

DUAL CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON THE ARCHITECTURAL STYLE EVOLUTION OF SAN FRANCISCO CHINATOWN: A COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

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Abstract

The unique neighborhood style of San Francisco Chinatown is influenced by Chinese and American culture, history and social system. Through field investigation, Chinese and English literature collection, and spatial analysis, this paper interprets the motivation of its style evolution. In the process of research, the author tries to analyze the changes and driving forces of Chinatown in San Francisco from three dimensions: the city scale, the blocks scale, and the building scale. The results show that the formation process of Chinatown in San Francisco and the range of its blocks are deeply influenced by the world political pattern in the early 20th century, the Sino-American multi-party regulations and Sino-American relations. The architectural style of the block is influenced by the Eastern and Western cultures, which is a distinctive architectural feature. The traditional architecture is deeply influenced by the architectural style of southern Fujian, while the new architecture is mainly based on the modernist architectural style. Among the main factors affecting the evolution of Chinatown in San Francisco, gold rush, earthquake, traditional Chinese architectural style and immigration policy to China are the internal mechanisms of the formation of Chinatown's spatial characteristics.

Keywords:

San Francisco Chinatown;
Spatial Evolution;
Architectural Style Evolution;
Chinese History.

1 Introduction

Urban landscapes, as external physical environments, serve as profound reflections of a city's history, culture, and spiritual character [1]. Within this context, San Francisco's Chinatown emerges as a dynamic and culturally rich microcosm situated at the heart of the city center. Its urban spatial landscape, architectural style, and daily behaviors of its residents are deeply intertwined with the historical, cultural, and political tapestries of both China and the United States.

Ranked as "the most densely populated urban area west of Manhattan," San Francisco's Chinatown is a vibrant neighborhood with approximately 35,000 residents, of whom 81 % are of Asian descent, as reported by the San Francisco Planning Department in 2022[2]. The remarkable population density of Chinatown, at around 50,000 people per square mile, underscores its unique character, standing at 2.7 times the average population density of the broader city of San Francisco [3].

The roots of Chinatown trace back to the first wave of Chinese immigrants, predominantly hailing from villages in the Pearl River Delta and Fujian Province. These immigrants, whose livelihoods were grounded in farming, fishing, and trading, brought with them a distinctive work ethic and adventurous spirit. Additionally, they carried an inherited sense of religion, family values, and a profound awareness of traditional Chinese aesthetics. This amalgamation of characteristics played a pivotal role in transplanting Chinese culture onto American soil, shaping the cultural identity of Chinatown [4].

The evolution of Chinatown's architectural style is a nuanced blend of the inheritance and evolution of Chinese culture in the process of global dissemination. The unique style of this urban enclave has evolved in tandem with historical processes, reflecting both traditional Chinese

architectural influences and the impact of modern Western architectural styles. The significance of studying this evolution lies in unraveling the layers of cultural and historical significance embedded in the physical fabric of the neighborhood.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a study on the characteristics and formation reasons of the architectural style of present-day Chinatown in San Francisco. This study delves into the motivations driving the evolution of Chinatown's architectural style through a comprehensive field analysis within San Francisco's Chinatown. The analytical approach involves organizing and scrutinizing domestic and foreign historical literature on the history and humanities of Chinatown to support arguments, conducting detailed comparisons between historical and contemporary architectural photographs of this district, and contrasting them with the urban layout and developmental context of San Francisco. By examining elements such as urban layout, architectural style, architectural detail decorations, and tracing their cultural and historical origins, the author seeks to elucidate how San Francisco's Chinatown has undergone transformation under the dual influences of traditional Chinese architectural styles and modern Western architectural paradigms. In doing so, the study endeavors to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between cultural heritage and urban development in this iconic enclave.

2 Changes in Chinatown at the Urban Scale

Today, the core area of Chinatown is located in the northeastern part of downtown San Francisco, occupying about thirty city blocks from Broadway in the north to Powell st in the west, Montgomery st in the east, and Bush st in the south. In San Francisco's "narrow and dense" square road layout, Chinatown's distinctive architectural forms set it apart from other neighborhoods. Architectural decoration is also a product of spiritual and material civilization, so the architectural style of San Francisco's Chinatown has traces of the architectural styles of Guangdong and Fujian [5]. The hustle and bustle of commercial activity and the crowded streets made the neighborhood look more vibrant, and the evolution of the urban landscape was related to both the changes in Chinese history and the political history of the United States.

2.1 From the initial scale to gradually expand

Along with the development of the westward movement in the United States in the nineteenth century, John Augustus Sutter discovered large quantities of gold in California, and the ensuing Gold Rush (1848-1855) brought a large influx of people to the state. This also brought the business-minded and adventurous southern population of the Late Ching Dynasty across the ocean to California in search of wealth [6]. The first Chinese to arrive in a foreign country relied on the continuation of the traditional Chinese way of life and relied on kinship ties to gradually form a Chinese living area along Grant Avenue. Recent scholars described the Chinatown at that time as "Chinatown's wooden buildings, many with riding floors, the top of the building adopts the ancient tower style" [7], and its architectural style still adopts the traditional wooden structure building. However, at this time, Chinatown was rejected by the mainstream white society because of its dirty and chaotic appearance, and was called a "tumor" of the city [8].

The Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 was a turning point in the transformation of Chinatown. The earthquake caused three days of fires that destroyed 28,000 homes in the city, and almost all of the wood-built Chinatown houses were destroyed in the fires. In the aftermath of the fires, the community was divided over whether or not to rebuild Chinatown in its original location. Many white citizens called for the relocation of the filthy Chinatown to the suburbs of San Francisco. Because of the aggressiveness of Japan after the Russo-Japanese War, the U.S. government realized the importance of improving relations with China to counterbalance Japan [9], coupled with the support of Chinese elites, Hong Kong consortiums, American churches and other organizations that argued for their support, Chinese churches were the first to be rebuilt on their old sites, which also laid the foundation for the reconstruction of Chinatown's old sites, thus forming the pattern and form of Chinatown that we see today. After the reconstruction, Chinatown was developed as a tourist attraction, and the buildings were designed by white architects. The new architectural style used a lot of symbols and language from the western aesthetic system to show the oriental culture, and the style of Chinatown neighborhoods converged with the western aesthetics.

In the mid-twentieth century, the gradual lifting of U.S. policy constraints on the Chinese led to the expansion of Chinatown's boundaries and influenced the spatial evolution of the surrounding neighborhood. After the end of World War II, the United States entered a phase of rapid growth, and

San Francisco saw a third wave of urban development. High-rise buildings rose in the city center, and the Chinatown neighborhood was marginalized to form a physical barrier by the forces generated by the urban revitalization process. Since 1943, when the United States repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished the Asian quota, San Francisco's Chinese population has risen significantly. It was recorded that "from 1940 to 1970, Chinatown's population grew at a rate of about 25 percent per decade" [10]. The area of Chinese settlement also expanded outward from the original boundaries of Chinatown, forming the spatial pattern of "Greater Chinatown". Today's Chinese neighborhoods [Figure 1] also include parts of Russia Hill, Nob Hill, and Polk Gulch, as well as "Little Italy," a tourist attraction on the northern beaches. These areas are more Chinese neighborhoods used more for residential than commercial purposes, and their architectural styles are not characterized by distinctive Chinese cultural symbols, making them less prominent than the core Chinatown area.



Fig. 1: Scope of Chinatown in San Francisco.

2.2 From racial enclaves to lively neighborhoods

As Chinatown began to take its form in the early nineteenth century, a pivotal historical artifact, the Official Map of San Francisco's "Chinatown" from 1885 [Fig. 2], serves as a visual testament to the intricate fabric of this community. The map delineates the spatial organization of Chinatown, spanning from Pacific Avenue to Sacramento Street, revealing a complex tapestry of land use. Predominantly inhabited by the Chinese, denoted by orange plots, the area housed a myriad of establishments, including stores, markets, clinics, garment factories, residences, and thirteen temples marked in red plots. Simultaneously, the map exposes the presence of less savory elements, with casinos (pink plots), opium dens (yellow plots), and brothels (blue and green plots) interspersed throughout Chinatown. This period marked Chinatown as a perceived "dangerous part of the city," underscored by tensions and conflicts within the enclave.

The landscape of Chinatown underwent transformative shifts with the advent of San Francisco's first zoning ordinance in 1921 and subsequent urban renewal initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s [11]. The seismic reconstruction following the earthquake further catalyzed change, redirecting the focus of Chinatown toward tourism. Gradually shedding its characterization as a racial enclave, Chinatown evolved into a prominent tourist destination, fostering economic development in the process [12]. A closer examination of the 2020 San Francisco Zoning Map for commercial land use in the core area of Chinatown [Fig. 3] reveals a distinct clustering of tourist-oriented

establishments, particularly along Grant Avenue. This spatial concentration includes souvenir retail stores and key tourist service facilities.

Noteworthy among these tourist-centric developments is the Chinatown Visitor Center, situated at the northwest corner of Dupont Avenue and California Street. This four-story edifice, adorned with distinctive Chinese architectural features, has emerged as a landmark within Chinatown. Its strategic location has spurred the outward spread of tourist service facilities, contributing to the redefinition of the neighborhood. Residential parcels, exemplified by Ping Yuan and China Center High School, are predominantly positioned in the west, north, and parts of the east. In contrast, community business parcels, such as the San Francisco Guang Hai Association and the Jinshan Overseas Chinese Cultural and Educational Center, concentrate in the eastern and northern fringes of Chinatown. This dynamic distribution shapes a Chinatown that orbits around tourism, underlining the profound impact of economic considerations on the evolving spatial structure of this iconic neighborhood.



Fig. 2: 1885 Chinatown Land Use Map.

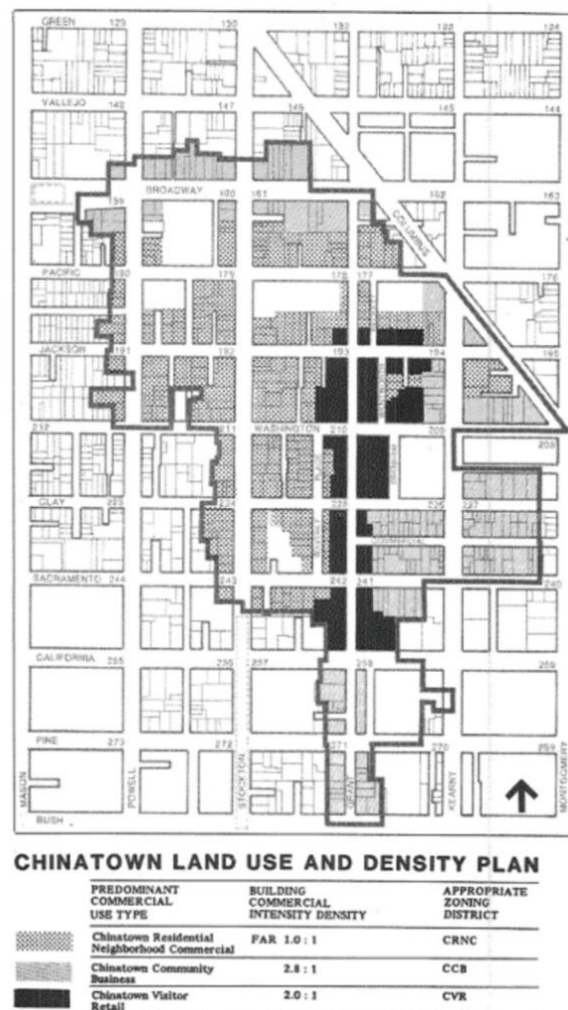


Fig. 3: 2020 Chinatown Zoning Map.

3 Evolution of Traditional Architectural Elements in Chinatown

3.1 Architectural Evolution during Earthquake Reconstruction and Cultural Influences

In the aftermath of the seismic upheaval during the earthquake reconstruction period, Chinese entrepreneur Look Tin Eli enlisted the expertise of architect T. Paterson Ross and engineer A. W. Berggren to spearhead the design of new edifices for San Francisco's Chinese community. Given the predominance of immigrants from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, the traditional Minnan architectural style, rooted in geographical, historical, and economic influences, became a hallmark in overseas Chinatowns. These structures, characterized by vermilion walls, curved ridges, and intricate carvings, were enthusiastically embraced by San Francisco residents,

thereby shaping the aesthetic standards of overseas Chinatowns. In Chinatown, the Minnan architectural style has undergone a gradual evolution from intricate complexity to a more streamlined simplicity.

Contemporary Chinatown buildings predominantly feature modern reinforced concrete structures, with representative Chinese architectural elements adorning their facades, serving as deliberate expressions of Chinese cultural identity. Typically ranging from three to four stories, these structures allocate the first and second floors for commercial purposes, while the upper floors are designated for residential use. While many of these buildings date back to the 20th century, some plots have undergone recent construction or renovation, attesting to the ongoing transformation of the neighborhood's urban architecture [13].

During the research process, distinct patterns in Chinatown's architectural aesthetics emerged. Notably, red brick facades are prevalent, and the prevalent street colors are predominantly white, yellow, and red. This stylistic choice in Chinatown is a nuanced response to the early twentieth-century American "city beautification movement" that favored white-based buildings [14]. In contrast, Chinatown diverges by incorporating red and yellow as decorative elements, infusing the neighborhood with a distinctly Chinese ambiance. Eaves adorn some houses, displaying a spectrum of red, green, and yellow hues. These color choices echo the traditional palette of Minnan architecture in Ming Dynasty, which includes red, brown, green, blue, black, white, and gold hues [15].

The vibrant color schemes in Chinatown emanate from the region's rich cultural and geographic heritage, drawing inspiration from the lush landscapes of Fujian. The hilly terrain, adorned with green mountains and red flowers, has informed the traditional architecture's meticulous attention to color and material texture. Red bricks paired with greenish-gray stone, red and black tiles, and vividly colored decorations underscore the visual richness of local buildings. In Chinatown, the prevalence of highly saturated yellow, green, and red decorations is pronounced, while the use of black and white is relatively subdued. This deliberate use of color creates a cohesive visual ambiance that not only reflects local aesthetics but also conveys a collective spiritual aspiration for auspiciousness and prosperity within the community.

3.2 the Bank of America building

The Bank of America building on Sacramento Street is one of the classic buildings in Chinatown [Fig. 4]. The corner sign is decorated with a six-sided lantern with the words "Bank of America" written in Chinese and English in traditional regular script on a red, yellow and green border. The business area on the first floor is decorated with eaves and arches above the windows, and retains the red brick walls and columns to indicate the wooden pillars in traditional old buildings. The eaves are mainly in green color with tiles, tiles, tiles and dripping shapes, and the lower part is decorated with arches made of stone. Stone is commonly used as a building material in traditional Minnan architecture. Since granite is abundant and strong in southern Fujian, local stone is often used as foundations, pillars, steps etc., which can stabilize the walls and at the same time resist wind and moisture, and can effectively cope with the weather such as typhoons and heavy rains. Some affluent homes are decorated with stone carvings made of green doo-doo stone. The main structure of the bank building in Chinatown is reinforced concrete, so the stone used here is only decorative.

The front pillars and doors of this building are decorated with gold dragons, and there are 60 dragon medallions on the window facades on both sides of the main entrance. The windows on the second and third floors have eaves that reflect Chinese culture. The topmost part of the building is decorated with a heavy eave outcropping roof structure, and the corner heads mimic the Chaozhou-Shantou region's inlaid porcelain molding, with the eaves shaped in high relief, but lacking the fine subject details of the inlaid porcelains [Fig. 5]. Southern Fujian region building decorative colors are also affected by the southern Fujian people bold and open-minded, adventurous character, the overall building commonly used red with white form, meaning prosperity and good luck. Bank of America building bright colors and complex cultural patterns decorative, and because it is located in Chinatown important road, come to visit a constant stream of tourists, the bank building is also treated as a major focus of Chinatown architecture.



Fig. 4: Bank of America Building.



Fig. 5: Traditional Chaoshan inlaid porcelain molding.

4 The Interpretation of Modernism in Chinatown

4.1 Influence of Modernism on Architectural Style

Compared to the early 1920s when Chinatown buildings were built with reference to traditional Chinese architectural styles [16], today's remodeling projects are more influenced by Western functionalist architectural styles. And this remodeling project includes renovation of old buildings and developing new construction that help preserve the historical character in Chinatown while ensuring modern standard to accommodate residential, commercial, or mixed-use purposes. The buildings are more functional and less ornamented. The buildings are larger than those in the core area, and the use of color is not limited to the traditional highly saturated red, yellow, and green color scheme, which also gives Chinatown a new look. Ping yuen center, Chinatown's first public housing project, consists of four buildings. Located on Pacific Avenue (the northern edge of Chinatown), the architecture here is taller and more modern than the buildings in the core of Chinatown. Built in 1951 for Central Screen Court and 1956 for East and West Screen Court, these three buildings are located on the south side of Pacific Avenue. All three buildings have the same exterior and were built as public housing, with each room connected by a linear balcony, and decorated on the outside by green, red, and grey Chinese style decorations, and roofs with classic Chinese eaves [Fig. 6]. Compared to the houses built earlier on Greenland Street, the color saturation of Ping Court houses is relatively low, making the overall look more modern without losing the Chinese cultural elements; North Ping Court [Fig.7] was renovated in 2016, with 32 floors in the "H" shaped building, and the architectural style is more influenced by the theories of Corbusier, with white walls with red, yellow and blue colors. White walls with red, yellow and blue accents and linear balconies facing the inner courtyard. Screen Court, a mid- to large-scale public housing project with 434 rooms in Chinatown, is developed and operated by the Chinatown CDC, which in addition to Screen Court has 36 properties in the San Francisco community, providing affordable housing for more than 4,500 low-income families, adults, and seniors.



Fig. 6: Ping Yuen Central.



Fig. 7: Ping Yuen North Central.

4.2 Chinese Decorations in Modern Chinatown Streets

As the largest Chinatown community outside of Asia, San Francisco's Chinatown is now more tourist-oriented, and the overall style of the neighborhood and street decorations have become one of the most important elements of Chinese culture. As the entrance to Chinatown, Dragon's Gate features a plaque inscribed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, "The World is for the Common Good", and the left and right pillars of the plaque each feature a dragon and the words "Loyalty, Piety, Benevolence and Love", "There are two stone lions in front of the arch. The two stone lions in front of the pagoda and the setting of the pagoda show the Chinese style image in the city interface. Passing through the most representative pagoda into Chinatown, the neon signs of small stores and restaurants form a strong visual reunion, reflecting the unique cultural imprint of the neighborhood. Language as a cultural carrier is also a window to reflect culture. Billboards in the neighborhood are usually bilingual in Chinese and English, and many of them use traditional brush fonts, which on the one hand serves to convey information, and on the other hand serves as a visual decoration, giving a sense of exoticism. Along the main roads such as Dupan Street and Qi Li Street, the streets are decorated with red lanterns meaning reunion and prosperity [Fig. 8]; the street lamps on both sides of the road are modeled after ancient Chinese buildings [Fig. 9], with the tops of the lamps decorated with red saving spires, and the lamp crowns held by golden dragon-style sculptures, and the bases are modeled after the pillars of the pillars. These small details of street decoration also enrich the Chinese flavor of the neighborhood.

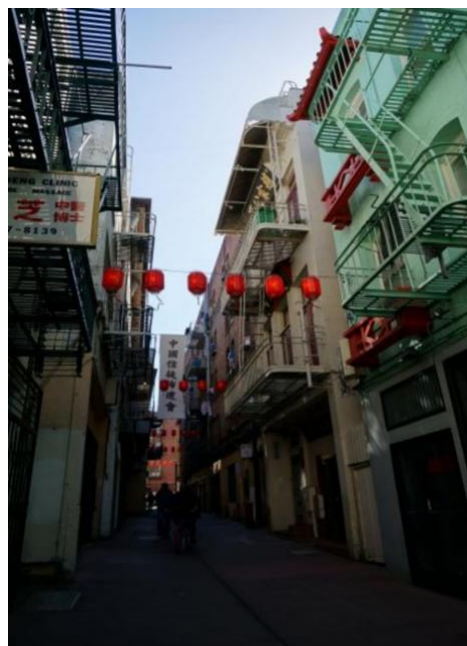


Fig. 8: Lantern decoration in Ross Alley.



Fig. 9: Streetlight decoration on Sacramento Street.

Chinatown employs artistic means to enrich the district with additional cultural elements. Utilizing wall murals to depict the history of San Francisco's Chinese community, the aim is to concretely portray this segment of memory. Dr. Sun Yat-sen held the inaugural meeting of the San Francisco League (formerly the "Junior Society", later reorganized as the San Francisco League) in Building 36 on New Luzon Lane during the 1911 Revolution, and called for revolution and fundraising here, and these milestones are now reflected in the wall paintings on the streets of Chinatown [17]. The city's history is now reflected in the wall art on the streets of Chinatown. [Fig. 10 and 11] These graffiti further enhance the Chinese cultural atmosphere in Chinatown. Some of the themes include Bruce Lee, Sun Yat-sen, Journey to the West, and other myths and legends, religious beliefs, and celebrities of the times, and these graffiti are more artistically created in the representation of Chinese culture in the eyes of the Westerners, and the painting techniques are more inclined to the Western aesthetic style. The use of bright colors makes the streets of Chinatown look more energetic and conveys Chinese culture through these themes with distinctive cultural symbols. Graffiti plays a positive role in creating a landscape atmosphere in urban public spaces, setting Chinatown apart from the cookie-cutter city streets, and the unique colors create a distinctive style and make Chinatown more recognizable.



Fig. 10: Chinatown Street Wall Painting.

5 Conclusion

Chinatown, initially established as a haven for early Chinese immigrants in the United States, stands as a living testament to the unfolding narrative of Chinese development in the country. Beyond its historical significance, Chinatown serves as a fertile ground nurturing the expansive tapestry of American culture. The evolution of architectural style in Chinatown involve in the following aspects:

1) As a cultural bastion, the architectural evolution within Chinatown mirrors the shifts in societal attitudes—from exclusionary practices to a more inclusive embrace of Chinese culture within the broader American mosaic. The distinctive architectural style of Chinatown has seamlessly woven itself into the vibrant urban fabric of San Francisco.

2) Chinatown has undergone a remarkable transformation as China has ascended in global stature in the 21st century. The perception of Chinatown has undergone a paradigm shift, prompting a concerted effort to renovate its stylistic elements, drawing significant societal attention.

3) Noteworthy initiatives such as the Chinese Association Center, the YWCA, the Chinatown Community Improvement Resource Center, the Chinatown Traffic Study and Improvement Project, and the Orange Merchants Association have emerged, directing their focus towards addressing the construction of public housing projects for low-income groups within the Chinatown neighborhood.

These endeavors reflect a broader social consciousness and proactive engagement with the rejuvenation of Chinatown. Far from losing its allure in the modern Western world, the revitalization efforts have rendered Chinatown even more attractive. Its bustling, clean, and orderly environment has not only enhanced the quality of life for its residents but has also played a pivotal role in reshaping the public image of overseas Chinese. From its origins as a "racial enclave" marked by disorder, Chinatown has gracefully metamorphosed into a dynamic hub for the dissemination and celebration of Chinese culture. As an integral part of the American cultural landscape, Chinatown continues to evolve, embodying the resilience and adaptability of a community that has successfully integrated itself into the ever-changing narrative of the United States.

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