Shrinking Chinatown Project

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Abstract of Thesis

Shrinking Chinatown Project

Shrinking Chinatown explores the state of Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown and the mostly elderly Chinese population living there today. Washington’s Chinatown is fading into the shadows as economic development shifts the business culture, housing becomes exorbitant, and young families move to the suburbs. The elderly residents who have built and shaped this community over the last 30 years are being displaced.

Chinatown was first established in the 1930s with the arrival of Chinese immigrants to the region. With decades Chinatown became a cultural landmark and the hub of tourism. The area saw significant growth in the 1980s when Chinese-U.S. relations improved. The community grew organically, supporting new arrivals through cultural networks and linguistics familiarity. Washington’s Chinatown is regarded as a bridge between Chinese culture and the west.

This project employs documentary video and photography, as well as interviews with subjects, book and film format.
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Under a dim desk lamp light, Dr. Shihua Wu bends down and opens a rusty cabinet. Dozens of green record books are lined up in drawers. Wu opens these documents, and seems to be searching for something.


“What are these numbers?” I ask him.

“Patients,” Dr. Wu answers, “These numbers are patients who come to my clinic over past 25 years.”

“So, how about this year?”

“Hmmm, not too many,” he says, hesitating. “Until October this year, it is 583 patients.”

Wu, an 83-year-old Chinese acupuncturist, came to Washington, D.C., 25 years ago. He is good at using acupuncture to treat blood diseases and leukemia. In 1992, he opened his clinic in Washington’s Chinatown. In the beginning, he saw at least 10
patients per day looking for help. He would never have imagined that, after 20 years, the number of patients would have decreased to just 10 per week.

The changes in Chinatown are also unexpected to Wu. The neighborhood’s original planners and designers once thought the community had the potential to develop into a business and tourism center like the Times Square in New York City. However, a number of factors have contributed to Washington, D.C.’s shrinking Chinatown. These include a sharp increase in housing prices, a drastic decrease in Chinese residents, gentrification and many other factors. This is visible in Chinatowns all across the United States, including Philadelphia and Boston - each facing the same crucial situation: they are shrinking.

When Wu arrived in Washington, he bought a townhouse in Chinatown as his home and clinic. Today, if you did not step into the cardinal brick townhouse, it would be hard to imagine it as a Chinese traditional medicine and acupuncture clinic. Now in Chinatown, many of the old buildings have been converted into fancy hotels, office buildings and modern-looking apartments. Yet Wu’s clinic still looks the same as it did when he bought it. In fact, the old building looks even more obsolete than before because of the peeling walls, a rusty iron mailbox, and a weedy courtyard entrance.

Inside Wu's acupuncture clinic, the dim and narrow room overflows with newspapers and magazines he has collected. They are on the desk, on the cupboard, on the chair, and even on the floor. There is little space to stand. The house has not been cleaned in a long time and it is poorly ventilated. It is full of moisture and the odor of
rotten wood.

"These are all my medals," Wu says, pointing to certificates and trophies stacked on a cabinet that holds Chinese herbal medicines covered with dust and cobwebs. He is full of pride despite the distress he feels as he confronts the messy room. From 2003 to 2013, Wu was the chairman of an advisory committee on acupuncture for Washington’s Department of Health. The awards, he says, are from the city, in recognition of his contributions in evaluating acupuncture practitioners’ qualifications, administering exams, recommending standards and procedures. It would be difficult to connect this low-key old man with an experienced acupuncturist without these awards.

The early 1990s were the heyday of Dr. Wu's career and was also a period of rapid development for Washington’s Chinatown. Around this period, several things happened that made residents of the area believe that the spring of Chinatown was coming. In 1982 the Wah-Luck House was established to provide affordable housing for low-income Chinese-American senior residents. In 1984, Beijing and Washington made an agreement establishing intercity relations. Two years later, to mark the normalization of Sino-American relations and promote more interactions between Beijing and Washington, the Friendship Archway was built. The establishment of the Archway not only symbolized a new landmark in Chinatown, but also opened a window for Westerners to discover Chinese culture through commerce and visits to Chinatown.

In 1986, the Metro station was given its present name, Gallery Place-Chinatown. Ten years later, the core of the neighborhood was demolished to make way for the MCI
Center, now Capital One Arena. Local inhabitants and Chinatown’s original planners and its residents initially believed that the transportation convenience, the location advantages and the establishment of new commercial buildings would become resources to spur Chinatown’s growth and benefit local inhabitants. But the development of Chinatown did not turn out as local residents expected. Instead, rising housing prices and commercial rents and other effects of gentrification have pushed small Chinese businesses, like restaurants, out of the community.

Full Kee Restaurant, which opened in Chinatown in 1989, was once regarded as one of the best restaurants for visitors and locals alike because of its authentic Cantonese cuisine and affordable prices. Initially, Full Kee served as many as 300 meals in one day and the queue lined up outside the restaurant stretched 50 meters long. But now a day’s business barely reaches half of what it used to be. “If the landlord sells the building, the restaurant will probably disappear,” Mie Wu, the owner of Full Kee, says with a wry smile when asked about the restaurant’s operations.

“In the beginning, the rent was $5500 per month,” Mie Wu says, “But today, it is, on average, about 30 percent higher every year than the previous year.” The continuously increasing rent and the meager profits make Mie worried about the future of the restaurant. In the past six months, she stayed in the Full Kee almost every day and without a break because she worried about the business would get bad once she left. She is very tired in the face of the current situation of her restaurant. Whether or not to move this restaurant out of Chinatown and reopen it in a suburban area is a topic that she and her family often discuss.
Residential property has also become more expensive, "In 1973, each townhouse was only $3,000. Today, prices each $3 million. The Chinatown will be the center of the most expensive real estate in the whole Washington, D.C," said Alfred H. Liu, a Washington-based architect who designed the Friendship Archway, the Far East Trade Center and the Wah-Luck House in Chinatown.

In Chinatown, residential property rents for up to $82 per square foot, compared to about $40 per square foot in other parts of the city. In some parts of the Washington, the rental rate is as low as $10 per square foot. Such manic rental rates pushed a lot of Chinese residents and businesses that could not afford high prices out of this area. In 2000, 33.4 percent of residents in Chinatown and its adjacent areas were Asian. By 2015, that number had decreased to 22.8 percent, according to data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Several factors help explain the rising property prices that have pushed Chinese residents out of Chinatown in recent years. Chinatown is next to Metro Center, and almost all of the city’s subway lines intersect in or near Chinatown. The transportation center provides huge traffic conveniences for Chinatown’s residents and people who want to visit this area. The other factor is the D.C. Convention Center, just a few blocks north of Chinatown and Capital One Arena. These buildings combined to push Chinatown to become the center of convention activities, sports events and other commercial activities in the city. Therefore, the price of townhouses, apartments and land in Chinatown has increased at a phenomenal rate since the area’s transformation began.
Some Chinese townhouse owners sold their homes and moved out of the neighborhood to achieve better living conditions. Conversely some Chinese tenants could no longer afford the incredible rents, so they had to move out of this area.

Different generations of Chinese Americans have different attitudes toward where they should live. The first generation of Chinese immigrants, who were not born in the United States, could hardly speak English when they arrived in Chinatown around 1960. The basic service industries like laundries and restaurants – businesses that did not require them to speak or write much in English – became the main sources of income for early Chinese immigrants. Their children and grandchildren have learned English and have had the chance to go to college. Being a doctor, a lawyer or other profession that symbolize the upper class is becoming more attractive to the younger generations of Chinese Americans. This, too, is evident in the census data. In 1990, only 10.3 percent of adults in Chinatown and surrounding areas had a bachelor’s degree. But in 2000, 44.7 percent of adults living in those neighborhoods had a bachelor’s degree.

The situation is similar in Wu’s family. “My son is now in the same field as I am. He is also an acupuncturist. But instead of taking over my clinic, he chooses to work in a clinic in Maryland,” said Wu. There is another reason that Wu’s son is not in Chinatown. He has a son and a daughter, and lives in Virginia where the schools are better than they are in Washington, the Wu says.

Washington is not the only city with a shrinking Chinatown. The Chinatowns of Boston and Philadelphia are also becoming less Chinese, for many of the same reasons. In 1990,
the percentage of Asian in Boston Chinatown is up to 70. But by 2010, it had decreased to 46 percent. In Philadelphia, as in Washington, rental rates and housing prices in Chinatown are much higher than the average price for the city city.

When it comes to curtailing the shrinking trends of Washington’s Chinatown, Derek Hyra, an associate professor in the Department of Public Administration at American University, says several steps can be taken, “One is to maintain a certain percentage of affordable housing and the other one is to maintain some of the longstanding Asian owned businesses.” Hyra, who directs AU’s Metropolitan Policy Center, suggests that when Asian small businesses like restaurants cannot afford such high commercial rents and they have to go out of the community, then the Asian cultural traditions get moved out of the community at the same time. So, it is important for the city to subsidize affordable housing, but also to think about how it could subsidize small businesses, he said.

Recently, Wu's family has suggested that Wu sell the clinic in exchange for a better life in his retired years. But Wu does not agree. “As long as there are patients who need me, I will keep the clinic open,” he says. Obviously, despite the decline in his business, he remains committed to his career. And, he says, he has a more important mission. “I hope that through acupuncture, more Westerners can understand and be fond of Chinese medicine and Chinese culture.”
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Chapter Two: Visual Review Chapter

These days, it is easy to find complaints about Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown on social media. “A ‘Chinatown’ in theory only,” “More like ‘Chinablock’ than ‘Chinatown’,” and “This is the smallest Chinatown in the Northeast Corridor.” In the past Chinatown in Washington, D.C., has been a destination, but comments like these, posted recently on the travel site TripAdvisor, may make people wonder what has changed. In the past, Chinatown was considered a beacon for Chinese immigrants, and an attractive scenic spot for Westerners to experience and explore exotic cultures. Today, however, this out of date landmark is losing its authenticity and shrinking.

My documentary and photo story, Shrinking Chinatown of Washington, D.C., explores present day Chinatown through the life of Shihua Wu, an 83-year-old Chinese acupuncturist who has lived and worked in Chinatown since moving his family there in 1992. Shihua Wu acts as a guide, leading the audience through the past of the neighborhood to experience Chinese immigrants’ current attitudes toward their shrinking neighborhood and presence and to discover the visions of future development in this area. While researching and filming, it has been important to understand other documentaries and photo projects on gentrification, aging communities, and immigrants’ lives. These projects have inspired me to consider develop different approaches and perspectives, such as each photo’s tone and color, the way to frame people in the pictures, the way to integrate audios and images. The process has and have helped me to discover my own style of photo story and documentary work.

When it comes to the photography projects about American Chinatowns, the work, New York Chinatown, published by Bud Glick in 1984 must not be ignored.
Beginning in 1981, Glick spent three years photographing Chinese immigrants in New York’s Chinatown. Through his photo work, Glick documented the changing neighborhood as it underwent a rapid demographic shift because of the increase of new Chinese immigrants. He also focused on the “bachelor society” (Kim, 2007), which describes the large number of male immigrants who were living in Chinatown without their wives and children.

In Glick’s work, random street scenes and people are the main content. His work documents different generations, genders, and occupations, and shows them in different settings, including garment factories, Chinese restaurants, a senior citizens center and the kitchen of a Chinese family’s house. We see men playing mahjong, the Chinese game, and people attending funerals. By showing all of these people, places and events, Glick illustrates a vibrant New York Chinatown. Although Glick captured so many differences among his subjects, these inhabitants of Chinatown still have similarities including similar cultural backgrounds, customs, and language.

Fig. 1. Glick, Bud. Bachelor Apartment, Bayard St. from: “New York Chinatown, 1982.”
One of Glick’s photos presents an elder male and younger Chinese immigrants sitting together and having dinner in a bachelor apartment (see figure 1). Audiences can see the structure and interior decoration of the apartment. The bed and dinner table occupy the same room. Without a closet, people hang their clothes on the wall close to their beds. There is no privacy. These Chinese men of different ages are not families, but life is a struggle, so they help each other and care for each other like a family.

In another image, Glick depicted a woman named Rebecca with her children in their kitchen (see figure 2). The narrow and small living environment is a distinct characteristic of Rebecca’s house. Rebecca’s kitchen is not only used as a kitchen, it is also a place for her children to play, and a place to hang clothes to dry. Other details are
documented in this picture, such as the cracks on the bathtub, the shredding walls, and five locks on the door, reflecting the difficult and turbulent living and working conditions of Rebecca and her family. Taken together, the images of life in the bachelor’s apartment and Rebecca’s home represent the lives of hundreds and thousands of Chinese immigrant families.

Glick is a master of discovering and capturing details about his subjects. He uses black and white photos to create a nostalgic sense for stories he wants to tell. Compared to color photographs, black and white photos can remove unnecessary information from the environment surrounding subjects or objects, because too many different colors distract attention rather than focus on the primary content of the photo as a whole. Therefore, for my Shrinking Chinatown project, I also use black and white photos because they are an effective way to tell the past stories and the history of Washington’s Chinatown.

Thomas Holton’s documentary photo project, The Lams of Ludlow Street, focuses more on specific subjects including Steven and Shirley Lam and their children, Michael, Franklin, and Cindy and stories how they lived in a tenement on Ludlow Street in New York Chinatown through color pictures. Holton began his project as his master’s thesis in 2003. He spent more than thirteen years photographing Lams’ family in New York’s Chinatown. Holton depicted the connection and alienation of one Chinese family in his project. He documented Chinese families’ daily life behind closed doors. When Holton first met with Lam, she and her family lived in a 350-square-foot apartment in Chinatown. Holton not only documented the growth of children and the aging Lam and her husband, but also the subtle change in the interpersonal relationships and emotions among family members. Through these pictures, experience the Lam’s family’s life path, from the period when the Lam family lived in a small place but enjoyed themselves to the time when they
moved to a bigger place but had endless quarrels.

In order to show the connection between Lam’s family, Holton recorded some intimate moments, such as Lam bathing her children, family members eating time, three generations sitting together, and children enjoying afterschool TV time.

![Image of a family in an early apartment, with clothes arranged on a hanger, lights on the ceiling, and a neat and clean table.](http://www.thomasholton.com)

Fig. 3. Holton, Thomas. Shirley Lam’s Families from: “The Lams of Ludlow Street, 2003.” Thomasholton.com, http://www.thomasholton.com

In one image of the family in its early apartment, the clothes arranged in order of size on the clothes hanger, the colored lights on the ceiling, and the neat and clean table reflect the positive and optimistic attitude of Lam’s family towards life (see figure 3).

In order to show the troublesome and difficult times among in Lam’s family, Holton also recorded emotional moments, including children building private spaces, and the moment that Steven stands alone in his new house. When Holton first met the family, they slept together; but when the parents started quarreling more, children wanted to have more privacy so they built a bunk bed with curtains between each other (see figure 4). This physical isolation and emotional distance show the alienation within the family.
I am inspired by Holton’s approach to documenting a Chinese-American family. He spent a long time with Lam’s family and they treated him like a family member. Holton was able to get glimpses of their daily lives. Such interactions allowed Holton to photograph the most authentic side of people, and create warm images. The color images convey emotional expression and more information than black and white photos. For Shrinking Chinatown of Washington, D.C., Black and white photos narrate the history of Washington’s Chinatown, while color pictures allow me to tell stories about how my subjects live in the present.

I am also inspired by Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi’s project, Cui Cui, published in 2005. She photographed a lot of touching scenes of her family. She shot ordinary life events, such as a family gathering during the New Year’s holidays, grandparents holding hands and standing together, the birth of a new child. Kawauchi’s photos have a strong personal style. For example, not like some photos about elders
always present sentimental feeling, Kawauchi's pictures of her grandparents are full of tranquility and vitality.

Kawauchi's work does not focus on major or very serious themes, she just photographed the details of life and normal scenes. Such ordinary details carry profound implications and afford much room for thought to viewers. In addition, a slight overexposure and the cool hues in the photograph does not cause discomfort for the viewer; instead, it gives the viewer a sense of freshness and refinement. Also, such shallow tone allows these images to contain an unexpected impact and a flavor of Eastern culture and Zenist serenity.

Fig. 4. Kawauchi, Rinko. Grandparents sitting together from: “Cui Cui.”
Kawauchi's work motivated me to explore the artistic style of my photos. In multimedia project, Shrinking Chinatown of Washington, D.C., the main subjects are elders whose average age is over 70 years old. Most of them have witnessed the changes in Chinatown. The project is dominated by images of their daily lives. Changing the hue and light of a photograph appropriately can create a more artistic or fantastic feeling, which in certain ways adds to the fun, creativity, and freshness of the photograph. For documentary photography, truth is undoubtedly the most important factor, but the stylistic creativity is precisely the way to boost its vitality and expressiveness.

Another long-term photography project about Chinatown that has to be mentioned is Chien-Chi Chang's documentary photography project, Chinatown (New York and Fuzhou 1992-2011). Chang spent nineteen years to photographing and documenting what was going on behind Chinatown's facade and the glimpses of people who immigrated from Fuzhou City (south of Chinatown) to New York City.
Unlike other work that I reviewed, Chang recorded and displayed a more comprehensive New York Chinatown. In his work, a viewer can see almost all aspects of Chinatown: the lion dance team during the Chinese lunar new year, a worker carrying four small pigs on the street of Chinatown, and praying Buddhists, as well as Peking Opera performers, a wedding, a funeral, and even an inflatable blow-up doll. When Chang brings together these independent but connected people and events, viewers can see a microcosm of the Eastern cultures in New York City.

In Chang's video about Chinatown, each photo is accompanied by relevant sound material. When viewers see the vicissitudes of people's lives in New York's little Fuzhou through these photos, the sound behind the pictures enables them to stereoscopically feel the vitality and diversity of the community. For example, when showing pictures of Chinese are displayed, the background sound is of colliding kitchenware; with pictures of Chinese New Year, the sound is of burning firecrackers; when the images are of Buddhist prayers, the sound is of knocking wooden fish, a percussion instrument.

Not every photo in the three-and-a-half minute video is satisfactory. In my opinion, some photos are not only visually unpleasant to the viewers, due to a lack of exposure or color distortion, but they also blur the topic, so that the viewer cannot accurately capture the meaning beyond the content of these photos, for example and image of a man passing by a TV screen, or another of the backs of pedestrians on the streets of Chinatown. Some of the photos are mediocre, but the sound brings them to life. The mix of different sounds push me to consider how could I narrate my story in a vivid and attractive way.

In addition to long-term projects, Ruxandra Guidi and Bear Guerra’s short-term project, Chinatown Going Gray in L.A., created in 2016 is worthy of analysis. In general,
long-term projects about Chinatown document the changes of community or people over time, and viewers can see the development of the area. Guidi and Guerra's project focuses on the things that Chinese residents living in Chinatown in Los Angeles most want to change, the housing issue. Guidi and Guerra spent nearly a year documenting the lives of Chinese inhabitants in L.A. Chinatown under new development. As we know, food, clothing, housing and transportation are the basic elements to satisfy human social life; however, when someone cannot afford a house or a place to live a sense of security and trust in other people gradually disappears. Chinatown Going Gray in L.A not only records the life of Chinese residents of Chinatown, but also records their longings and their efforts to secure a better life. Guidi and Guerra, for example, record the story, Mr. Song’s California Dream, of a sixty-eight-year-old Chinese immigrant, Mr. Song, as he learns English and prepares for a U.S. citizenship exam.

All these projects document people’s lives, and record people’s perceptions of life. In my opinion, the hardest part about these projects is not techniques, such as using fancy shooting methods to attract viewers' attention. Of course, technically creative ideas are important to the photographer who is working on the project because they promote the formation of the artistic style and story structure of visual work. But, what's more important is how to dig out different feelings from the ordinary life of the subjects, or tell a story from different angles.

These projects and the experience that these photographers shared show that the best way to achieve stories is to have interaction with one’s subjects, not merely to listen passively to them. Interactions like chatting with subjects, printing photos for subjects, and even living with subjects can build trust between subjects and project makers and also enable the relationship to be more relaxed in front of the camera. In working this way,
photographers come closer to recording true stories and reactions, and evoke empathy in their viewers. I hope Shrinking Chinatown of Washington, D.C., can convey the same feeling to viewers, allowing them feel like they are talking to people in photos or videos while watching my visual work, not just browsing the pictures as an onlooker.
Annotated Bibliography


In Chien-Chi Chang’s photo essay, he explored and analyzed the alienation and connection between Chinese immigrants and the New York’s Chinatown. Chien-Chi’s immigrant experience draws him to investigate the ties that bind one person to another and to the society; In his video, each photo is paired with related sound. Through this video, we can see what was the living condition of Chinese immigrants from 1992 to 2011. Chang used his photos to illustrate and capture the emotions, happiness, pain, longing, and stories of Chinese immigrants behind Chinatown’s façade. By contrast, in Washington’s Chinatown, because the neighborhood is declining and fading, most of the significant Chinese elements are no longer exist. Chang’s photo project forced me to consider that how I could overcome this problem and portray these elements in my project.


Bud Glick finished his New York Chinatown documentary photography project more than thirty years ago. Through these photos, people can see what the New York Chinatown looked like in the 1980s, and the history and transformation of the neighborhood. In this documentary photography project, Glick was not only documenting the street scenes and public events, such as festivals and funerals, but also photographing specific people and their lives. He took photos in elders’ homes, bachelor apartments, a senior citizen’s center and garment factory. When I watch his work, it seems like I can see and feel people’s stories and emotions in these photos. And I would love to know and discover the connection between these subjects and the community, rather than just be an outsider seeing a single picture. I truly like the picture #45 which shows a grandfather holding his grandson and sitting on a long staircase. The harmonic atmosphere integrates people in the picture and the environment of the picture. I believe that this is what I need to show and document in my project, because what I learn from Glick’s project is that a good photo is not building a barrier between the audience and photos, but allowing the audience to emerge in the photos and make people want to be a part when they read these stories.

In the Chinatown Going Gray in LA project, Ruxandra, Guidi and Bear Guerra pay more attention to housing issues. According to their investigations, the rising housing costs and new construction are forcing senior residents to move out the Chinatown of Los Angeles. Ruxandra and Bear still use photo stories as the main method to illustrate their photo project. Mr. Song, who immigrated from China to Los Angeles ten years ago, is the main subject of this project. Mr. Song lives in this community with low meager income. Ruxandra and Bear took portraits and detailed shots of Mr. Song and made an audio story for audiences to better understand the story. All the photos are black and white, which creates a sense of seriousness.


The documentary photography project, The Lams of Ludlow Street, was started in 2003. Thomas Holton documented and photographed Steven and Shirley Lam (their preferred American names) and their children, Michael, Franklin, and Cindy. He spent thirteen years recording the story of the Lam’s family. He photographed how the family looked like when they lived in a tenement on Ludlow Street in New York Chinatown and moved to a new house. Different from other photography projects about Chinatown, Holton documented a specific family, not just random street scenes. Also, the most important aspect in his project is that he documented the growth of children in this family and the transformation of this family. I like his photos about the private space in the Lam’s home. This made me think about the best ways to document intimate moments with my subjects.


The photo work, Cui Cui, is taken by Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi. In this work, Rinko Kawauchi took photos for her own family. There is not any dramatic scene or photograph in this work. The content of this work consists of fragments of normal life. The reason why this work attracts me is the technique Kawauchi used. Most of photos in her work always have bright and hazy light and a dreamlike quality. When I photograph people or other things, most of time, I would like to intentionally avoid overexposure. But in Kawauchi’s work, slight overexposure and cold hue is her photo style. I used to think the photographs for my thesis, Shrinking Chinatown in Washington, D.C., should use thick colors and
hues or black and white to illustrate past things or things that are slowly fading. But viewing her photos made me reconsider my approach.


In 2007, James Kim wrote a blog giving a definition about what is the bachelor society.
Appendices

A. Images from documentary film and photo project

Shrinking Chinatown - Documentary

Shihua Wu
Chinese Acupuncturist

Alfred H. Liu

ONLY ONE OR TWO PEOPLE.
Architect & Designer of Friendship Archway

Chuanxiu Ye
Chinatown Resident

Chinatown
Chinatown

但是我们需要一些能干的领导者来发展中国城
But we need some capable leaders to do this.

Asian Senior Center
Seniors’ Portraits – Photo Project
B. Thesis exhibition installation
C. Project Website

Homepage

TheShrinkingChinatown – Just another WordPress site

[Graph showing Dr. Wu’s clientelle over 24 years, with details from 1995 to 2018, indicating a decrease in clients over time.]

[Statistical circles showing:
- Full Kee Restaurant: 30% rent increase annually
- Full Kee Restaurant serves: HALF the meals than in years past
- Since 2000: 30% decrease in Asian population

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

_Shrinking Chinatown_ explores the state of Washington, D.C.’s Chinatown and the mostly elderly Chinese population living there today. Washington’s Chinatown is fading into the shadows as economic development shifts the business culture, housing becomes exorbitant, and young families move to the suburbs. The elderly residents who have built and shaped this community over the last 30 years are being displaced. Chinatown was first established in the 1930s with the arrival of Chinese immigrants to the region. Within decades Chinatown became a cultural landmark and hub of tourism. The area saw significant growth in the 1980s when Chinese-U.S. relations improved. The community grew organically, supporting new arrivals through cultural networks and linguistic familiarity. Washington’s Chinatown is regarded as a bridge between Chinese culture and the West.
Documentary

The Shrinking Chinatown – Just another WordPress site

DOCUMENTARY

SHRINKING CHINATOWN
FEATURE STORY
Under a dim desk lamp light, Dr. Shihua Wu bends down and opens a rusty cabinet. Dozens of green record books are lined up in drawers. Wu opens these documents, and seems to be searching for something.

“What are these numbers?” I ask him.
“Patients,” Dr. Wu answers, “These numbers are patients who come to my clinic over past 25 years.”

“So, how about this year?”

“Hmmm, not too many,” he says, hesitating. “Until October this year, it is 589 patients.”

Wu, an 83-year-old Chinese acupuncturist, came to Washington, D.C., 25 years ago. He is good at using acupuncture to treat blood diseases and leukemia. In 1992, he opened his clinic in Washington’s Chinatown. In the beginning, he saw at least 10 patients per
day looking for help. He would never have imagined that, after 20 years, the number of patients would have decreased to just 10 per week.

The changes in Chinatown are also unexpected to Wu. The neighborhood’s original planners and designers once thought the community had the potential to develop into a business and tourism center like the Times Square in New York City. However, a number of factors have contributed to Washington, D.C.’s shrinking Chinatown. These include a sharp increase in housing prices, a drastic decrease in Chinese residents,
gentrification and many other factors. This is visible in Chinatowns all across the United States, including Philadelphia and Boston – each facing the same crucial situation: they are shrinking.

When Wu arrived in Washington, he bought a townhouse in Chinatown as his home and clinic. Today, if you did not step into the cardinal brick townhouse, it would be hard to imagine it as a Chinese traditional medicine and acupuncture clinic. Now in Chinatown, many of the old buildings have been converted into fancy hotels, office buildings and modern-looking apartments. Yet
Wu’s clinic still looks the same as it did when he bought it. In fact, the old building looks even more obsolete than before because of the peeling walls, a rusty iron mailbox, and a weedy courtyard entrance.

Inside Wu’s acupuncture clinic, the dim and narrow room overflows with newspapers and magazines he has collected. They are on the desk, on the cupboard, on the chair, and even on the floor. There is little space to stand. The house has not been cleaned in a long time and it is poorly ventilated. It is full of moisture and the odor of rotten...
“These are all my medals,” Wu says, pointing to certificates and trophies stacked on a cabinet that holds Chinese herbal medicines covered with dust and cobwebs. He is full of pride despite the distress he feels as he confronts the messy room. From 2003 to 2013, Wu was the chairman of an advisory committee on acupuncture for Washington’s Department of Health. The awards, he says, are from the city, in recognition of his contributions in evaluating acupuncturists’ qualifications, administering exams, recommending standards and procedures. It
would be difficult to connect this low-key old man with an experienced acupuncturist without these awards.

The early 1990s were the heyday of Dr. Wu’s career and was also a period of rapid development for Washington’s Chinatown. Around this period, several things happened that made residents of the area believe that the spring of Chinatown was coming. In 1982 the Wah-Luck House was established to provide affordable housing for low-income Chinese-American senior residents. In 1984, Beijing and Washington made an agreement establishing intercity relations. Two years later, to mark the normalization of Sino-American relations and promote more interactions between Beijing and Washington, the Friendship Archway was built. The establishment of the Archway not only symbolized a new landmark in Chinatown, but also opened a window for Westerners to discover Chinese culture through commerce and visits to Chinatown.
In 1986, the Metro station was given its present name, Gallery Place-Chinatown. Ten years later, the core of the neighborhood was demolished to make way for the MCI Center, now Capital One Arena. Local inhabitants and Chinatown’s original planners and its residents initially believed that the transportation convenience, the location advantages and the establishment of new commercial buildings would become resources to spur Chinatown’s growth and benefit local inhabitants. But the development of Chinatown did not turn out as local residents expected. Instead, rising housing prices and commercial rents and other effects of gentrification have pushed small Chinese businesses, like restaurants, out of the community.
Full Kee Restaurant, which opened in Chinatown in 1989, was once regarded as one of the best restaurants for visitors and locals alike because of its authentic Cantonese cuisine and affordable prices. Initially, Full Kee served as many as 300 meals in one day and the queue lined up outside the restaurant stretched 50 meters long. But now a day’s business barely reaches half of what it used to be. “If the landlord sells the building, the restaurant will probably disappear,” Mie Wu, the owner of Full Kee, says with a wry smile when asked about the restaurant’s operations.
“In the beginning, the rent was $5500 per month,” Mie Wu says, “But today, it is, on average, about 30 percent higher every year than the previous year.” The continuously increasing rent and the meager profits make Mie worried about the future of the restaurant. In the past six months, she stayed in the Full Kee almost every day and without a break because she worried about the business would get bad once she left. She is very tired in the face of the current situation of her restaurant. Whether or not to move this restaurant out of Chinatown and reopen it in a suburban area is a topic that she and her family often discuss.
Residential property has also become more expensive, “In 1973, each townhouse was only $3,000. Today, prices each $3 million. The Chinatown will be the center of the most expensive real estate in the whole Washington, D.C,” said Alfred H. Liu, a Washington-based architect who designed the Friendship Archway, the Far East Trade Center and the Wah-Luck House in Chinatown.

In Chinatown, residential property rents for up to $82 per square foot, compared to about $40 per square foot in other parts of the city. In some parts of the Washington, the
rental rate is as low as $10 per square foot. Such manic rental rates pushed a lot of Chinese residents and businesses that could not afford high prices out of this area. In 2000, 33.4 percent of residents in Chinatown and its adjacent areas were Asian. By 2015, that number had decreased to 22.8 percent, according to data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Several factors help explain the rising property prices that have pushed Chinese residents out of Chinatown in recent years. Chinatown is next to Metro Center, and almost all of the city’s subway lines.
intersect in or near Chinatown. The transportation center provides huge traffic conveniences for Chinatown’s residents and people who want to visit this area. The other factor is the D.C. Convention Center, just a few blocks north of Chinatown and Capital One Arena. These buildings combined to push Chinatown to become the center of convention activities, sports events and other commercial activities in the city. Therefore, the price of townhouses, apartments and land in Chinatown has increased at a phenomenal rate since the area’s transformation began. Some Chinese townhouse owners sold their homes and moved out of the neighborhood to achieve better living conditions. Conversely some Chinese tenants could no longer afford the incredible rents, so they had to move out of this area.

Different generations of Chinese Americans have different attitudes toward where they should live. The first generation of Chinese immigrants, who were not born in the United States, could hardly speak English.
when they arrived in Chinatown around 1960. The basic service industries like laundries and restaurants – businesses that did not require
them to speak or write much in English –
became the main sources of income for early
Chinese immigrants. Their children and
grandchildren have learned English and have
had the chance to go to college. Being a
doctor, a lawyer or other profession that
symbolize the upper class is becoming more
attractive to the younger generations of
Chinese Americans. This, too, is evident in
the census data. In 1990, only 10.3 percent
of adults in Chinatown and surrounding areas
had a bachelor’s degree. But in 2000, 44.7
percent of adults living in those
neighborhoods had a bachelor’s degree.

The situation is similar in Wu’s family. “My
son is now in the same field as I am. He
is also an acupuncturist. But instead of
taking over my clinic, he chooses to work in
a clinic in Maryland,” said Wu. There is
another reason that Wu’s son is not in
Chinatown. He has a son and a daughter.
and lives in Virginia where the schools are better than they are in Washington, the Wu says.

Washington is not the only city with a shrinking Chinatown. The Chinatowns of Boston and Philadelphia are also becoming less Chinese, for many of the same reasons. In 1990, the percentage of Asian in Boston Chinatown is up to 70. But by 2010, it had decreased to 46 percent. In Philadelphia, as in Washington, rental rates and housing prices in Chinatown are much higher than the average price for the city city.

When it comes to curtailing the shrinking trends of Washington’s Chinatown, Derek Hyra, an associate professor in the Department of Public Administration at American University, says several steps can be taken, “One is to maintain a certain percentage of affordable housing and the other one is to maintain some of the longstanding Asian owned businesses.” Hyra, who directs AU’s Metropolitan Policy Center, suggests that when
Asian small businesses like restaurants cannot afford such high commercial rents and they have to go out of the community, then the Asian cultural traditions get moved out of the community at the same time. So, it is important for the city to subsidize affordable housing, but also to think about how it could subsidize small businesses, he said.

Recently, Wu’s family has suggested that Wu sell the clinic in exchange for a better life in his retired years. But Wu does not agree. “As long as there are patients who need me, I will keep the clinic open,” he says. Obviously, despite the decline in his
business, he remains committed to his career.
And, he says, he has a more important
mission. “I hope that through acupuncture,
more Westerners can understand and be fond
of Chinese medicine and Chinese culture.”

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Portraits

PORTRAITS

Shihua Wu, 83

In the community

IN THE COMMUNITY

On the April 17th, 2019, I went to the Asian Senior Center in Washington, D.C.’s, Chinatown to present my project. The project documented the story about Chinatown and the elderly living in Chinatown. When they saw themselves in my Shrinking Chinatown documentary and the portrait book, they smiled.

https://www.shrinkingchinatown.com/
Contact

First Name

Last Name

Email

Comment or Message

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D. Community Engagement

**Present Shrinking Chinatown Project in Asian Senior Center**

April 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2019. 417 G Pl NW, Washington, D.C. 20001

For the community engagement, I took my *Shrinking Chinatown* project back to the Asian Senior Center and presented to all the seniors.

The project documented the story about Chinatown and the elderly living in Chinatown. When seniors saw themselves in my *Shrinking Chinatown* documentary and the portrait book, they smiled.
E. Book: Shrinking Chinatown
SHRINKING
CHINATOWN
A photo story about Chinese elderly residents living in Washington, D.C.'s, shrinking chinatown.
Xinai Mei, 86

Xuefang Yu, 70

“Chinatown is a place to unite Chinese immigrants, and we can help each other here.”
Jinxuan Zhou, 83

“l chose the Pillow Book from the Asian Senior Center. It teaches me how to deal with life and not to be self-absorbed.”

Xiaqing LiangChen, 85
Shihua Wu, 83

“My aplastic anemia patient sent me her family pictures after she was cured by me. Seeing my patients healthy and having a lovely family is my greatest pursuit in my life.”

Ying Lin, 66
Guisong Liu, 85
“I will love my wife forever.”

Liqing Cheng, 84
“I wish my husband will be long life and good health.”

“We got our wedding anniversary certificate.
This is the best reminder of our diamond anniversary.”

Qiqing Shao, 80
“I have lived in Chinatown for 20 years.
Chinatown to me is a place of freedom.”

64
Jiahui Zhang, 81

“I have lived in Chinatown for 24 years. There are fewer and fewer Chinese shops in Chinatown. Chinese residents are less and less, too. Chinatown is not as same as it used to be.”
Thomas Singcho Cheng, 69

"Chinatown is fading out gradually. Chinese restaurants were a big part of Chinatown, but now they are moving out from this community."

Xingfeng Wang, 83

"I came to Chinatown at 2002. I feel happy to live in here."
Ruiyan Li, 70

“I bought the pearl necklace for a fan dance. I think Chinatown is a place full of joy.”

Chuanxiu Ye, 79

“I came to Chinatown in 2004. Chinatown is a place that I can communicate with others in my mother tongue.”
Meiyin Wang, 68

"I don't speak in English, but I can communicate with others in Chinatown."

Xingwen Zhang, 81

"This was ten years ago. It was winter. I was doing leg presses on the ancient city wall in my hometown. I could never reach that height any longer. This picture means a lot to me."
Xiaoying Chen, 77

Lanai YuMei, 95

“Chinatown is a great place for me because I can live independently, and not depend on my family.”
Meiyang Luo, 71

“This scarf was a gift from my husband 31 years ago. I have taken good care of it. It is a testimony of our love.”

Dongmei Lin, 77
Qingqing Li, 85

"I bought this radio three years ago in China. I use it to listen to Cantonese opera every day. My son and daughter bought an apartment for me in another area, but I prefer living in Chinatown. It's more bustling with activity here."

Meiqing Tang, 82

"I came to Chinatown 19 years ago. The environment in Chinatown is getting better than before."

Xueyu Liu, 85

"Chinatown offers me a lot of convenience. I would have loved to have lived here my whole life."

Chuanzhao Xie, 65

"Chinatown to me is yearning for home."