

## A City Within a City: The New York Chinatown

Amritha Purohit

In 1840, a Cantonese businessman named Ah Ken arrived in America, fresh from China. He would immigrate to New York in 1858, becoming the first Asian man recorded to permanently reside in the city.<sup>1</sup> His arrival marked the beginning of a flood of new Chinese immigrants who eventually formed a community known as the Manhattan Chinatown, or simply, Chinatown.

Commonly referred to as an 'ethnic enclave,' Chinatown was formed in the late 19th century by decades of immigration and a clustering of Chinese immigrants searching for a safe haven from racial discrimination. It was a cultural hotspot in the middle of Manhattan; the immigrant population that moved there retained many of the same practices and languages they did in their hometown. The very existence of Chinatown stands as a marker of the resilience of the early immigrants who settled there. The challenges that plagued the first generation of immigrants no longer exist. The Chinese Exclusion Act, a major factor in Chinatown's formation, was abolished in 1943. The Page Law, a law prohibiting Chinese prostitutes from entering the United States, has long been repealed, finally ending in 1974. However, there will always be a need for Chinatown and an ethnic enclave for Chinese immigrants because there will always be new, non-English speaking New Yorkers searching for a safe harbor, and because Asian American discrimination still exists, albeit in different forms. Chinatown was formed unintentionally, through decades of gradual evolution, but ultimately formed as a refuge from racism.

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<sup>1</sup> "About Chinatown," Greater Chinatown NYC, accessed April 20, 2024, [https://greaterchinatownnyc.com/about\\_chinatown](https://greaterchinatownnyc.com/about_chinatown).

The population of Chinese-Americans in America grew exponentially in the 19th century because of the California Gold Rush (1848–1855), a period of time in California where many fortune-hunters migrated on the off-chance they could find gold and subsequently become rich. When the gold mines inevitably began yielding less, the availability of cheap Chinese labor in industries like textiles and cigar-rolling “became a source of tension for white laborers, who thought that the Chinese were coming to take their jobs and threaten their livelihoods. Mob violence and rampant discrimination in the West drove the Chinese east into larger cities, where job opportunities were more open and they could more easily blend into the already diverse population.”<sup>2</sup> A group of these people remained in New York City.

Chinatown was established in the 1870s, following Ah Ken, principally by immigrants from Toisan, Guangdong, a large province in China,<sup>3</sup> as well as migrants from California. They were escaping massive flooding and famine, as well as unrest caused by the Red Turban Rebellion (1854–1856), a political movement aimed at restoring the Ming Dynasty. The repercussions of the First Opium War (1839 and 1842), military engagements between China and Britain over the trade of opium, also affected these immigrants. During the First Opium War, the British forced China into “trade concessions, sapp(ing) the empire’s power, and people in the southern coastal province of Guangdong — home to the only port in China that was open to Westerners — felt emboldened to seek opportunities in America.”<sup>4</sup> The immigrants were searching for better and safer opportunities, and a few ended up in New York; an 1873 New York Times article “reported around 500 Chinese Immigrants, most of them men, half of which moved

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Waxman, "The History of New York City's Chinatown," NY.com, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://www.ny.com/articles/chinatown.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Chinatown Manhattan Commercial District Needs Assessment," NYC Gov, accessed April 19, 2024, <https://www.nyc.gov/assets/sbs/downloads/pdf/neighborhoods/avenyc-cdna-chinatown.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ligaya Mishan, "Saving Chinatown, While Also Making It Their Own," The New York Times Style Magazine, last modified September 19, 2023, accessed April 21, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/19/t-magazine/manhattan-chinatown-neighborhood.html>.

to what we now call Chinatown.”<sup>5</sup> The neighborhood over time got its name due to the influx of Chinese immigrants.<sup>6</sup> These Chinese immigrants usually stuck together as protection from racial discrimination, using “safety in numbers and self-segregation”<sup>7</sup> to ensure their security. Once there, however, they faced many legal challenges aimed at obstructing their passage and livelihoods.

The Page Law of 1875 prevented Chinese prostitutes from moving to America, to “end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women,”<sup>8</sup> although the law in practice ended up preventing many women who are not prostitutes from entering as well. “The Page Act primarily targeted the immigration of Asian women who were suspected of coming to the United States for ““lewd and immoral purposes”... passed in the name of safeguarding public morals, the Page Act proved an effective way to restrict admission of Chinese women and thereby control local Chinese communities by skewing sex ratios and preventing Chinese American men from having children in the United States.”<sup>9</sup> By categorizing Chinese women as “lewd vectors of venereal disease, and threats to White manhood, morality, bloodlines, and health, this...law helped institutionalize the sexualization, objectification, and vilification of Asian women.”<sup>10</sup> This created an imbalance between Chinese men and women in America, with around 21 Chinese

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<sup>5</sup> "A History of Chinese Immigration to New York," Macaulay Honors College, accessed April 23, 2024, [https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/drabik09/articles/a/\\_/h/A\\_History\\_of\\_Chinese\\_Immigration\\_to\\_New\\_York\\_713b.html](https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/seminars/drabik09/articles/a/_/h/A_History_of_Chinese_Immigration_to_New_York_713b.html).

<sup>6</sup> "Chinatown Manhattan," City Neighborhoods NYC, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.cityneighborhoods.nyc/chinatown>.

<sup>7</sup> Waxman, "The History," NY.com.

<sup>8</sup> Maddalena Marinari, "The 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts a Century Later: Roots and Long Shadows," Oxford Academic, last modified September 1, 2022, accessed April 21, 2024, <https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/109/2/271/6747696?login=false>.

<sup>9</sup> Maddalena Marinari, "The 1921 and 1924 Immigration Acts a Century Later: Roots and Long Shadows," Oxford Academic, last modified September 1, 2022, accessed April 21, 2024, <https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/109/2/271/6747696?login=false>.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Lee, "When the Past Becomes Present: A Legacy of Anti-Asian Hate," Social Science Research Council, last modified April 22, 2021, accessed April 27, 2024, <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/covid-19-fieldnotes/when-the-past-becomes-present-a-legacy-of-anti-asian-hate/>.

men for every Chinese woman by 1880.<sup>11</sup> The Page Act also limited the growth of Chinatown by preventing women from immigrating at all, and helped worsen public opinion of Chinese immigrants.

A new challenge arose when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882. In 1880, Chinatown had between 700 and 1,100 Chinese immigrants.<sup>12</sup> In 1882, 40,000 new Chinese immigrants arrived in New York City. By 1887, only 10 were allowed entry.<sup>13</sup> The Exclusion Act severely limited Chinatown's growth. The Chinese Exclusion Act was, in essence, a law completely stopping Chinese laborers from entering the country for 10 years on the "premise that it endangered the good order of certain localities."<sup>14</sup> For the few non-laborer Chinese who wanted to come to America, official certification was required, something that became "increasingly difficult"<sup>15</sup> as time went on. After 10 years the Exclusion Act was modified and renewed in the form of the Geary Act.<sup>16</sup>

Rumors about opium dens, prostitution, and crime plagued Chinatown, lending it a bad reputation and worsening public opinion.<sup>17</sup> There are a few reasons for this, the two largest being a pre-existing bad reputation for rampant gang conflict and crime in the Five Points District, where much of Chinatown resides. Chinatown was also the subject of intense scrutiny because of the resident Chinese population; the media and general population were already prejudiced

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<sup>11</sup> Lee, "When the Past," Social Science Research Council.

<sup>12</sup> "Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District New York, New York," National Park Service, last modified March 4, 2020, accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/places/new-york-chinatown-and-little-italy-historic-district.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Sietsema, "Over a Century of Food and Change in Chinatown," Eater, accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.eater.com/a/mofad-city-guides/chinatown-nyc-chinese-history>

<sup>14</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)," National Archives, accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act#:~:text=It%20was%20the%20first%20significant,immigrating%20to%20the%20United%20States.>

<sup>15</sup> "Chinese Exclusion," National Archives.

<sup>16</sup> "Chinese Exclusion," National Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Sietsema, "Over a Century," Eater

against the community from its inception.<sup>18</sup> The laws that formed in America were a reflection of public sentiment towards the Chinese at the time; by the 1880s the Chinese were viewed as “not only as an inferior and undesirable population, but also as an actual threat to American culture, American government, and even the Caucasian race.”<sup>19</sup> The immigrants that made up Chinatown, fleeing from different dangers, met legal roadblocks and discrimination once they arrived in America, creating a need for a safe immigrant community. The Five Points neighborhood became an important area in the city for these immigrants as they moved downtown, forming close communities with their own jobs and housing.<sup>20</sup> It became an ethnic enclave, an area defined as “where a particular ethnic group is spatially clustered and socially and economically distinct from the majority group.”<sup>21</sup> The early immigrants were “not welcome anywhere...and had to “create their own sense of place.”<sup>22</sup> It was a self-supporting community; they supplied their own jobs, housing, economic aid, social service, protection, newspapers, schools, and social clubs.<sup>23</sup> With usually 5-15 people per 2 bedroom apartment, the space available was small, but with a growing sense of belonging and community the neighborhood only expanded.<sup>24</sup> After the Exclusion Act was repealed, Chinatown only exponentially increased.

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<sup>18</sup> Sietsema, "Over a Century," Eater.

<sup>19</sup> "The Chinese Experience in 19th Century America," The University of Illinois, last modified 2006, accessed April 23, 2024, [http://teachingresources.atlas.illinois.edu/chinese\\_exp/introduction04.html](http://teachingresources.atlas.illinois.edu/chinese_exp/introduction04.html).

<sup>20</sup> Chinatown NYC, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://chinatown.nyc/people-history/>.

<sup>21</sup> Sungwoo Lim et al., "Defining ethnic enclave and its associations with self-reported health outcomes among Asian American adults in New York City," National Library of Medicine, last modified February 6, 2017, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4919243/>.

<sup>22</sup> Elaine Chen and Stefanos Chen, "Chinatown's Civic Groups Have Held Developers at Bay. Can They Survive?," New York Times, last modified April 23, 2022, accessed April 21, 2024, [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/nyregion/chinatown-new-york-real-estate.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=Qr6LnJ3t9WR\\_2MHn4mdkCKbLMN\\_hE-AWlcVibhnJdWqGEUVP5uV1Wx2gW9-N9\\_budw-NXOVxRM SGGBUmJ9HICgRzpKtrVrR-KfbTYEs-rnbvZVLikRI1pjwp31PViA5sAcQhOfK9qMHaorVaw-tDptxrau4YRI1tt\\_e8XliUbXX\\_kgX7coeihN8mBIMKLTx3ly\\_zVSD8qf4TmHDnHqlwESHEIJSOa3hWsbHkqcDIqS5ZrM\\_m-zOoCjbjf1Ote-meAM6tk2ElMo2wxr8V156GTaf28BpLMmTfx6yOj776xnhTXYapNB6l-x7Ybavj8Gos1fTAvvjYwtmu-e4CUw42Xpt4SZwXAA&giftCopy=3\\_Independent&smid=url-share&login=email&auth=login-email](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/nyregion/chinatown-new-york-real-estate.html?unlocked_article_code=Qr6LnJ3t9WR_2MHn4mdkCKbLMN_hE-AWlcVibhnJdWqGEUVP5uV1Wx2gW9-N9_budw-NXOVxRM SGGBUmJ9HICgRzpKtrVrR-KfbTYEs-rnbvZVLikRI1pjwp31PViA5sAcQhOfK9qMHaorVaw-tDptxrau4YRI1tt_e8XliUbXX_kgX7coeihN8mBIMKLTx3ly_zVSD8qf4TmHDnHqlwESHEIJSOa3hWsbHkqcDIqS5ZrM_m-zOoCjbjf1Ote-meAM6tk2ElMo2wxr8V156GTaf28BpLMmTfx6yOj776xnhTXYapNB6l-x7Ybavj8Gos1fTAvvjYwtmu-e4CUw42Xpt4SZwXAA&giftCopy=3_Independent&smid=url-share&login=email&auth=login-email).

<sup>23</sup> Waxman, "The History," NY.com.

<sup>24</sup> Waxman, "The History," NY.com.

The borders of Chinatown are now Grand Street to the north, bordering or overlapping Little Italy, Worth Street to the southwest, bordering Civic Center, East Broadway to the southeast, bordering Two Bridges, Essex Street to the east, bordering the Lower East Side, and Lafayette Street to the west, bordering Tribeca. There are also now different sections to Chinatown within itself, such as Little Fuzhou or Little Hong Kong, areas that are now primarily Fuzhounese or Hongkongese immigrants. Many of these subsects first appeared in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Most businesses remain Cantonese however, despite other population growth. The formation of Chinatown was not deliberate; it was circumstantial, people finding refuge within their own community. Chinese immigrants came from all around the country searching for a shelter, safe from bigotry and racism. The Chinatown of today grew from nothing; a community of people who once sought protection within each other have carved out a landmark district of New York City.

The Chinese Exclusion act was repealed in 1943, but because Chinese-American land rights were still limited, Chinatown only began expanding again after the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed in 1965, granting them their full rights as citizens of the United States.<sup>26</sup> Between 1965 and 2000 the neighborhood “swelled to 10 times its earlier size, growing to occupy much of the Lower East Side.”<sup>27</sup> The district is largely owned now by associations that control plots of land, who have historically maintained Chinatown’s primarily Chinese population and continue to do so by only renting to people of Chinese origin, or who are in the association. To be in the association you often have to share a family surname or have a recommendation from someone in the association. “The associations began in the late 1800s, during a period of intense discrimination, to protect Chinese immigrants — mostly men who had

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<sup>25</sup> Sietsema, "Over a Century," Eater

<sup>26</sup> Sietsema, "Over a Century," Eater.

<sup>27</sup> Sietsema, "Over a Century," Eater.

emigrated with the goal of sending money back to family in China, said Charlie Lai, a community organizer who helped establish the Museum of Chinese in America. Many groups were formed in the wake of laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882... United by shared surname, village of origin or profession, the groups functioned as de facto governments, adjudicating disputes, levying fees and deciding where businesses could open, along with lending money and helping members find jobs.”<sup>28</sup> The associations often lease the buildings at a discounted rate, helping families maintain their property and businesses. It is a big reason why Chinatown has not been gentrified in the ways other ethnic districts have been, and why it is extremely difficult for a foreigner to have property in Chinatown. Chinatown remains isolated and an ethnic enclave through these efforts.

According to the Asian American Federation, since January of 2020, “over 2,627 Asian New Yorkers have been attacked, harassed, or shunned, leaving 72% of Asian American women stressed and 75% of seniors terrified to leave their homes.”<sup>29</sup> The New York City government says that “during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City saw a sharp increase in harassment and violence against Asian people and communities, especially Asian elders.”<sup>30</sup> Although these crimes have spiked since the Covid pandemic, anti-Asian hate has always existed in America, and continued in the years prior to covid. Between 2016 and 2018, “hate crimes

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<sup>28</sup> Elaine Chen and Stefanos Chen, "Chinatown's Civic Groups Have Held Developers at Bay. Can They Survive?," New York Times, last modified April 23, 2022, accessed April 21, 2024, [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/nyregion/chinatown-new-york-real-estate.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=Qr6LnJ3t9WR\\_2MHn4mdkCKbLMN\\_hE-AWlcVibhnJdWqGEUVP5uV1Wx2gW9-N9\\_budw-NXOVxRM SGGBUmJ9HICgRzpKtrVrR-KfbTYEs-rnbvZVLkRI1pjwp31PViA5sAcQhOfK9qMHaorVaw-tDptxrau4YRI1tt\\_e8XliUbXX\\_kgX7coeihN8mBIMKLTx3ly\\_zVSD8qf4TmHDnHqIwESHEIJSOa3hWsbHkqcDIqS5ZrM\\_m-zOoCjbjf1Ote-meAM6tk2ElMo2wxr8V156GTaf28BpLMmTfx6yOj776xnhTXYapNB6l-x7Ybavj8Gos1fTAvvjIYwtmu-e4CUw42Xpt4SZwXAA&giftCopy=3\\_Independent&smid=url-share&login=email&auth=login-email](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/nyregion/chinatown-new-york-real-estate.html?unlocked_article_code=Qr6LnJ3t9WR_2MHn4mdkCKbLMN_hE-AWlcVibhnJdWqGEUVP5uV1Wx2gW9-N9_budw-NXOVxRM SGGBUmJ9HICgRzpKtrVrR-KfbTYEs-rnbvZVLkRI1pjwp31PViA5sAcQhOfK9qMHaorVaw-tDptxrau4YRI1tt_e8XliUbXX_kgX7coeihN8mBIMKLTx3ly_zVSD8qf4TmHDnHqIwESHEIJSOa3hWsbHkqcDIqS5ZrM_m-zOoCjbjf1Ote-meAM6tk2ElMo2wxr8V156GTaf28BpLMmTfx6yOj776xnhTXYapNB6l-x7Ybavj8Gos1fTAvvjIYwtmu-e4CUw42Xpt4SZwXAA&giftCopy=3_Independent&smid=url-share&login=email&auth=login-email).

<sup>29</sup> "Hope Against Hate," Asian American Federation, accessed April 27, 2024, <https://www.aafederation.org/hope-against-hate/>.

<sup>30</sup> "Stop Asian Hate," NYC Gov, accessed April 27, 2024, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/cchr/community/stop-asian-hate.page>.

against Asians under the Trump administration increased 31 percent.”<sup>31</sup> The circumstances may be different from when Chinatown was first created, but anti-Asian hate is still prominent in the city today. Chinatown is necessary because it acts as a rare pocket of New York City when Asian Americans can blend in, and are surrounded by a crowd of people who look like them and speak their language. Thousands of new Asian immigrants have come to New York City in 2024, only some of whom speak English. Chinatown serves the same purpose it did in the 1880s, protection, and is still vital for one of the city’s most vulnerable populations.

Chinatown, an ethnic enclave in the middle of New York City, has endured for 180 years, forming because of a series of deliberate obstacles aimed at the Asian-American population. It has shrunk and expanded again over its lifetime, but its resilience and perseverance is a testament to the immigrants themselves who created it. Chinatown is still necessary and has a place in New York City because it still carries out its original purpose– to defend Asian-Americans from the discrimination that has remained in America since the 19th century.

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<sup>31</sup> Lee, "When the Past," Social Science Research Council.

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