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Commodifying Culture and Ethnicity: Chinese New Year Parade and the Chinatown Tourism Industry in New York City

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Abstract: The face of America has changed dramatically in the last few decades. With the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a large influx of immigrants from Asia and Latin America came into the United States. The increase in the number of immigrants from the Chinese-speaking world is particularly drastic as the quota for immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere was lifted. From the early integration pattern of assimilation to the growing popularity of multiculturalism in the 1990s, the American society has gone from a melting pot to a salad bar, where people can co-exist with their distinctive cultures and identities. In this paper, I argue that culture and ethnicity as a commodity can serve as a main economic booster for the ethnic enclaves as well as the entire city. I will use the Chinese New Year parade in Manhattan's Chinatown as an example, and discuss the economic impact the 9/11 attacks have on its economy, and how important it is for the government as well as community-based organizations to work together to develop promotional campaigns to attract tourists. Also, the Chinatown community also needs to draw plans to reinvent itself by becoming more tourist-friendly but remain authentic at the same time.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Identity, Tourism

Introduction

DECORATIVE FIRECRACKERS, RIBBONS, ornaments and couplets with Chinese calligraphy are hung in front of every gift shop and restaurant. Festive Chinese music can be heard all around Chinatown. Celebration is in the air. The color red – a symbol of fortune and prosperity – can be seen everywhere. As Chinatown rings in the Year of the Ram, its narrow streets are filled with shoppers and tourists as families, Chinese and non-Chinese, getting ready for the biggest Chinese holiday of the year. On the day of the parade, a colorful dragon dances to the drumbeat as the crowd greet it with warm enthusiasm. Parade goes, adults and children, vie for attention from the lion dancers hoping that it will bring them good luck in the new year. People on the floats entertain the crowds and the crowds respond by showering them with confetti. Kids from the local martial arts schools impress everyone with their kung fu moves and swordplay. All the restaurants are full with people enjoying a big Chinese New Year feast with their loved ones.

The Chinese New Year is the most important and most celebrated holiday for ethnic Chinese people around the world. Outside the Greater China region (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan), various Chinese diasporas honor and celebrate their heritage by organizing parades and other festivities within their respective Chinatowns. In New York City, where more than 370,000 ethnic Chinese reside, the Chinese New Year is the biggest

celebration in the Chinese enclaves, with one parade in Manhattan's Chinatown, and another in Flushing, Queens.

Still struggling to recover from the post-911 economic downturn, Manhattan's Chinatown is experiencing a makeover with efforts from the local business and civic associations as well as City Hall. In order to boost tourism revenues in Chinatown, the Bloomberg administration built an information kiosk in the center of Chinatown to provide tourist information. Meanwhile, the local business associations also frequently organize campaigns to promote the retail and restaurant businesses there.

The Chinese New Year parade is the high point of a series of Chinese New Year celebrations, which last from the first day of the lunar calendar to the 15th. Every year it attracts a large number of visitors and locals, Chinese and non-Chinese, to the parade that marches from Chatham Square to Mott Street. Many major corporations sponsor floats and concerts in addition to street fairs and karaoke competitions.

While Chinatown is no longer the largest ethnic Chinese enclave (Flushing is the largest and Sunset Park in Brooklyn is expanding rapidly), it remains the center for commercial and entertainment life for many overseas Chinese and Chinese Americans with its central location and the concentration of food markets and restaurants. For tourists, the historical streets and the wide variety of restaurants make Chinatown a must-visit destination when they come to Manhattan.

In addition to the Chinese New Year, the two other major Chinese holidays are Mid-Autumn Festival (also known as the Mooncake Festival), and Dragon Boat Festival. Businesses in Chinatown often organize campaigns to promote these two holidays with special offers in restaurants and ethnic gift baskets as well as hosting dragon boat races. Since the 911 attacks, the Chinatown community has been working together with the city's official tourism board, NYC & Company, and other non-profit organizations such as the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, and Chinatown Partnership, to revitalize the local economy.

Brief History of Chinese Immigration to New York

In the late 1840s, Chinese began to arrive in California soon after gold was discovered there. Despite the discriminatory treatment and harsh working conditions, the Chinese stayed and later worked on the transcontinental railway built by the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Large-scale immigration continued into the late 1800s, with 123,201 Chinese recorded as arriving between 1871 and 1880, and 61,711 arriving between 1881 and 1890. Most of them were low-skilled young men from Guangdong (Canton) Province, making the early Chinatowns primarily Cantonese-speaking neighborhoods. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted to prevent any Chinese from obtaining citizenship and reuniting with their families left behind in China. It is the only legislation that restricted immigration based solely on nationality. Because of the imbalanced male-to-female ratio, Chinatown virtually became a "bachelor's society".

The act was abolished in 1943 at the height of the World War II as China was an ally. However, large groups of Chinese immigrants did not arrive until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, when 170,000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere were granted residency, with no more than 20,000 per country. From the late 1950s to the 1970s, many highly educated Taiwanese emigrated to the United States as the first post-Chinese Civil War wave of immigration. Those who came to New York first settled in

Flushing, Queens, formerly a Jewish and Italian neighborhood. Now Flushing is known as the Mandarin-speaking Chinatown of New York, while Manhattan's Chinatown is still primarily Cantonese-speaking. In 1977, China started to allow its citizens to emigrate, setting off a big wave of immigrations from the mainland. The most recent wave of immigration started in the 1990s, when large groups of mostly undocumented and low-skilled people from Fujian Province flooded New York's Chinatown, taking over the city's Chinese take-out restaurants and the East Broadway area. Currently, Chinese-Americans make up about 4.5 percent of the population in New York City.

Context

Festivals as a Form of Environmental Performance

In Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's book, "Culture Destination" (1998), she wrote that ethnic festivals, both as they occur locally and as an anthology of ethnographic displays, can be seen as a form of environmental performance. The Chinese New Year Parade, both in the cases of Manhattan and Flushing, is a highly performative event with folkdance, martial art, marching bands, dragon and lion dances taking place within the ethnic enclaves. Unlike other major ethnic parades in New York City such as the St. Patrick's Day Parade and Puerto Rican Parade, both taking place on Fifth Avenue, the Chinese New Year Parade has always been in Chinatown.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett acknowledged that ethnic festivals are cultural performances par excellence:

"Tourists who have difficulty deciphering and penetrating the quotidian of their destinations find in festivals the perfect entrée. Public and spectacular, festivals have the practical advantage of offering in a concentrated form, at a designated time and place, what the tourist would otherwise search out in the diffuseness of everyday life, with no guarantee of ever finding it" (1998).

By attending the Chinese New Year Parade, one can see the traditional performances, shop for Chinese souvenirs, and sample authentic Chinese cuisine, and even try the Asian-style karaoke, where you can sing with your friends in the comfort of a private room, all in one day. The experience might be superficial as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett put it. "To festivalize culture is to make every day a holiday." But as a commodity, the Chinese New Year Parade is practical and appealing to both Chinese and non-Chinese.

Ethnicity as a Commodity

In Marilyn Halter's book, "Marketing Ethnicity" (2000), she traces the complicated history of ethnicity and consumption in the United States. She argues that the society is a salad bar instead of the traditional notion of a melting pot. In fact, ethnicity is a huge business where two billion dollars are spent on marketing ethnic products and events to help people express their ethnicities. She further posits that the business of ethnic identity is an important aspect of our contemporary life that validates our needs to connect to our roots.

In addition to attracting visitors who are not familiar with Chinese culture, the Chinese New Year Parade is also attracting ethnic Chinese living in New York City.

Benny Lee, a native Guangdong Province who has been living in New York for more than 20 years, reflected on what the Chinatown looked like when he moved to New York in 1984 (Lee, personal communication, April 15, 2008).

“The Chinatown was so small,” Lee said. “Now there are several satellite Chinatowns like Elmhurst... I don’t think there were New Year parades. Only the past few years they started to have parades.”

“I definitely feel that my Chinese identity is stronger,” said Lee after attending the parade. “There were a lot of people, not only just Chinese but also other races and ethnicities, who participated. People really appreciate the Chinese culture and want to participate. I will definitely go again next year.”

For ethnic Chinese like Lee, attending the Chinese New Year Parade brings back childhood memories, and makes him feel more connected to his heritage. He also visits Chinatown frequently to have dinner and do grocery shopping.

Heritage and Culture for Tourism

In Jan Rath’s article on immigrants and the tourist industry (2002), he first echoes Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s remark on the high marketability of festivals as culture at its most accessible and concentrated form.

“Originally, the Lunar New Year celebrations were a matter of locals only, an occasion to meet and greet and experience and strengthen feelings of belonging to the Chinese community, but they increasingly involve a broader public. Once a ghetto of underprivileged outsiders and a place to avoid, Chinatown nowadays stirs the imagination of mainstream people and attracts local and international visitors. The tourists and leisure-seekers –generally ignorant of the sundry contradictions that go with this development –indulge the pleasures that are so nicely advertised in IN-New York, in tourist guides and on the web.”

He also acknowledges that commodification of heritage serves both the immigrant as well as the larger society.

“The tourist industry is not just a sector of the knowledge economy, but one of the fastest growing ones. In some cases, its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has surpassed that of any manufacturing sector. The tourist economy constitutes a potential interface of immigrants from all strata with the wider economy. In a globalizing world, local difference and place identity become more important. Heritage, cultural diversity and urban tourism then become crucial components of the cultural capital of post-industrial society.”

Rath added that, under particular circumstances, the commodification of cultural features helps foster the inclusion of both high-skilled and unskilled immigrants in the emerging service economy and, at the same time, allows them to boost urban economy.

The Impact of 911 Attacks and Gentrification

The 911 attacks devastated the economy of Chinatown, a community less than 10 blocks from Ground Zero. In the aftermath, traffic restrictions, telephone and electricity outages, and downturn in the garment, retail, restaurant, and tourism industries, pushed Chinatown's already fragile economy to the point of crisis. Based on the report by the Asian American Federation of New York (2002), about two thirds of the workers in Chinatown were displaced, most of them garment workers.

As the nature of the businesses in Chinatown is mostly cash-based with thin profit margins, most of them were especially hard-hit and could not recover from short-term losses. Meanwhile, most Chinatown workers with relatively low educational levels faced even more dire employment prospect.

According to the report, Chinatown's garment industry alone, which counts for six percent of Chinatown's business and 40 percent of its jobs, lost nearly 500 million dollars in just one year after the attacks. However, less than 60 million dollars in financial assistance from all forms of loans and grants was available to all businesses in Chinatown. In Wilma Consul's report on WNYC (2006), Chinatown's economy had already been on the decline before the 911 attacks because of the gentrification of the area.

"911 exposed something that's already decaying and rotting," Peter Kwong, a professor at Hunter College, told Consul. "Sure it makes it worse, but it did not cause Chinatown's economic problems."

In a New York Times article on December 20, 2007, Jennifer 8. Lee reported that an 18-story Wyndham Hotel is being built on the Bowery. Some groups in Chinatown see the hotel as a good way to diversify its economy while others fear that it will displace more workers and price out more residents.

"It's about displacement and gentrification in this community," Josephine Lee, an organizer with the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, told the Times. "It's not that we don't want development in this community, we want development for people who work here and live here."

"We are encouraging variety," said Wellington Chen, the executive director of the Chinatown Partnership, a nonprofit organization that is trying to revive the economy of Chinatown after Sept. 11. "We are encouraging more choices for consumers in Chinatown and Lower Manhattan."

Post-911 Chinese New Year Parades

In order to streamline the efforts to organize a bigger and better Chinese New Year Parade, community leaders from Chinatown established the Better Chinatown Society in 2001. In addition to the annual Chinese New Year Parade, BCS also organizes Mid-Autumn Festivals and Independence Day Parade in Chinatown.

As part of the Chinese New Year celebrations, there is a flower market organized by the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and the United East Athletics Association. As a Chinese tradition, going to the market to purchase flowers is a popular way of ushering in the Chinese New Year because flowers bring luck and prosperity in the New Year. Meanwhile, for the fourth consecutive year, the Chinese New Year celebrations started with a firecracker cere-

mony by Gucci Fireworks. The firecrackers were banned in 1997 by the Giuliani administration but the ban was rescinded after the 911 attacks.

“The crowds have grown in size each of the past eight years, and this year, with good weather, we believe the crowds might exceed 550,000. We will have the biggest parade ever and the firecracker celebration will be the most impressive in recent years,” said Steve Tin, one of the main organizers of the event.

The five-minute noisy explosion created a wall of smoke and fire aimed at chasing off evil spirits of the past year.

Governmental Support

According to Marilyn Halter, after decades in which assimilation was the leading model for the incorporation of diverse populations, cultural pluralism emerged to take its place as the reigning paradigm. When Congress passed the Ethnic Heritage Act in 1974 to support the funding of initiatives that promote the distinctive cultures and histories of the nation’s ethnic populations, it was clear that this philosophy had taken hold at even the highest levels of government. The so-called “roots” phenomenon accounts for such developments as the growth of ethnic celebrations, a zeal for genealogy, increased travel to ancestral homelands, and greater interest in ethnic artifacts, cuisine, music, literature, and, of course, language (2000).

In more recent development, a position paper developed by the U. S. Department of Commerce and the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities for the 2005 U.S. Cultural and Heritage Tourism Summit shows that cultural and heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry. For many travelers, cultural and heritage experiences are “value added”, enhancing their enjoyment of a place and increasing the likelihood that they will return. Statistics also show that cultural and heritage travelers spend more than other travelers (\$623 v.s. \$457) in average. They are also more likely to stay in a hotel, motel or bed and breakfast (62% v.s. 55%), and spend more than \$1,000 per trip (19% v.s. 12%). The numbers show that they also tend to travel longer (5.2 nights v.s. 3.4 nights). And out of the 146.4 million American adults who took a trip of 50 miles or more away from home in 2003, 35.3 million say that a specific arts, cultural or heritage event or activity influenced their choice of destination (2005).

Community-based and/or Non-profit Organizations

Among some of the key organizations involved in the rebuilding of the post-911 Chinatown economy, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) plays an important role. It was created in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 by then-Governor Pataki and then-Mayor Giuliani to help plan and coordinate the rebuilding and revitalization of Lower Manhattan. The LMDC is a joint State-City corporation that runs the following programs:

Explore Chinatown: It is a tourism promotion campaign on behalf of the Manhattan Chinatown, which suffers great, lasting economic damage from the events of September 11th. The campaign is intended to build awareness and increase revenues for Chinatown businesses. One of the biggest new additions is the information kiosk in the corner of Baxter Street and Canal Street. It is the first of its kind in Chinatown and serves as an easy access for tourists to obtain information about Chinatown.

Chinatown/Lower East Side Acquisition Program: LMDC allocated \$16 million for the preservation and rehabilitation of 160 or more units. This program will establish housing that is permanently affordable under rent stabilization. The program focuses on the acquisition of mid-size buildings that currently have all or a portion of the units under rent stabilization. The program aims to benefit households up to 80 percent of the affected residents.

Chinatown Local Development Corporation: LMDC allocated up to seven million dollars to fund the Chinatown Partnership Local Development Corporation that would spearhead community improvements in Chinatown, engage in a combination of short-term projects and long-term planning. It is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that has brought together major civic organizations, cultural institutions, and businesses in the community. It is a new economic development corporation led by a talented group of individuals dedicated to strengthening Chinatown as a center of commerce, business, culture, and tourism. Within the next two years, Chinatown Partnership LDC is developing a broad agenda of projects and activities and they include: supporting and promoting cultural events, developing a “Night Market”, use of banners to promote business districts, creating a heritage trail of historic sites, enhancing Chatham Square as a main public square by installing public art and signs, and developing a community-wide street cleaning project.

Chinatown Clean Streets Program: The program will include manual and mechanical sweeping of the sidewalks, curbs and gutters, frequent removal of bagged litter from street corners, pressure cleaning of sidewalks, graffiti removal, and additional maintenance. The initiative will also provide for the necessary public outreach and community relations work to ensure that the community understands the benefits of the pilot program and begins to take ownership of the services over time.

Meanwhile, the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative (RCI) is a comprehensive community-based planning project sponsored by Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), to engage Chinatown stakeholders including residents, businesses, and public agencies in the revitalization of Chinatown. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Chinatown has experienced a decline in investment of infrastructure, jobs, housing, and quality of life. RCI has brought attention to these issues by working with the stakeholders of Chinatown and representing their concerns to the highest levels of government.

One of most noticeable projects under RCI is the Chinatown Design Lab. It is an innovative project that brings talented artists, architects, community activists, and landscape architects together to create urban design guidelines to reflect the value and history of the Chinatown community for key public spaces like the East River Waterfront (2007).

Conclusion

In an increasingly globalized world as depicted by Marshall McLuhan, heritage tourism enjoys growing popularity and is undoubtedly creating many business opportunities for the host city and its ethnic enclaves. Chinese New Year parade is one of the many events that can bring in tourists and has been receiving attention from major corporations as well as the public sector. In the past few years, we have seen more investments in Chinatown, including an overdue renovation of Columbia Park, expansion and relocation of the Museum of Chinese in the America, which is being designed by renowned Chinese-American architect Maya Lin, and the construction of a new Wyndham Hotel on the Bowery. It is clear to see that

Chinatown is undergoing a makeover. Chinese New Year Parade, as the biggest event of the year, is also expanding rapidly with more corporate sponsorship as well as media attention as the Asian population in New York continues to grow.

Meanwhile, the Chinatown community itself is also realizing the importance of working together to create better strategies in promoting tourism in Chinatown. They understand that in order for Chinatown to survive, they will need to work in packaging the neighborhood into a more tourist-friendly destination. That includes cleaner streets, better-organized events and spectacles, more innovative marketing (more web-based campaigns), and long-term urban development plans (waterfront and night market). But to some people, development to some can be seen as gentrification. It remains to be seen that whether Chinatown can reinvent itself as a favorite tourist destination, and support the livelihood of its own residents and businesses at the same time.

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Professor Tung is currently an assistant professor at Kean University in Union, NJ. His areas of research and interest include images of minorities in the media, Asian and Asian-American cinemas, documentary production and journalism. He has written papers in those areas and presented them in academic conferences. At Kean, he teaches Mass Media, Video Production, and International Cinema. Before moving to the United States, Tung was a reporter for the English-language Taiwan News and had covered Taipei City Hall and the Taiwanese Legislature. He is also a contributor for GothamGazette.com, a Columbia Online Journalism Award-winning news website, and has been reporting on the Chinese community in New York City. One of his documentaries, *Daughters From China*, has been featured in several film festivals, including Vancouver Asian Film Festival, Asian American Film Festival of Dallas, and was aired on Speech TV. He also received the Best Documentary Award in the Honolulu International Festival IN 2005. Tung is also a faculty fellow of the National Association for Television Programming Executives 2007.

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