

## ASSIMILATION OR ISOLATION? COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR STRATEGIES FOR REDEVELOPMENT IN MANHATTAN'S CHINATOWN

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**ABSTRACT:** *The scale of contemporary immigration is reminiscent of large-scale immigration at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the socio-economic climate differs substantially from what existed during previous immigration waves. An increasing proportion of immigrants live in poverty relative to the overall population. A 1999 study found no region of the country where immigrant poverty is not at least 60% higher than that of natives. As assimilation into the mainstream economy grows more difficult for low-skilled immigrants, enclave economies, such as Manhattan's Chinatown, have swelled. Meanwhile scholars and policymakers debate the desirability of immigrant clustering. This paper opens with a synopsis of the assimilation debate. It then discusses how community organizations operate and specifically, whether community organizations' redevelopment strategies lend support to the ethnic-enclave assimilation model or increase the likelihood of neighborhood isolation. The paper provides a brief description of five non-profit community organizations and an assessment of their redevelopment strategies. It then examines similarities between the organizations, including barriers they face to service provision. Finally the paper offers insights on how investments in human capital succeed as a redevelopment strategy for ethnic enclaves.*

### THE ASSIMILATION DEBATE

Chinatown<sup>1</sup> features prominently in the immigration debate as its population and living conditions become reminiscent of mass migration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As immigration in-flows to the US continue to climb to new post WWII levels, policymakers, scholars, and citizens struggle to determine the nation's capacity to absorb low-skilled immigrant labor. Continual migration is reinforcing the spatial concentration of immigrants, making ethnic enclave economies a focus in the on-going scholarship on assimilation and demographic restructuring in the US (Frey and Liaw, 1999). Meanwhile, poverty among persons in immigrant households has increased. Immigrant poverty is higher than that of natives regardless of age, education level, or employment status, according to a recent study conducted by the Center for Immigration Studies (Camarota, 1999). The study also found that throughout the 1990s, immigrant poverty rose 42% in New York City.

Manhattan's Chinatown has long been a first destination for immigrants and the neighborhood has

sagged under the weight of larger numbers of residents and fewer dollars (see Figure 1)(Cohen, 1999).

Some of Chinatown's social workers liken the area to a "Processing Machine" that absorbs new low-skilled migrants and provides them with job opportunities unavailable elsewhere. Zhou (1992) and Alba (1998) describe ethnic enclaves as a distinct strategy used by some immigrants to assimilate into a receiving country. The enclave-economy model posits that immigrants have greater access to job and skill training in the enclave than in the larger economy. According to this model, enclaves like Chinatown allow in-migrants to get the training and socioeconomic support needed to build some capital and move elsewhere. However, segregated areas can also operate in the opposite way; limiting immigrant interaction outside the enclave and isolating them from mainstream society.

Gans (1997) says assimilation occurs when immigrants move out of formal and informal ethnic or social associations and into the so-called non-ethnic equivalents accessible to them in the host society. However, as the poverty level of immigrants rises and the federal funding for social programs decreases newcomers are increasingly dependent on



Figure 1. Manhattan's Chinatown

the assistance of family networks and community-based organizations (CBOs) to meet basic needs. The immigrants most likely to settle in ethnically concentrated areas frequently have fewer language skills, lower educational attainment, lower rates of naturalization, and lower income (Newbold, 1999). These characteristics make new immigrants more prone to social isolation, discrimination, and limited economic opportunities. Unskilled immigrants in Chinatown often find themselves locked into dead-end, low paying jobs (Ho, 1999).

This paper examines the role CBOs play in generating human capital and promoting opportunities for unskilled immigrants who live in the ethnic enclave. Interviews were conducted with five local non-profit organizations to observe the redevelopment strategies employed in Chinatown. The paper then examines similarities between the organizations to identify critical success factors as well as barriers to service provision in the area. In

Chinatown, CBOs attempt to redevelop the declining built environment as well as increase the area's social and human capital. The scope of this research treats the social programs and services that are delivered by CBOs as redevelopment activity. Immigrants are viewed as redevelopment actors who have moved to Chinatown in an attempt to maximize available resources. Chinatown residents self-betterment strategy is evidenced by the large number of individuals seeking a variety of skills training.

## **DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS IN CHINATOWN**

### **The History of Chinatown CBOs**

Initially Chinatown residents formed community groups as social vehicles, largely to buffer the isolation of Chinese in the US. Family Associations were the earliest community groups in Manhattan's Chinatown, forming in the late 1880s. These associations organized around family names, shared regional or city origins, occupations, Chinese political parties, and sometimes, the arts (Cohen, 1999). In the absence of a comprehensive social policy, immigrants came to rely on community ties and family networks for basic services. The Family Associations mediated labor and housing disputes but tried to keep the area isolated from formal politics in order to maintain their control over Chinatown. Some associations became linked to organized crime and there were territory battles between different organizations.

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) was formed through the consolidation of traditional family associations and other member organizations. It registered with the Beijing Imperial Government in 1881 and maintained strong political ties to China. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the mercantile elite of Chinatown and factions of organized crime headed the organization. The CCBA acted as a go-between for Chinatown and City Hall but largely isolated the area from city politics and police intervention. Internally they regulated business disputes and, in fact, controlled all Chinatown industry. They owned a significant

portion of property along Mott Street and performed a variety of social functions.

Chinatown residents found jobs and housing, gained financial credit, settled disputes, had the social needs of their children and the aged cared for, resolved issues with home villages, and resolved issues of American immigration status through the patronage and mediation of their traditional associations and the CCBA. (Lin, 1998 124)

As a consequence, self-sufficient ghettos formed around Family Associations and the CCBA.

The Civil Rights movement inspired the creation of contemporary community development organizations in Chinatown. In the late 1960s and early 1970s more militant organizations formed to confront poverty, poor housing and disease in Chinatown. They attempted to improve the standard of living experienced by many residents. These new organizations fought the isolation imposed on Chinatown through the CCBA and Family Associations. Initially they encountered resistance from the older groups that struggled to maintain the old power hierarchy in Chinatown. Militant youth and college students viewed the established Chinatown social order as "feudal, outmoded and corrupt" (Lin, 1998 128). However, community organizations have maintained ties with the past. Although the power of the CCBA declined in the post-exclusion era, it still owns property and continues to act as an umbrella organization for other social service providers and economic development agencies in Chinatown (Kinkead, 1992). Lin (1998) states that liberal Family Associations, like the Lee Family Association, contribute to the fundraising campaigns of contemporary community organizations. Sometimes members of Family Associations sit on the boards of other community organizations.

### **Five Contemporary Organizations**

Once the hold of isolationist organizations was broken, CBOs proliferated in the area. Due to the changes in US immigration law, post-1965 Chinatown ceased to be a bachelor society as Chinese women, children and the elderly immigrated to the area. As the population grew, so did the need for services. President Lyndon B. Johnson's anti-poverty program created grants that were available to

community groups. By 1999, the Asian American Federation Guide listed 63 health and human service organizations serving the Chinatowns of New York City. Five non-profit community associations were selected from the guide and interviewed for this paper. Combined, the organizations represent a broad spectrum of service provision including vocational training, mental health care, and financial assistance. Several of the organizations provide cradle-to-grave services. Together these organizations provide a holistic picture of community driven redevelopment in an urban ethnic enclave. The following section gives a synopsis of the five CBOs and details the redevelopment strategies they employ. The information presented comes from interviews and personal communications conducted by the author.

### ***Chinese-American Planning Council***

Founded in 1964, the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC) was one of the first reformist community organizations and it is now the largest Chinese American community organization in the country. Today it operates a budget of over \$30 million, the majority of which comes from federal, state and local governments. The organization has a staff of 180 with 75% of its employees of Asian descent.

In 1969 the CPC surveyed Manhattan's Chinatown to assess community need. According to Allen Cohen (1999), former executive director, they identified daycare, language skills, job training/placement, and housing as the issues of most concern to residents. Soon afterwards, the CPC began establishing and managing daycare centers. Today they are affiliated with 12 centers throughout New York and serve over 1,000 children per day.

In addition to day-care, programs now include: employment and training, economic and housing development, senior citizen services, youth services, domestic violence counseling and cultural arts. The local development component of the organization has traditionally focused on small business formation, food service programs, housing construction and housing management. The CPC also promotes economic development projects that focus on alternative industries to garment factories and restaurants.

According to Cohen (1999), the greatest challenge to the organization centers on politics.

Political battles are involved in getting many projects completed, for example, developing low-income housing in certain neighborhoods, fighting gentrification, and competing with other minority groups for limited funding. Cohen (1999) noted that natural allies become divided when they must compete for scarce resources. The CPC also wrestles with the difficulty of creating unskilled and semi-skilled well-paying jobs outside of the service sector.

### ***Chinatown Manpower Project***

The Chinatown Manpower Project began 27 years ago. The New York City government started the project to help teach English to Chinese immigrants and soon gave the project to the Chinese community to run. Today Manpower is the largest Asian vocational training organization in New York City. Manpower expanded 24 years ago to include programs in addition to English as a Second Language (ESL) and began vocational training. They now offer services to non-Asian and native English speakers. In 1997, they branched out into four training sites. Three sites are located in Chinatown, and the other in Brooklyn. They offer a wide variety of services including job skills training, adult literacy programs, and refugee assistance. At Manpower, about 60% of service users are Chinese.

The organization operates with a 75 person full-time staff and serves 1,600 clients per year<sup>2</sup>. Their government funding is determined by performance-based contracts. Some program funding requires that Manpower place 70% of their job training participants within 90 days after the class cycle has ended. Placed workers must have a 90-day to 1-year retention period (depending on the program) at placement wages (generally \$7 - \$16 per hour for full-time employees). Jobs must be related to the training clients receive. Often the job must include employer-paid health benefits after a 90-day period. For every requirement Manpower cannot meet, an amount of money is deducted from their funding. Government funding pays for staff salaries and equipment; private funding is used to cover overhead costs.

Currently, Manpower is held back from helping many of those in need by requirements of whom they can serve. Federal, state, and city government set eligibility criteria for projects they help fund. Cambao De Duong (1999), deputy director

of administration, identified recruitment of eligible clients as the biggest challenge facing the organization. Despite a growing refugee population, Manpower did not meet the placement requirement for refugees in 1997 and 1998. Although the need is high many people are not eligible for services. For example, if an immigrant's sponsor's income is too high, it disqualifies the immigrant from using Manpower. Nor can undocumented aliens receive services.

### ***Renaissance Economic Development Corporation***

The Renaissance Economic Development Corporation is a community development financial institution (CDFI) with an operating staff of 5 full-time employees. It focuses on providing technical and financial assistance to immigrants, women, and other minorities. Originally Renaissance was a component of the community development corporation Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE). Renaissance's initial project was the proposal and organization of a Chinatown Building Improvement District (Alexander, 1999; Lin, 1998). Three years ago the organization split from AAFE and made small businesses their focus. Since then they have broadened their scope to include large immigrant communities in Brooklyn and Queens. They are developing a strategy to increase the number of ethnic groups served. Their goal is to get people into the position where they can access mainstream lending services. In 5 years, the organization has made 34 loans; 75% of loan recipients were immigrants and 75% were women. Their average loan sizes run from \$16,000 to \$17,000.

Renaissance also offers technical assistance programs and financial assistance to small business owners. The technical assistance takes the form of business training courses, workshops, and one-on-one counseling. The training courses consist of a 60-hour class that runs two times a year. The course costs \$175 and is intended for amateurs or people with limited experience. The workshops are generally free and focused on particular topics such as accounting, finances, and revenue. The free counseling helps small business owners or potential owners with specific questions.

Renaissance provides financial assistance through seed capital grants of \$700 and the operation of a loan fund. Vice President Mitchel Alexander

(1999) says the organization tries to make the loans that the banks are not making because large commercial banks do not normally consider small business loans profitable. Also, immigrants, women and minorities tend to receive poor credit scores from banks. Alexander (1999) compares the credit scoring process to racial profiling where immigrants often get rejected because they lack a credit history or business experience. He added that big banks view restaurants, the primary small business venue for immigrants, as a risky investment.

Currently, Renaissance receives most of its funding from the following sources: 33% from state and local governments; 33% from the federal government; and 23% from private banks. Their Federal funding is fixed and they have not received an increase in the past three years. Renaissance takes out loans from private banks in order to make its own loans. About 10% of the organization's budget is self-generated from investment returns and fees. Although the interest rates on Renaissance loans are 2 to 3% higher than the prime rate, it is a better alternative to credit cards which are a common method people use to finance businesses when they are turned away from the banks. Renaissance plans to begin applying to foundations soon to diversify and increase funding sources. They are not held back by government restrictions on whom they can lend to. However, the process tends to disqualify undocumented immigrants because they face extreme difficulty in guaranteeing a loan.

#### *Hamilton-Madison House*

One of the oldest agencies in New York, Hamilton-Madison House (the House) celebrated its centennial last year. The agency grew from two separate settlement houses that were established, respectively, on Madison Street in 1898 by Jewish activists and on Hamilton Street in 1902 by Lillian Wald. The houses merged in 1954. Their mission is to provide bilingual/bicultural services so that people can work within their own culture and language to overcome problems and improve their quality of life.

In 1970 the House began focusing on the needs of Asian immigrants. They offer 19 programs such as Head Start, day care, youth programs, tutoring, summer day camp, community Saturday programs, mental health services, alcoholism, AIDS/HIV counseling, refugee assistance programs,

and family and senior services. These programs are offered throughout 10 different locations. They are the largest mental health care providers for Asians and Asian Americans and are licensed by the State. They service all five boroughs of New York. A new program, "Women Talk," was developed this year for immigrant women to help them improve their language skills.

Today the organization employs 160 full-time staff members and 30 part-time workers. Their funding is not performance-based and comes from a variety of sources, including federal, state and local governments (the largest single source); private foundations; individual donations; and revenues from services. If clients have no income, they do not pay for services. Otherwise health services are provided with a sliding fee scale.

The House services the working poor. Approximately 35% of their clients are uninsured. The agency provides services to 1,500 to 2,000 clients per week. The majority of these clients are elderly people and children. Undocumented immigrants are eligible for services. Associate Executive Director Susan Chan (1999) saw the need to strategize more effective ways to better serve the mentally ill as the organization's biggest challenge. The needs have been changing in the area as more people have come from more diverse backgrounds. They are looking for more resources to expand services due to long waiting lists for many of their programs.

#### *Chinese Development Council*

Originally titled the Chinese Youth Center, the agency was established in 1968 to work with gang members. Their first grant came from Lyndon B. Johnson's anti-poverty programs. After three years, the leadership decided they were not helping the troubled youth in Chinatown. They changed their focus to assisting new immigrants. The organization serves citizens from all five boroughs and, occasionally, people from New Jersey who work in Chinatown. It currently employs three full-time and two part-time workers.

During the Reagan Administration, funding cutbacks prompted the Chinese Development Council (CDC) to go into local economic development in an attempt to create self-supporting programs. Their economic development initiatives took the form of a

food co-op, sewing factory, and credit union. The food co-op survived for two years past the life of the grant. The sewing factory encountered a lot of resistance from union organizers and folded when its grant ran out. The credit union is still in operation. It accepts deposits/savings and makes small personal, commercial, and business loans. There are 350 members. The CDC no longer advertises the credit union because they have too many applicants. People have to be referred by two members in order to join. Currently the credit union has loaned out only 20% of its funds (10 loans). They are legally allowed to loan up to 80% but new government regulations make it harder for credit unions to make small loans. The CDC is also more selective these days because many illegal immigrants owe large human smuggling debts and will try to take out loans to pay them.

The CDC has cut back on programs because the agency chooses to no longer receive any government funding. They are now funded through individual donations and the United Way. Because they receive no government funding, CDC has no restrictions on whom they can serve. Still the agency offers free ESL and basic accounting classes. This semester they had 108 people enrolled. Director David Ho (1999) stated the enrollment is small compared to local need but the CDC has to compete with for-profit agencies providing similar services. These organizations charge for their services but have very effective advertising. Ho (1999) says these organizations often do not deliver the services they promise.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINATOWN ORGANIZATIONS**

Each of the five organizations work to increase the human and investment capital of Chinatown residents. They say they do accomplish their goals although Chan (1999) says the impact of social services are, at best, felt by a small minority of immigrants. Funding constraints often keep organizations from reaching all those demonstrating high need. Although every organization employs a different mix of redevelopment strategies, there are some distinguishable common characteristics that

contribute to the successes and failures of these CBOs.

### **Critical Success Factors:**

- Shared Vision – The CBOs all profess a commitment to improving conditions in Chinatown through the empowerment of its residents.
- Cooperative Nature – Together CBOs in Chinatown form a comprehensive web of social services. The organizations networked and referred clients to one another. Coalitions were sometimes formed between the organizations. Earlier this year Manpower formed a coalition with several other social service agencies that was successful in petitioning the local government to expand the refugee eligibility window for services.
- Multicultural Staff – The CBOs tend to hire from the community they serve and keep a bilingual staff.
- Flexible Programs – The organizations are quick to redistribute available resources to meet community needs.
- Mixed Strategies – The organizations employ various mixes of place-based and people-based strategies. Even Renaissance offers programs that develop human capital in addition to its focus on small business loans.
- Decentralized – All the CBOs have branched out beyond Chinatown to serve other Asian and, in some cases non-Asian, communities in New York City.

### **Critical Barriers:**

- Funding – The lack of sufficient funding sources hinder the service provision of these associations. Community workers said the government never funds a program forever and yet some programs, such as ESL classes, will never be self-supporting. Furthermore, because funding is nationally based, it cannot meet changing needs at the community level.
- Restrictions – Service restrictions tied to government funding prove a major challenge facing social service providers. These government restrictions do not allow some

- organizations to service the most needy, including undocumented aliens.
- Competition – The private sector poses problems for non-profit service providers in Chinatown because they offer similar services and have the funds to advertise. Nor are for-profit companies subject to the same government restrictions imposed on CBOs.
  - Staff Retention – Several of the non-profits also mentioned losing staff to the private sector because it is able to offer competitive salaries (Cohen, 1999; Chan, 1999).
  - Pessimistic Prognosis for the Future – Community organizers said it was not likely to get any easier on immigrants in the future. A good immigrant social policy is not forthcoming due to the immigration backlash taking place all over the world (Chan, 1999).

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the five Chinatown CBOs presented an impressive picture. They stretch available resources, are well organized, and ascribe to collective responsibility. In the assimilation/redevelopment scenario, Chinatown views itself as a producer of social and intellectual capital. By building on ethnic solidarity, CBOs provide immigrants with a point of entry into the mainstream economy. In doing so they support the enclave economy assimilation model. The social workers interviewed say Chinatown CBOs propel people out of the community to be the agents of redevelopment in other areas. Although some organizations focus on providing place-based services such as housing and small business loans, they all recognize the need to increase immigrant opportunities outside the enclave. Community workers note the income gap between immigrants employed inside the enclave and those employed in the larger labor market. For the majority of low-skilled immigrants, jobs in Chinatown are a dead end. Community organizers therefore attach great importance to people-based-policies that improve immigrant mobility.

The administrators interviewed all said that today's immigrants face more difficulties than past

waves. Chan (1999) said she believes it is getting tougher for new immigrants to succeed in Chinatown due to increased competition that drives wages even lower. The shrinking garment industry means that employment opportunities are more limited. Therefore, increasing people's chances of leaving offers them the greatest opportunity to improve their standard of living. However social service organizations still find it difficult to focus entirely on people-based programs.

People-based policies fit the needs of immigrants who hope to move on to more prosperous occupations and places. However the elderly and disabled populations that tend to settle permanently in Chinatown, as well as the continual flow of new immigrants, have other needs. Place-based policies are a lifeboat for these populations. Policies that provide housing and healthcare are necessary to help them maintain a decent standard of living. Community social workers say they feel that basic needs have to be met first for all immigrants before they can work to increase their skills.

The development of human capital succeeds as a redevelopment strategy for Chinatown residents but often prevents CBOs from building assets in their own community. However, a stronger focus on place-based policies would not likely benefit Chinatown because many of the immigrants themselves do not wish to stay. Chinatown is not the ultimate destination for new immigrants. Rather it is an initial settlement choice and immigrants tend to move out when the opportunity arises. So CBOs help make room for the tomorrow's immigrants. Even with high levels of people-based programs, Chinatown is not likely to have a net population loss.

Overall, social service organizations improved the lives of some Chinatown residents. Unfortunately they are not able to reach everyone and the need for services only grows with time. "Globalization" makes the situation of immigrants and refugees living in Chinatown more urgent. In the past, investing in human capital, usually in the form of higher education, has paid off for immigrants. Traditionally second-generation Asian immigrants have assimilated well into the larger society. However, recent changes in the US economic structure raises doubts that the first generation will be able to invest as much money in the education of their children. If the government fails to make up the

difference, the human capital of the area is likely to decrease.

Community organizations have facilitated moderate redevelopment through their investment in the Chinatown's human capital. They are part of a redevelopment chain; helping immigrants that have the potential to ignite positive citywide redevelopment move into the larger economy. Alexander (1999) stated that immigration has saved New York from the fate of other large American cities experiencing population loss and decline. But the forces undermining the chances of immigrants are strong. Community associations cannot substitute for the lack of adequate and consistent government involvement. They simply do not have the funds.

All the problems experienced by the associations interviewed in this study show that there is a limit to what community organizations can do. The investments they make in human capital benefit immigrants in the short run as well as the larger US economy in the long run. Unfortunately they cannot make adequate investments to redevelop the neighborhood on the necessary scale. For now decline is held at bay, but not necessarily because of their efforts. Ho (1999) said he believes Chinatown is doing well, but not because of social service or economic development programs. "The problem is beyond what social services can handle," he said. Rather it is the constant influx of cheap labor that sustains the enclave economy. Chinatown's competitive edge is that it is cheap. Unfortunately, many immigrants must sacrifice basic living standards to keep it that way.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>When the term Chinatown is used throughout this paper, it refers to Manhattan's Chinatown.

<sup>2</sup>Manpower cut their staff by 15 people after the organization was interviewed in November 1999. More cuts may follow. The funding for the refugee assistance program was cut by 36%. This program currently serves 202 people. In 1998, 324 people were serviced but prior cutbacks had forced it to downsize. The Bureau for Refugee and Immigration Affairs (BRIA) was cut completely. The program had serviced 300 people annually.

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