

Essay Prompt: Our Chinatowns – What will be their future?

Chinatowns began when large numbers of Chinese came to work in America for economic opportunity and escape war and poverty in China in the mid-1800s. They toiled as low-wage laborers in jobs others didn't want. They were "coolies" first in gold mines. Many later died in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Discrimination, economic and language barriers, and support networks led them to concentrate in the cheaper parts of towns. These became Chinatowns. Despite tumultuous histories, including the largest mass lynching in the U.S., occurring in 1871 in Los Angeles, internal power struggles among tongs, civil rights curtailments, and restrictions on Chinese immigration from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, thriving residential, cultural, and business communities formed, often evolving into tourist attractions with ethnic shops and restaurants. Many descendants of early Chinese migrants believe Chinatowns must be preserved as historic reminders of the struggles and hardships endured by their parents and grandparents.

Ethnic enclaves like Chinatowns are not unique to the Chinese, or to the U.S.: concentrations of immigrants from many countries have established similar settlements in many parts of the U.S., and there are Chinatowns worldwide. Several factors drive the growth and decline of ethnic communities: new immigration, race violence, upward mobility, lack of desirable housing and amenities, elimination of race restrictions in "better" areas, proximity to jobs, and regional market changes. Ethnic enclaves disappear or are transformed as immigration slows, the ethnic demographics change, and as adjacent high-density urban areas expand. In New York City, for example, working-class Jews are mostly gone from the Lower East Side; a synagogue became a Buddhist temple. Little Italy is now mainly a tourist destination, with few Italians living there.

Chinatowns in the U.S. illustrate some of these same drivers at work. Chinatowns in Pittsburgh and Detroit disappeared as immigration slowed and the young scattered. Chicago's Chinatown was in decline, due to physical barriers to growth, but is reviving with new immigration and as higher density urban areas form. Despite high Chinese immigration to Los Angeles, recent immigrants have headed directly to areas outside of L.A.'s Chinatown, even though Chinese do own restaurants, and members of old associations still hold meetings there. New York City's historic Manhattan Chinatown, experiencing gentrification and high costs, some of which ironically result from wealthy Chinese buying homes in Manhattan, struggles to retain its population, but large Chinatowns, with dynamic living and working communities, though without historic buildings, have sprung up in nearby Queens and Brooklyn. Very similar trends were observed in other historic Chinatowns, as in San Francisco, Boston and Washington DC. Earthquakes and fires, urban renewal, and urban sprawl have also damaged Chinatowns. The specifics may vary for each Chinatown. But the recurrent drivers of the transformation remain new demographics, new land economics, and new opportunities.

ESSAY QUESTIONS:

Address the questions below. Feel free to include personal experiences with Chinatowns, but there is no penalty if you include none.

- 1) Do you think historic Chinatowns should be preserved and/or reinvented? Why or why not?**
- 2) If not, what are other ways for Chinese Americans to remain connected with their cultural heritage?**
- 3) If yes, what are sustainable, meaningful ways to preserve and/or reinvent them?**