinatown (Da Roza, 1974). This plan would not see fruition, but in the 1980s, several major developments occurred in Chinatown through funding from the Core Area Initiative, including the construction of the Dynasty Building and Harmony Mansion (Chang, 2011).

Similarities with Vancouver's Chinatown

In spite of the growing affluence and suburbanization of the Chinese community in Canadian cities, and in spite of the end of overt discrimination and racial ideology, historic Chinatowns remain an important part of city's cultural and urban fabric (Li and Li, 2011). In 2006, Vancouver's historic Chinatown was only home to approximately 1% of the city's Chinese population. In contrast, some 20% of Chinese Vancouverites lived in Richmond (Li and Li, 2011), a suburb with a high concentration of Southeast Asian shopping malls. Winnipeg does not currently have the same commercial concentration in its suburban region (sometimes called "new Chinatowns"), though many Chinese businesses can be found in many of the city's suburban areas, notably South Pembina Highway and McPhillips Street.

Where does Winnipeg's Chinatown go from here?

Like Vancouver, Winnipeg's Chinatown has long since ceased being a self-contained community that is the social, cultural, residential, and commercial heart of the city's Chinese population (Li and Li, 2011). However, Chinatown remains important to the Chinese and the broader Southeast Asian community of Winnipeg (Godbout, 2009; Marshall, 2012).

In new development and planning initiatives, urban design is an important consideration for Winnipeg's Chinatown. The heart of Vancouver's Chinatown today is a mix of old and new buildings, but newer construction has blended in with the existing scale and character. Buildings are oriented to the street, with surface parking lots and strip mall-style development largely absent. This adds a sense of place, and makes Vancouver's Chinatown a distinct and popular neighbourhood to experience. Winnipeg could follow Vancouver's lead by not only encouraging affordable housing for Chinese residents in Chinatown, but by ensuring design guidelines protect and enhance a unique urban sense of place. As a vibrant and mixed-use neighbourhood, Winnipeg's Chinatown could act as a greater draw for both Chinese and non-Chinese residents and visitors.



Nighttime market in Vancouver's Chinatown (Source: bcbusiness.ca)

Winnipeg's Chinatown: A Timeline



Alexander Ave. looking west from Main St., c.1905 (Source: Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

1900-1945

Formation and Early Development

- A cluster of Chinese businesses form on King Street, north of city hall and warehouse district
- Early cultural and fraternal organizations form.
- Federal policies restrict Chinese immigration, and Chinatown remains a small, predominantly male community.



Johnstone Block on Pacific Ave., c.1955 (Source: L'Atelier National du Manitoba)

1946-1970

Decline and Uncertainty

- Urban renewal plans for core area occur nearby, including a new city hall and Disraeli Freeway.
- A growing number of middle-class Chinese families move out of Chinatown.
- Many of the old buildings in Chinatown fall into disrepair.



Harmony Mansion and the Dynasty Building, c.1986 (Source: The University of Manitoba's Architecture and Fine Arts Library)

1971-1989

Redevelopment Plans

- A development corporation forms in response to decline.
- Several major development projects occur through the Core Area Initiative.
- Chinatown remains an important place even as Chinese population continues move to suburban areas.

Changes to the built form

Figure-ground maps can help illustrate the spatial patterns of a city and its neighbourhoods by contrasting built and open spaces (Carmona and Tiesdell, 2007).

Comparing figure-ground maps of Chinatown from 1943 and 2015, a loss of density and Chinatown's historic building stock can be seen. More open space, typically used as parking lots, exist now. This suggests opportunities for new development on unbuilt sites.



Chinatown and area, 1943. (Source: IUS)



Chinatown and area, 2015. (Source: IUS)

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