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Making the exotic familiar: Representing Chinese Culture in Chicago's Chinatown

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Making the Exotic Familiar: Representing Chinese Culture in Chicago's Chinatown

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Research Question

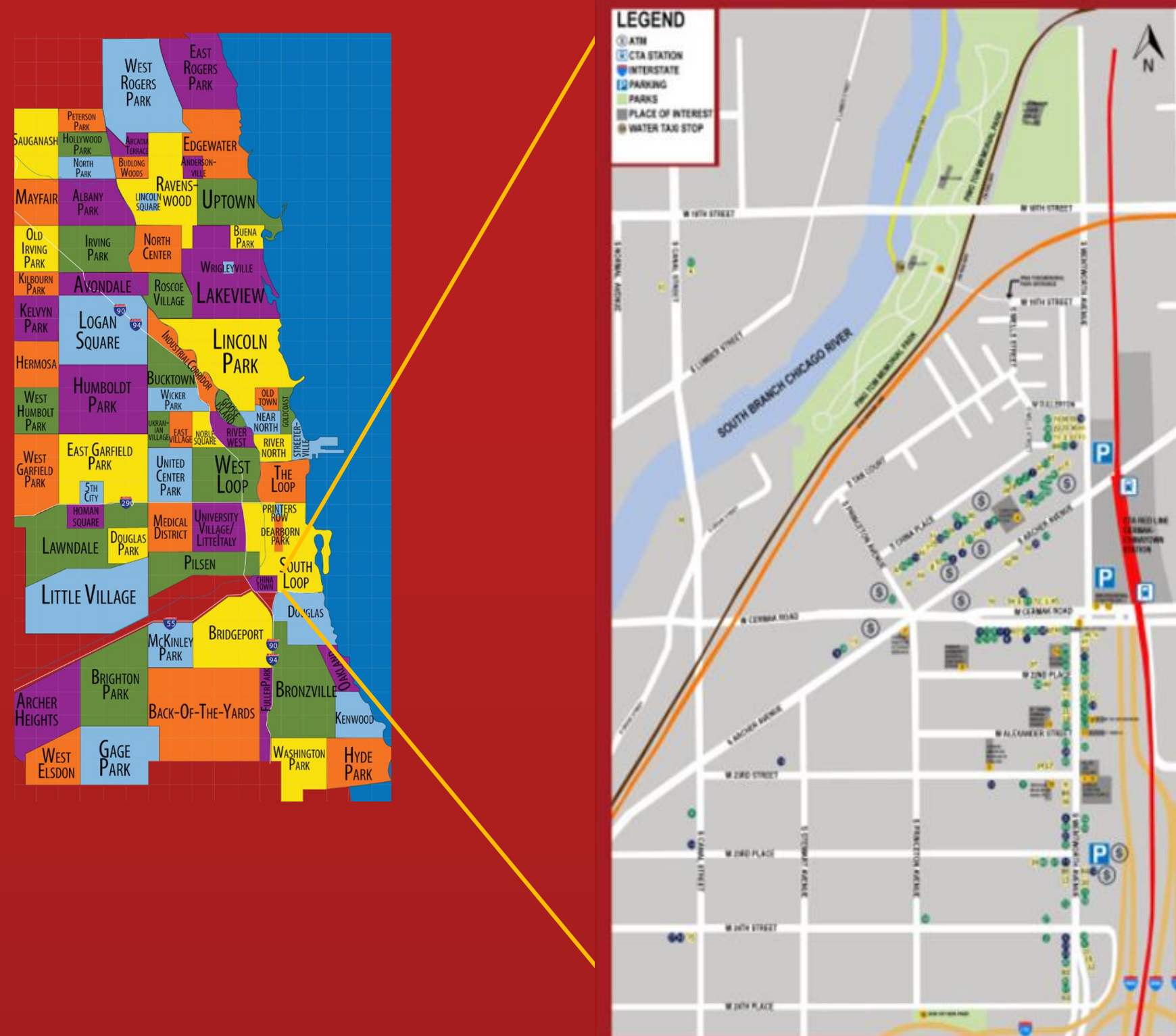
How does Chicago's Chinatown represent Chinese culture to the wider public and how is Chicago's Chinatown changing with changes in U.S. immigration policies?

Background

Chicago is a "city of neighborhoods" and Chinatown is officially recognized as one of the 77 neighborhoods. The neighborhood is contained by physical barriers on all four sides. The business center runs along two main streets (Wentworth Avenue. and Cermak Avenue) that are considered "Old Chinatown" and an outdoor mall and adjacent indoor mall that are considered "New Chinatown". The older residential areas is west and south of the business center, with newer housing north of the malls.

Despite the physical barriers, Chicago's Chinatown is growing. While Chinatowns across the U.S. are facing gentrification and disappearing, Chicago's Chinatown seems to be the exception (Lutton 2019). The population in Chinatown is estimated to be 89% Chinese and the number of Chinese people in surrounding neighborhoods is growing.

Chinatown attracts a large number of visitors and is considered a major tourist destination in Chicago



Methodology

I used anthropological methods of field research to collect data, including mapping, in-depth interviews (conducted remotely), and observation. I also used public census data and archival materials.

I analyzed my data using De Leon's concept of the "hybrid collectif" to understand the human and non-human (i.e., urban landscape, public policies, etc) actants at work in Chinatown.

Findings

Chicago's Chinatown brings in visitors from across the city, and from across the world. People come to Chicago's Chinatown for the Chinese restaurants, bakeries, and gift shops, but even more, they come to experience "authentic" Chinese culture. The architecture, language, smells, and local residents, give visitors a safe and easy way to explore a culture different from their own. What they don't see is how the residents of Chinatown work to create that image as a way to give visitors an authentic Chinese experience and brings income into the neighborhood, while maintaining an exclusive Chinese community.



Chinatown Street Scene, State of Illinois tourism website

"The more tourists the better. It brings income for local businesses... [and] not just the restaurants, there are gift shops and other small businesses that need income... A lot of the businesses here hire the residents living in Chinatown, so if the businesses are doing good that means they will keep hiring residents in Chinatown. If businesses close then they [local residents] lose their jobs and have to look elsewhere. Some of those residents have limited English skills so they might not be able to find a job elsewhere." [2]



Indoor Mall Basement Food Court

I observed three key ways that the residents of Chinatown welcome visitors while keeping a distance that preserves the local neighborhood culture: Chinese language, Chinese restaurant cuisine and décor, and local advocacy.

Language

Chinese language marks the cultural boundaries of the Chinatown community. Outsiders see Chinese characters as part of the authentic Chinese experience, and do not seem to notice that the language also deliberately excludes non-Chinese people, making it difficult for someone who doesn't read or speak Chinese to find local housing or employment or use local services.

"...most Chinatown apartments are rented to Chinese tenants through exclusively Chinese networks. These networks include everything from family friends to social media sites that are in Chinese. But the reasons Chinatown landlords prefer Chinese tenants are complicated. Landlords say they feel a level of comfort and trust with Chinese tenants, who share their language and culture. For community leaders in Chinatown, it's also about a desire to preserve the neighborhood's Chinese identity..." [5]



Restaurant job postings



Optometrist Office

Restaurant Cuisine and Décor

Chinatown attracts visitors with a high density of restaurants offering "authentic" Chinese food. Until recently, most were locally owned, which helps to maintain local boundaries, keeping jobs and money in the community. As new waves of immigrants arrive, they bring new foods, and more recently, restaurant concepts, that keep visitors coming back with new, and possibly even more exotic, Chinese experiences.

"Taishan people were the original people from mainland China, but now we get people from Hong Kong... When the Hong Kong people moved in they wanted food from Hong Kong.. Menus changed big time. In the 1970's, restaurants popped up with northern cuisine, like Hunan wok type of places with the hot peppers. Szechuan cuisine popped up everywhere." [4]

"...businesses here work together not to allow national chain stores to come into Chinatown. That means there is space for those small businesses. The only chain store is Starbucks. There is no McDonalds, no Burger King, no Wendys. No chain stores." [2]

I observed changes in the types of restaurants and businesses that are opening in Chinatown, and renovations to existing restaurants, that suggest that these businesses may no longer serve as local boundaries for Chinatown. This may be due to recent immigration trends bringing wealthy Chinese and Koreans to Chicago both as business owners and consumers.

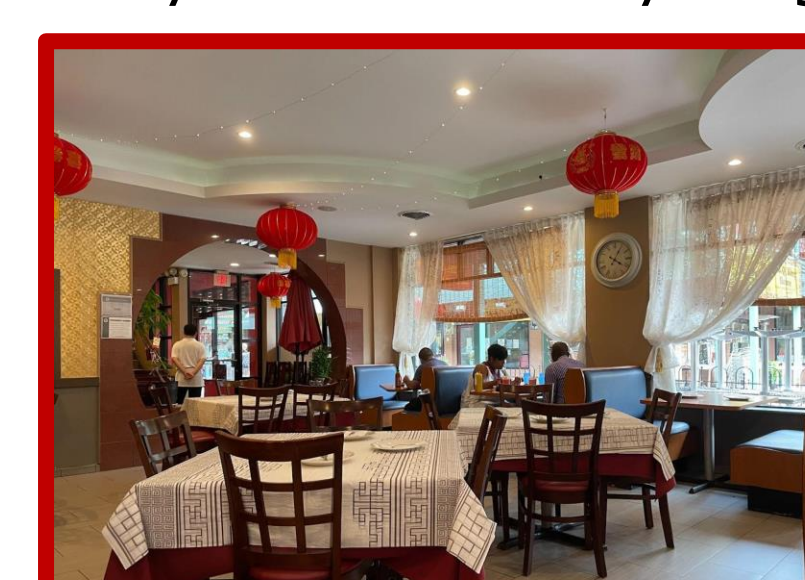
- More Chinatown restaurants that are not Chinese but "Asian", are small franchises with locations in other parts of Chicago, the suburbs, and even other cities, and several big chains, all of them Asian
- More Chinese restaurants in nearby neighborhoods with cheaper rent
- Replacing "conventional" Chinese decor with more trendy or "modern" styles to attract younger, hipper visitors, including Chinese students and young professionals



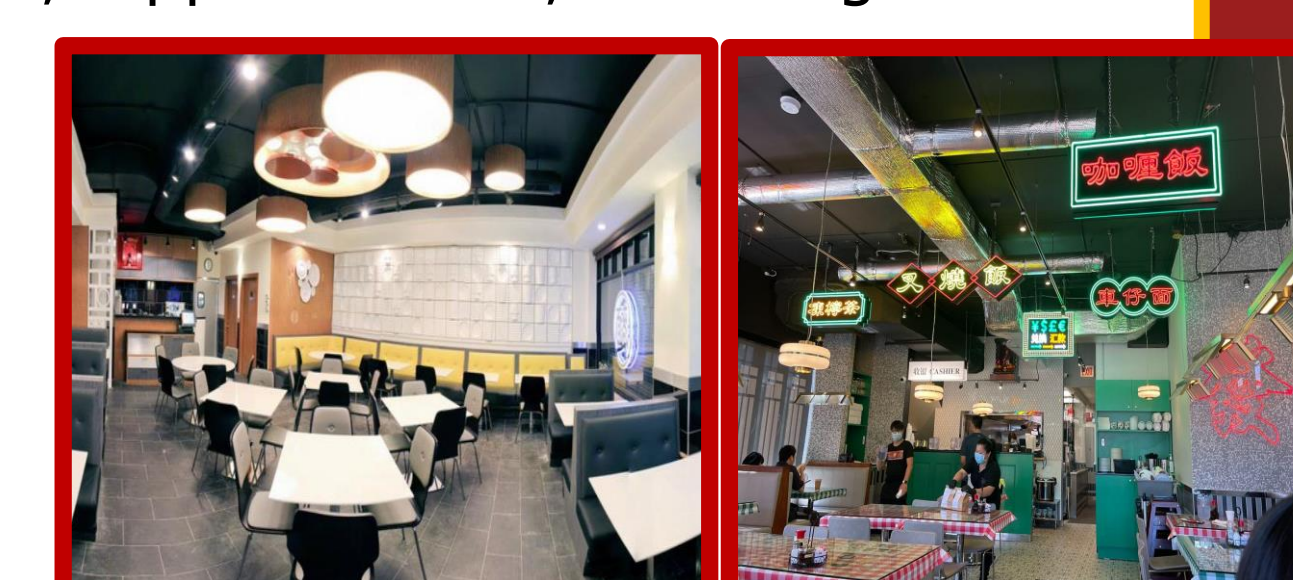
Lao Szechuan, one of the first Chinatown franchises Original Chinatown (right), downtown Chicago (left)



Bonchon Korean Fried Chicken, international chain, opened 2017



Lee Wing Wah, traditional Cantonese food



Before & After. Ken Kee, est. 1997, renovated 2021 by new owner



Chicago Public Library - Chinatown Branch



Ping Tom Memorial Park



Chinese American Museum of Chicago

References



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"Asian people like to live in Chinatown not only because of the grocery stores or restaurants but also because of the rents...Buildings are old and under maintained so the landlords cannot charge a lot of money for rent. People don't mind to pay to live in an old building as long as they pay less." [2]