Kind Lands, Unkind Realities: The Conflicting Heritage(s) of the Baltimore Chinatown and Its Relations to Urban Developments in Asian neighborhoods

Introduction

When one stops at the Lexington Market Light Rail station at the present time, it's rarely assumed that within the area lies the first public market in the United States of America, and a bustling neighborhood of trade. Furthermore, most would be unaware that the Park Avenue area where the 300 block would stand—just steps away from the Light Rail station—lies Baltimore Chinatown. The hub of the Chinese community (by extension, the Asian and Asian American communities) in Baltimore from the end of the Second World War up until the 1960s due to the impact of the Baltimore riots[1]. From being a haven for the revolutionaries of the early age of the Republic of China (with Dr. Sun Yat-sen, dubbed "father of modern China" being the most notable temporary residents)[2] to being a haven for the Chinese community at large. Away from the discriminative and oftentimes dangerous reality that was associated with their existence as Asian immigrants in the United States (especially as the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect from 1884 to 1942)[3]. Generations of Asian Baltimoreans had thrived here in Chinatown, and the community—as well as the space in which they occupy—also became, in some ways "sanctified". However, the decline of Baltimore in the aftermath of the Baltimore riots of 1968 hit Chinatown particularly hard, and the neighborhood fell into oblivion and disrepair in the late 1970s.

[1] The current hub of the Asian American communities in Baltimore would most likely be the Baltimore Koreatown (now in the Station North neighborhood), established since the 1960s and continues to exist today, with organizations in place such as the Station North Neighborhood Board, the Asian Studies Department of Towson University, and the Asia North Festival. Examining the dynamics within the Station North neighborhood would go beyond the scope of this paper, as this paper would focus mostly on the Park Avenue area and its dynamics.
[2] Lillian Lee Kim, *Early Baltimore Chinese Families* (Baltimore, MD, 1976), ii-iii.
[3] Leslie Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore* (Baltimore, Md.: Greater Baltimore Chinese-American Bicentennial Committee, 1976), 12-13.

As of 2022, Chinatown has become the talk of the town in Baltimore, and synonymous with "redevelopment". Presently, alongside the project of revitalizing the Lexington Market itself (relaunch slated for 2022), there also exists a project, spearheaded by grassroots organizations such as the Baltimore Chinatown Collective and the Baltimore chapter of NAAAP (National Alliance of the Advancement of Asian Persons) to revitalize the Park Avenue area in general; and Chinatown in specific, where neglect had made itself known in many places within the neighborhood. However, this move is highly debatable, if one would consider the recent issue of gentrification that had plagued many other Chinatowns in the United States such as: Los Angeles, California, Washington, and the District of Columbia. Under the guise of "redevelopment", many Chinatowns across the United States had now been gentrified in different levels. Many former residents and businesses in these neighborhoods are now being displaced, and replaced by corporations and other residents, while other aspects (such as the Chinese signage) are being appropriated by the governing bodies of said cities. Furthermore, the Park Avenue area, where the Chinatown once stood, is not empty–it is, in fact, currently the hub of the city's Ethiopian community, who settled there during the 2000s and created a new identity for the area–and questions are being rightfully raised on the existence of the Ethiopian community as a community amidst this effort of revitalization. The questions regarding the future of the Chinatown area in Baltimore is a representative framework, and can offer solutions, for the questions of the contested sanctity of urban space for different communities, as well as the perceptions and effects of revitalization projects onto these urban spaces and the communities that lived within them.

Furthermore, the lessons on the rise, and fall, and (possibly) rise again of the Baltimore Chinatown, with both the Chinese and the Ethiopian community claiming its sanctity, will offer some insight into the understanding of contested spaces (à la Mircea Eliade and *The Sacred and the Profane*) within urban environments; including some of the arguments that different communities within the

contested sacred spaces might have, as well as the steps that were taken to address the contested nature of the space.

The History of Baltimore's Chinese American community

The first Chinese American (defined as a citizen of the United States, of Chinese descent) to be born in Baltimore, on November 29th, 1892, bore the name of Lily Lee (renamed to Lily Lee Wong in 1912 as she got married), the daughter of Lee Yoot, one of the first Chinese immigrants to arrive in Baltimore[4]. However, according to record, the Chinese community of Baltimore had existed for a substantial amount of time before her birth. In *Early Baltimore Chinese Families,* usually counted as the pseudo-official biography of the Baltimorean Chinese families, it was mentioned that Lee Yoot arrived at Baltimore alongside his wife after his brother and sister-in-law's arrival–while still being noted that the Yoot family is one of the first families to arrive in Baltimore[5]. The exact date of the arrival of the first Chinese immigrant into Baltimore remains a mystery (a popular conjecture had stated that the first Chinese migrants into Baltimore might have arrived in the 1870s; this claim matches with the interview of Gee Ott in 1932 for the *Baltimore Post,* who might have arrived in Baltimore in the 1880s[6]). However, the birth of Lily Lee Wong signaled a new era for the Baltimore Chinatown, at this time lying within the 200 block of Buck Street and mostly populated by Chinese migrants[7]. The era of diversifying in nationality among the residents, in the sense that outside of Chinese migrants, there are now *Chinese children born on U.S. soil* and are counted as citizens of the United States living within the neighborhood.

[4] Lee Kim, *Early Baltimore Chinese Families*, 19.
[5] Ibid
[6] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 12
[7] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 13

It would not have been such an important event, had the dominating narrative regarding Chinese immigrants not been variations of "Chinese go home!". Due to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act ten years before Lily's birth, the Chinese communities throughout the United States, and Baltimore most definitely not outside of this issue, became a category of "undesirables". They were systematically excluded from U.S. citizenship (and consequently all the rights that are usually granted under said citizenship), are not allowed to find work that will befit their abilities (and, some cases, any work at all) in almost all businesses and enterprises, among many other issues[8]. Amid such widespread displays of open hatred, many Chinese migrants had no better option than to gather around with their compatriots. In *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* written to record the oral history and the presence of the Chinese community as a demographic within the city of Baltimore as a part of the Bicentennial of the Founding of the United States; Leslie Chin also mentioned the phenomenon, citing both their nature of the Chinese people to gather in groups and socialize in group settings[9]. The hardships that the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882 and 1884 (mostly concerning the entry requirements of Chinese migrants into the U.S. to only allow children of Chinese people who are *born in the United States* to be eligible to migrate; which exclude *almost every family living in the Baltimore Chinatown at the time)*[10]. The Chinatown may have moved in the immediate years after the First World War[11], however the systemic discrimination that they are forced to face will not go away until after the second World War altogether. In *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* Chin also cited an article from 1942, where the issue of American war plants outright refusing to hire Chinese workers, even amid an acute shortage in manpower, brought forth by the war and the draft. To quote Jimmy Wu, a community leader who brought this issue to attention to the general public in Baltimore:

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[8] Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 89-90.
[9] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 20
[10] Ibid
[11] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 15-16

> Several members of the Baltimore Chinese colony have been unable to find work in the war industry, simply because they are Chinese. I am sorry to say this in the presence of so many friends of China, but the fact is that some of our Chinese are being discriminated against and they do not understand. Some of our Chinese have worked long and hard to master a skill, in the belief on the promise that they were needed… they are really discouraged![12]

The discriminative attitude in Baltimore is indeed egregious, one incident that stands out would have to be the time that 101 Chinese migrants were all charged with disorderly conduct and were asked to pay a fine of $101.35 each for playing fan-tan, a Chinese card game similar to Western poker, by the Baltimore Police Department in 1922. However, the issues of crowds attacking and committing hate crimes against Chinese migrants was not a part of the reality of Baltimore, the same way it is in cities such as Denver and San Francisco. Because of this relative tolerance to the presence of the Chinese migrant, many viewed Baltimore as a safe haven; however, this did not exclude Baltimore from feeling the impact from the mass exodus of the Chinese away from the United States and back to the then-Republic of China[13]. Leslie Chin noted that by the time the U.S. entered the second World War in 1941, the Chinese population of Baltimore dropped to only three hundred residents, mainly due to the constant harassment and the social discrimination they faced within the United States[14]. Also, due to the very limited employment possibilities, many Chinese migrants who stayed ended up making a living through laundromats and the restaurant business. This would further add insult to injury, since the first Chinese migrants arriving in Baltimore are intellectuals, and the Baltimore Chinese community remained highly educated.

[12] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 16
[13] Ibid
[14] Lee Kim, *Early Baltimore Chinese Families,* ii-iii

Because of this sense of social discrimination, Lillian Lee Kim did note that Chinese-Americans remained very isolated within the limits of the Chinatown area; as this is a space that is safe, and even though the Chinese community does not technically all live in Baltimore[15]. Due to this sense of safety, it will be safe to say that the Baltimore Chinatown became a *sacred space,* especially for Chinese migrants. The relative lack of a language barrier[16] as well as the sense of community belonging allow the space to be sacred, even if with a considerable number of citizens in Baltimore who thought of the Asian presence in the city as a profane thing. But this is not to say that the Chinese Baltimoreans did not thrive in the city, quite opposite, the Baltimore Chinese community became the place for many laureates in different disciplines. Including: Feng H. Der, the famous Scoutmaster of the Chinese Boy Scout Troop 128 in Baltimore and is one of the engineers behind what we know now as Meals, Ready to Eat (MREs)[17]. James Wong, a boy who loved tinkering and radio technology from the Baltimore Chinatown, to one of the pioneers in the missile program of the United States Army in Cape Canaveral (Florida) after the second World War[18]. Dr. Marian Buck-Lew (1941-2018), the first person (regardless of gender) to receive a Doctoral degree in Piano from West Virginia University; and the much-coveted Artist Degree in Piano from the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University[19]. The Baltimore Chinese community was also witnessing history, as Sun Yat-sen, revered as "the father of modern China", chose Baltimore as a base of operation to garner support for the cause of modernizing China. Which resulted in the 1911 Chinese Revolution, ending the dynastic rule over China and gave a start to the new Republic of China[20]. In more

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[15] Ibid
[16] To say "a relative lack of a language barrier" is to say that in written form, Chinese had a unifying script; most problems lie in the speaking dialects.
[17] Lillian Lee Kim, *Chinese Americans- A Part of America* (Baltimore: Maryland Bicentennial Commission Grant, 1977), 2.
[18] Lee Kim, *Chinese Americans- A Part of America,* 3.
[19] "Dr. Marian Buck-Lew Obituary (1941 - 2018) Baltimore Sun," Legacy.com, last modified February 7, 2019, https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/baltimoresun/name/marian-buck-lew-obituary?id=10962560.
[20] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 14.

ways than one, the Baltimore Chinatown became a sacred space due to these impactful individuals, even amid the widespread discrimination.

The history of Chinatown in Baltimore

It must be said upfront, that Chinese Baltimoreans do not all live in Chinatown as they first arrived into the city, and the scattered nature of the Asian communities persists even today. While the people living and businesses operating within the walls of the Baltimore Chinatown is incredibly important, the space itself was equally as important. Initially formed within the 200 block of Marion Street, the Baltimore Chinatown moved to its location to Park Avenue after the first World War, as downtown developments forced the relocation to happen. However, the Baltimore Chinatown, regardless of location, was a bustling hub for community and activity.

The Chinese migrants, through the Joss houses (scaled-down version of Chinese temples that are popular within the Chinese diaspora), are provided with a space to conduct their rituals, and to connect with the cosmos in a space that can be considered as sacred[21]. Through organizations such as the Grace and St. Peter Church, the Chinese Benevolent Society, and the Chinese Consolidated Association, new arrivals had the chance to be provided with a safe space to learn English, the American society, and to begin their journey as part of the United States and Baltimore[22]. Furthermore, the Chinese Consolidated Association and the Chinese Benevolent Society became the connecting thread between the Chinese community and their homeland. During the Sino-Japanese War, many fundraising opportunities were started from within the walls of these organizations to aid the Chinese defense against the Japanese expansionism[23]. As a token of appreciation, a seventy-five-foot dragon was gifted

[21] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore,* 23
[22] Lee Kim, *Early Baltimore Chinese Families,* ii-iii
[23] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore* 18

to the Baltimore Chinese community from the Republic of China[24] as part of the Third World Congress of Poets and in honor of the Bicentennial of the United States in 1976[25].

The Baltimore Chinatown is also a space for the reflection of the political development of the Chinese mainland. A chapter of the Chinese Kuomintang was highly active in the city between the early 1920s and the start of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The sanctity of the Chinatown also can be attributed to the existence of Chinese trade union (the On Leong Chinese Merchants League became one such example in Baltimore). The trade unions regulate the rise of storefronts, working as a moderator within the communities' traders and becoming a place where older Chinese migrants can find community and help outside of the doors of the church[26]. In many ways, the sanctity of the Baltimore Chinatown is upheld by the people but is also supported by the institutions that are active within it as well.

The Beating Heart: Po Tung Oriental Grocery, and the Current State of the Chinatown Area

The roads leading to the Lexington Market, as well as the Park Avenue area where this bustling community once stood, now stands almost entirely quiet. With most of the buildings abandoned with the move of the Chinese Baltimoreans away from the city and into the suburbs from the aftermath of the 1968 Baltimore Uprising, but especially in the 1990s. During an interview with the Baltimore Brew magazine, Jerry Tsang, the owner of Po Tung Oriental Grocery, already noted people's desire to leave Baltimore and move to either Rockville or to the District of Columbia[27]. The clearest signs that point one to the existence of the Chinese enclave of the yesteryears would be the signage in Chinese; at present, the On Leong Chinese Merchants League and the Chinese Freemasonry Lounge are still present. Many

[24] Lee Kim, *Chinese Americans- A Part of America* 21
[25] Ibid
[26] Chin, *History of Chinese-Americans in Baltimore* 17
[27] Fern Shen, "Mooncakes, Mochi and More Make Asian Market an Oasis in a City Food Desert," Baltimore Brew, last modified March 8, 2019, https://www.baltimorebrew.com/2019/03/08/mooncakes-mochi-and-more-make-asian-market-an-oasis-in-a-city-food-desert/.

buildings also have retained their Chinese flair, which are still visible within the 300 block of Park Avenue today.

Saying that Chinatown as a whole has died is a premature assessment, as the Po Tung Oriental Grocery store, the last remaining Asian-owned business of the old Chinatown, remains open at 321 Park Avenue, Baltimore, MD. Operated by Jerry Tsang–a former international student immigrated from Shenzhen, China–since 1990, the Po Tung Oriental Grocery remains a favorite. Providing Asian food and produce for both immigrant communities and international students alike. It is a living testament of the continuing spirit of the old Chinatown. Within the grocery store, Asian and Asian-Americans are able to find treats such as: Chinese tea, Malaysian confectionary, Vietnamese fish sauce, and other treats that are reminiscent of home (or allowing one to taste different cuisines throughout Asia). Preserving a part of the history of the neighborhood as a hub for the Asian community[28].

According to an interview with Jerry himself from the Baltimore Brew, the grocery store was a way for the Asian communities within the city of Baltimore to access Asian products and grocery without the need to travel to Baltimore County, where large Asian grocery stores such as H-Mart and Great Wall lie[29]. Consider that right across the street in front of Po Tung stands an Ethiopian grocery store, which is one of the great hubs of the Ethiopian community that is presently living within the old Chinatown. It will be safe for one to say that Chinatown of the present day has two hearts, one for the Chinese foundation, and one for the Ethiopian reality. If one applies the standards of a "sacred space" written by Mircea Eliade–a space where one conducts rituals and connects with the "cosmos"[30]–to determine the sanctity of a space, a space for such sanctity would have to be the grocery stores. As stated earlier in this paper, a space can be "sacralized" due to their place within the community. Just like in the old

[28] Ibid
[29] Ibid
[30] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1959), 20-24.

Chinatown, both the Po Tung Oriental Grocery and the Abient Ethiopian and American Market serve as places where one can find the needed aspects for the commencement of their respective rituals. From coffee for Ethiopian coffee time, to mooncakes for the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, the grocery stores and markets became sacred. Primarily because they are the places that are most likely to have vendors that can cater to that need, or sell the ingredients that are needed for the creation of said rituals. Furthermore, they would also be one of the places where many different immigrant communities would be able to meet and mingle with each other. An example of this is an interaction between Jerry Tsang and one of his regular customers, a woman from Africa, for a product that she might need but does not have; Jerry answered her "I don't have it, but I will try to find it for you, Mama,"[31]. While a small exchange, it is still a reflective image of the dynamics of the interactions that happen in the current Chinatown area. In some cases, stores like Po Tong might become the spark that led to the discussion: one of them would be the founding of the Chinatown Collective.

The Chinatown Collective and the Contested Realities of the Revitalization of the Baltimore Chinatown

Within the city limits, the Chinatown Collective marks itself as one of the major stakeholders in the revitalization process of the Baltimore Chinatown. Consisting of artists, business owners, and activists, the Chinatown Collective aims for the creation of a pan-Asian hub within the city. An expansion of the vision made by Katherine (Kitty) Chin and her late husband Calvin Chin, an immigrant in her 90s who can greatly recall from memory the once-thriving hub of Asian-American communities that was the Baltimore Chinatown[32]. Founded in 2018 by Stephanie Hsu, former marketing and events manager for the R. House (one of the largest food markets in the city, based in the Remington neighborhood); the Chinatown Collective made its mark by organizing the Charm City Night Market. A celebration of the

[31] Shen, *Mooncakes, Mochi and More*

[32] Lauren Cohen, "Asian-American Community Celebrates Past and Present With New Festival," Baltimore Magazine, last modified December 19, 2019, https://www.baltimoremagazine.com/section/fooddrink/asian-american-community-celebrates-past-and-present-with-new-festival/.

pan-Asian identity utilizing the green space between the 200 block of Park Avenue towards the eastern entrance of Lexington Market as a gathering site[33].

In *Asian-American Community Celebrates Past and Present With New Festival*, Hsu mentioned that the formation of the Chinatown Collective came as a decision from her own discoveries about the existence of the Baltimore Chinatown area. While going through Po Tong Grocery herself while finding a new flavor to test with one of the biggest Asian-owned eateries at the time, Ekiben in Hampden[34]: "When I was walking up and down the street, I had this realization of generations that had been there before. There is a history there that is not widely shared and not widely known."[35] A few months later, with the help of the Maryland Department of the Enoch Pratt Free Library and the Maryland Historical Society[36], the Chinatown Collective was formed. Focused on continuing the mission of the revitalization of the Baltimore Chinatown as a pan-Asian hub, a vision that had been the lifelong dream of Katherine "Kitty" Chin and her late husband Calvin (died February 2008) since the late 1970s. when the couple realized the decline of Chinatown as a neighborhood was evident[37]. A memorable sign was an interview with Feng H. Der which was part of writing *Early Baltimore Chinese Families* in 1975-76; Lillian Lee Kim had noted that he had already moved away to Asheville, North Carolina[38]. Back in 1976, the proposal for a Chinese Cultural Center in Baltimore was already circulating; cross-checking with the fact that Kitty Chin herself had said the Chinese Cultural Center was her husband Calvin's "lifelong dream"[39], and the Chinese Cultural Center has still not materialized even in 2022. The formation of the Chinatown Collective carried on this lifelong dream of a space for Asian culture and heritage here in Baltimore. With

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[33] Ibid
[34] As the article was written in 2018, the Ekiben branch in Fells Point has not yet been opened.
[35] Cohen, *Asian-American Community Celebrates*
[36] Now the Maryland Center for History and Culture
[37] The downfall of Chinatown as a neighborhood is influenced by many factors including the shortage of jobs, generational gaps, and other problems that are lying beyond the scope of the paper.
[38] Cohen, *Asian-American Community Celebrates*
[39] Julie Scharper, "The 'where' of Chinatown," Baltimore Sun, last modified March 2, 2008, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2008-03-02-0803020012-story.html.

a very different dynamic than in 1976, the Chinatown Collective's solution is the purchase the 400 block of Park Avenue; slating it into apartments and a restaurant-retail zone that is "Asian-themed"[40], partnering with a group of developers within Baltimore and Washington D.C., including Vitruvius Co.[41]

However, the phrase "new apartment building with Asian-themed restaurant-retail zone", and the earmark that only ten percent of the proposed apartments as affordable housing while Baltimore's downtown neighborhoods are in a shortage of affordable housing at first sight, sounds dangerously close to the rhetoric that was used by developers to begin the process of gentrifying (particularly Black) neighborhoods. The phrase sounded even more alarming to the Ethiopian community, who had started moving into the neighborhood after Chinatown became largely abandoned by the 1990s. The Ethiopian community, largely arriving to a mostly desolate area that was once Chinatown, had built, by themselves, a community. The 300 block of Park Avenue had become the center for a rising community of Ethiopian Baltimoreans, the Abinet Ethiopian Market acting as the de facto community center[42].

Much like the first Chinese migrants, Ethiopian migrants had "sacralized" the area, and made the neighborhood a sacred space to search for community and belonging. However, the community is financially struggling, and the threat for gentrification has generated a lot of anxiety in the community. When asked about this issue, Teklu[43], the owner of the Abinet, lamented on the already rising rent of the building: "When before, I first opened my store, the rent was $1,000; now it's $1,200. Now I even hear that my landlord might sell the building"[44].

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[40] Shen, *Mooncakes, Mochi and More*
[41] Amir Khafagy, "What Gentrification of Baltimore's Chinatown Means," Bloomberg CityLab, last modified December 4, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-04/what-gentrification-of-baltimore-s-chinatown-means.
[42] Ibid
[43] Amir Khafagy, "What Gentrification of Baltimore's Chinatown Means," Bloomberg CityLab, last modified December 4, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-04/what-gentrification-of-baltimore-s-chinatown-means.
[44] Ibid

This resentment is also shared by Andrew Leong, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Law at University of Massachusetts, Boston. When interviewed about this issue, he stated outright that "the 'rebuilding' of a Baltimore Chinatown would be an artificial attempt to conjure up some Orientalist exotic and Disneyfied fragment of what a true Chinatown community is"[45]. Pointing out that the Baltimore Chinatown's only way forward was to fully embrace its new identity as the hub for Baltimore's new Ethiopian community[46]. Regarding this issue, Stephanie Hsu responded with the following:

> The legacy of Chinatown is that they make space for more immigrant communities. We don't like to say that Chinatown is dying or needs to be revitalized; there is very much an exciting commerce community that exists right now. Our effort to highlight the history of the space is by no means a statement of erasure of the community that exists there now.

then noted that the partnership between the Chinatown Collective with the developers would not count as a consulting relationship. Rather it would act as a community accountability liaison to find businesses that would ensure the spirit of the Baltimore Chinatown remained intact throughout its development[47]. The development is also very welcomed by Jerry Tsang, as the 400 block is merely a block North of where Po Tung currently resides. When asked about his hopes for the development plan, Tsang mentioned that he is placing a lot of hope into this redevelopment project. "If some nice restaurants come here, maybe Chinese restaurants, that would bring more people to me,"[48]; and he would not be as far away from Kitty's, or Stephanie's vision[49].

The conflicting feelings, as well as the sense of resentment, reflected well with the issue of contested space that is measured in Beldon Lane's *Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for*

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[45] Ibid
[46] Ibid
[47] Ibid
[48] Shen, *Mooncakes, Mochi and More*
[49] Cohen, *Asian American Community Celebrates*

Understanding American Sacred Space. Lane defined a "sacred space" as a space where there exists a need for ritual activities, there exist a symbolic meaning for the site, and a vigorous claim on the ownership towards the site is used[50]. The discourse regarding the sanctity of the redevelopment of the Baltimore Chinatown satisfies all three of these prerequisites, with the ritual activities being getting food from your homeland, and the vigorous claim of ownership of the site is noted from all sides of the discourse. In many ways, the current conversations bear resemblance to the conversations seen in Rowland A. Sherill's *American Sacred Space and the Contest of History*. Sherill argues that in American culture, the sanctity of a place is not an intrinsic concept, but rather a result of human activity and the process of self-determination between different groups of human in the determination of the sacrality of the place[51]. This is clearly seen through the different viewpoints between Baltimoreans, from Teklu to Stephanie, and Kitty, and Jerry.

Furthermore, a specific rhetorical question can be explored–"what happens when a so-called secular age, stripped for many any credible prospects of "the holy", stunted in its senses of any transcendent and yet present spirit, makes the identification of any sacred space—in fact, the whole category of "the sacred"—a difficult, even whimsical matter?"[52] This question can be carefully considered by looking at one of the reasons that led to the fall of Chinatown: the lack of community coherence among the children of the original immigrants. As the community moved out and there is not a lot of effort given to the understanding of the community, the community will just eventually fade itself out. Many factors can push a community to its demise, but gentrification (what Andrew Leong and Teklu feared happening) is one of the deadliest forces if not addressed early. This can be seen through

[50] David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 339.
[51] Ibid
[52] Ibid

two of the largest Chinatowns in the United States of America: the Chinatown in Los Angeles, and the Chinatown in Washington D.C.

Case Study: Chinatown of Los Angeles, California

The claims by Andrew Leong that the Chinatown Collective is working as a force for gentrifying the city is not at all baseless. Moreover, the conversation about the possible gentrification of Chinatowns is not unique to Baltimore. The pace of recent development projects (which had been used under the guise of revitalization) had caused the concerning process of gentrifying the neighborhood to begin. In many cities–including Los Angeles and Washington D.C.–this further marginalized the Chinese community, many of whom were seniors and unable to work, within their own communities.

Gentrification, defined by Merriam-Webster as "a process in which a poor area (as of a city) experiences an influx of middle-class or wealthy people who renovate and rebuild homes and businesses and which often results in an increase in property values and the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents"[53] characterized much of the discourse surrounding the development of the Los Angeles Chinatown since the late 1990s. From the dilapidated and run-down outlook in the previous decades, popularized by movies such as Roman Polanski's Chinatown (1974)[54], the concept of "ethnohubs" began to take shape from the late 1970s. especially with the redevelopment of downtown Los Angeles and a new source of investment capital from abroad (e.g. the Middle East, Japan). Part of the development includes the rise of the art gallery scene within Chinatown, and the shifting of the neighborhoods such as Little Tokyo, Chinatown and Olvera Street, towards a public image more fitting for the tourism

[53] "Definition of GENTRIFICATION," Dictionary by Merriam-Webster: America's Most-trusted Online Dictionary, accessed May 15, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentrification.
[54] Jan Lin, "Los Angeles Chinatown: Tourism, Gentrification, and the Rise of an Ethnic Growth Machine," *Amerasia Journal* 34, no. 3 (2008): 111, doi:10.17953/amer.34.3.v545v63lpj1535p7.

industry, in both material culture (with the rise of high culture and art galleries) as well as the intangible culture (such as more ethnocentric events that rotates around the Chinese identity and history)[55].

In *Los Angeles Chinatown: Tourism, Gentrification, and the Rise of an Ethnic Growth Machine*, Jan C. Lin argues that while the rise of "culture" and tourism does bring forth some positive change. towards the Los Angeles Chinatown the same way it did with Koreatown and Little Tokyo, The issue of increased income inequality and skyrocketing costs of living might drive out many of the original residents. These are usually elderly citizens, low-income immigrants, mom-and-pop business owners, and other economically marginalized groups that have a significantly higher risk of being forced out of their own cultural hubs[56]. The status quo was dire enough that Lin mentioned the availability of Cathay Manor, an affordable housing unit in the Chinatown neighborhood that was subsidized by the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles. When it first opened in the 1980s, the residential unit was quickly filled up, as there was ten times more applicants than there was space available[57]. With the situation in cities like Baltimore, where the downtown core had been in dire need of affordable housing and with a building that does not allow that crisis to be solved, there are very legitimate grounds to worry that the displacement of lower-income citizens might happen with the issue of the development of the Baltimore Chinatown.

Case Study: Chinatown of Washington, District of Columbia

Another much-revered Chinatown going through an identity crisis is the Washington D.C. Chinatown. In the present time, the neighborhood is fighting to keep the spirit of the neighborhood alive—in this case, the family businesses and original residents—in a city that is more interested in creating the aesthetic of Chinatown; while not putting in the work to protect the Chinese community in

[55] Lin, *Los Angeles Chinatown* 112-19
[56] Ibid
[57] Lin, *Los Angeles Chinatown* 121

the city. An example of this failure is the fact that even though the neighborhood's signage is always bilingual in both English and Traditional Chinese[58] as mandated by the city, the number of original residents in the Washington Chinatown who are of Chinese descent which now stands at 300 and dwindling; a drop of ninety percent from its peak of 3,000 Chinese residents[59]. Proportionally speaking, Asian Americans have left D.C. en masse over the past twenty years, as the proportion of Asian Americans within D.C.'s population also dropped by two thirds–from 66 percent of residents in 1990 to 21 percent in 2010[60]. The skyrocketing cost of living in the District is one of the culprits, however, many researchers and journalists agreed that the construction of the Verizon Center (now the Capitol One Arena) was the final straw for the already declining area[61].

in *Gentrification and authenticity in D.C. Chinatown: Walking the Fine Line Between Exploitation and Prosperity,* Johns Hopkins graduate Rollin Hu'18 mentioned the cultural impact that the gentrification of the Washington D.C. Chinatown can bring to the Chinese community itself. While working in a Chinese restaurant, Hu encountered the restauranteur saying to him that "We aren't a Chinese restaurant; We are an Asian fusion restaurant. Get it right."[62] From there, a new ideal began to unfold, focusing on the white gaze of the Chinese culture. This ended up permeating through the Chinese community itself, focusing on the process of pleasing the white gaze (specifically, the restaurant

[58] Rollin Hu, "Gentrification and Authenticity in D.C. Chinatown: Walking the Fine Line Between Exploitation and Prosperity," The Johns Hopkins News-Letter, last modified April 13, 2017, https://www.jhunewsletter.com/article/2017/04/gentrification-and-authenticity-in-d-c-chinatown-walking-the-fine-line-between-exploitation-and-pros.
[59] Yanan Wang, "D.C.'s Chinatown has only 300 Chinese Americans left, and they're fighting to stay," The Washington Post, last modified July 16, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/dcs-chinatown-has-only-300-chinese-americans-left--and-fighting-to-stay/2015/07/16/86d54e84-2191-11e5-bf41-c23f5d3face1_story.html.
[60] Shaobin Zheng, "The Rise and Fall of DC's Chinatown," AHA, last modified December 29, 2017, https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2017/the-rise-and-fall-of-dcs-chinatown.
[61] Ibid
[62] Hu, *Gentrification and Authenticity in D.C. Chinatown*

mentioned in the previous quote in fact sells a myriad of different traditional Chinese dishes)[63], which can be considered as a form of cultural gentrification. The focus on the original inhabitants (traditional Chinese restauranteurs and their clientele) is being taken away in favor of what a Yelp reviewer that said "D.C. Chinatown is so fake if you want to get authentic Chinese food go somewhere else" have to say about the Chinese culture[64]. For all immigrant communities (especially for the Chinese Americans), food by itself, as well as the spaces that sell food, are a sacred space. Therefore, the desacralization of Chinese food in the name of "promoting cultural heritage" (which is the same backing that was used by Washington D.C. for the bilingual signs[65]), a valid concern as this borders the line of cultural appropriation; and that the institutionalized powers in the areas are using the Chinese culture to uphold the "Orientalist imagination" that Andrew Leong mentioned[66].

Conclusions: Is Baltimore The Same Case?

Now, we return to the Park Avenue area, with the question of the future of the Baltimore Chinatown. Both the Asian and Ethiopian communities consider the space to be a "sacred" space; both have a history that is still waiting to be mentioned, and both considered their community the most sacred spaces of all[67]. The problem, at this point, is not merely gentrification, but an issue of reclamation. As the Chinese community of Baltimore is working towards allowing the heritage of their already dwindling community—in 2022, there is estimated to be less than two thousand Asian Americans living in Baltimore City—with a heritage that are at risk of being brought to oblivion. To group Baltimore—with the scattered population spread and with two communities that have a very amicable

[63] Hu, *Gentrification and Authenticity in D.C. Chinatown*
[64] Ibid
[65] Ibid
[66] Khafagy, *What Gentrification in Baltimore's Chinatown Means*
[67] Christina Tkacik, "Baltimore's Historic Chinatown Again an Immigrant Hub," The Darkroom: Exploring Visual Journalism from the Baltimore Sun, last modified September 11, 2017, https://darkroom.baltimoresun.com/2017/09/park-avenue-baltimores-historic-chinatown/#17.

relationship with each other—in the same category as the power dynamics that had played out in Washington D.C. and Los Angeles the same way Andrew Leong argued is not unwarranted. But, nevertheless problematic as the Baltimore Chinatown is a completely different framework in that the plan to redevelop for the Chinese community has been consistently in place since the decline in the 1970s (as stated earlier in this paper). To ignore the Chinese community's own push is systematically closing the door on actual dialogue on the future of Chinatown as a neighborhood. Furthermore, to exclude Asians from conversations regarding the building of a new cultural hub is also a problematic fallacy, if one would talk about the issue of Chinatown as a sacred space. Since the Baltimore Chinatown, is indeed a sacred space (as stated earlier in this paper), to exclude the Chinese community from the conversation is to ignore their claims of ownership and desacralize the already contested space. The best way moving forward, in the opinion of the researcher, is expressed through the mural on Park Avenue, near the Lexington Market Light Rail station. Drawn by Jeff Huntington, the mural featured a Chinese dragon and the Ethiopian lion of Judah, representing the first migrant community, and the present residents of the neighborhood. In other words, the 300 block of Park Avenue's future cannot be complete without the input of the Ethiopian community; but the Baltimore Chinatown's future cannot be complete if the Asian American communities of Baltimore are not a part of this process.

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