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Reconstruction and Localization of Ethnic Culture: The case of Yokohama Chinatown as a tourist spot

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1. Introduction

There are Chinatowns all over the world, wherever there are Chinese migrants. Most Chinatowns are recognized as ethnic enclaves where Chinese people live and work (Wang 1982; Zhou 1992). However, Yokohama Chinatown is rather famous as a tourist spot. Like Tokyo Disney Land, more than 20 million people visit annually. 90 percent of its visitors are non-Chinese (mainly Japanese) who visit the town as tourists.

However, Yokohama Chinatown was not always so famous as a tourist spot. The formation of Chinatown can be dated back to 1849 when Japan opened the ports and neighboring towns to foreigners. Chinese lived closely together and started small shops, temples, schools etc. The town gradually became like a Chinese enclave. After WWII until the 1980's, it was rather known as a place where U.S. sailors spent shore leave at local bars. The image of Chinatown at that time was of a rather dark, dirty and dangerous place, far from suitable for tourists or family outings.

In the early 1980's, in order to end this poor image, the Yokohama Chinatown Development Association decided to revitalize the town. They reconstructed public aspects of traditional Chinese culture, such as building temples and gates, and they also organized Chinese festivals based on the lunar calendar. The more Yokohama Chinatown reconstructed traditional Chinese culture, the more tourists came to visit, because they were attracted by the exoticism of an ethnic culture. The members of the Association and the people of Yokohama Chinatown are aware of the localization of their ethnic culture, and that is why Yokohama Chinatown has been successful in becoming a famous tourist spot in Japan.

2. Chinatown in Japan

It is said that as surely as water flows downhill, one will encounter Chinese people everywhere in the world. Over 30 million Chinese migrants are spread all over the globe. Many of them start up a small Chinese restaurant, and sooner or later, their family and kinsfolk migrate and form a community known as Chinatown (Pan 1999). Somehow, Chinatown has become a global phenomenon, and most big cities contain a small "China" of their own. Unlike McDonald's (Watson 1997), however, we can not neglect the glocalization of Chinatown,

as its food and festivals have certain impacts and attract many people.

Japan, which can boast of its historic ties to China, has several sizable communities of Chinese, including the Chinatown in Kobe, another in Nagasaki, and the most famous in Yokohama. With its over 600 shops, 200 restaurants and numerous grocery stores, Yokohama's Chinatown has become one of the most popular tourist spots for the Japanese, who rank it along with Tokyo Disneyland as one of their "must visit" sites. Yokohama Chinatown is now known more as "the theme park of Chinese cuisine" rather than an ethnic enclave.

The popular media in Japan, led by television, frequently cover the goings on in Chinatown, especially its food and cultural events. It is fun and exotic for Japanese to take in the special atmosphere of Chinatown's narrow streets and distinctive architecture. Young people like to take their dates there, and families visit at weekends, considering the area both "yummy" (*oishii*) and "cool" (*omoshiroi*).

Amid all the hoopla, Yokohama Chinatown remains a place where many Chinese, and Japanese of Chinese descent, live and work and shop. There are two full time Chinese schools from kindergarten through high school. It is a community that thrives apart from the tourist inflows. Much of the recent growth in the area has been because of the Yokohama Chinatown Development Association (Yokohama Chukagai hat'tenkai kyodo kumiai), an organization that has shown how the ties that bind the community together are stronger than the political differences in China that sometimes pull it apart.

The Development Association seeks for mutual prosperity by emphasizing economic and cultural reconstruction. Ethnic culture is revitalized and capitalized which ends up attracting more and more tourists to visit the town.

3. Chinatown as the Hub of Japan and the West

Firstly, something of the history of the place. The Chinatown in Yokohama dates back 150 years, to the days in 1858 when Japan first opened port cities to residence by foreign nationals. The Edo Shogunate concluded the United States-Japan Treaty of Amity and Commerce, agreeing to open its ports and markets, which had long been closed. With the treaty, Japan opened the ports of Hakodate, Yokohama (Kanagawa), Nagasaki, Kobe (Hyogo) and Niigata for trading and residence.

Along with the Westerners who flocked to Yokohama came Chinese middlemen and interpreters. Many of the first Chinese arrived as servants brought in by their Western employers who had already worked in Chinese ports in Hong Kong and Guangdong. Westerners and Japanese could not communicate with each other and they needed Chinese middlemen who could communicate with Japanese by writing Chinese characters. There was no treaty between China and Japan at the time, so the Chinese could not officially enter Japan and were technically illegal. However, the Chinese were overlooked by the Japanese government because of the important role they played. Once the treaty of friendship between the Great Qing Dynasty of China and Japan was signed in 1871, many more Chinese moved to Yokohama.

Foreigners were only allowed to reside in an area designated by the Japanese authorities

as the Foreigners' Residence Area (*Gaikokujin kyoryuchi*), located in the region of present-day Yamashitacho. Even though land had been reclaimed from the sea there in 1861, the foreigners' section was still a swampy place, beset by mosquitoes and foul smells, not well suited for human habitation. As soon as they could the British, French and American businessmen built their trading houses and then their residences a bit more inland, in the Honcho area, leaving the newly arriving Chinese to take over the less inhabitable areas vacated by the Westerners (Nishikawa and Ito 2002: 81-83).

Ever resourceful and energetic, the newly arrived Chinese soon began building their own houses and starting small businesses. They established a theatre for Chinese opera and a shrine to the popular deity *Guandi*. In many ways that patch of Japan on the edge of downtown Yokohama began to look like a small Chinese city (Ito 1991). Looking at the streets and shops in the pictures of the Chinese streets in Yokohama in the early 20th century, one can see piano makers, barbers, toilet paper shops etc, in fact many of those businesses needed for the life of Westerners.

The modernization and civilization of Japan spread with the inflow of Westerners, but much was conveyed by Chinese. Therefore, it is important to point out that the Chinatown of those early years, rather than being merely a Chinese enclave, had an important function as the hub connecting Japan and the West.

4. Difficulties both Natural and Man-Made

The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 destroyed the Yokohama Chinatown. For several decades following the earthquake many Chinese residents moved back and forth between their ancestral homes in China and their adopted community in Japan, which was struggling to rebuild itself and to recover from the earthquake. Then in the massive bombings of Japan's eastern seaboard during World War II, Yokohama Chinatown, along with the nearby city of Yokohama, was again laid waste.

After the end of World War II greater numbers of Chinese began arriving in Yokohama with the intention of settling permanently and taking up new lives there. The earliest settlers had been laborers and merchants who had come directly from China to Japan, and many of their families already had strong ties in the community. The newer post-war group of Chinese tended to be businessmen, often with good educations, who had fled from the Communist victory on the mainland to Hong Kong or to Taiwan. They now arrived in Yokohama Chinatown in greater numbers, bringing with them their anti-Communist views. They tended to support the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalist government on Taiwan and were opposed to the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland. The stage was set for divisive political battles caused by the differing political outlooks of the two groups.

Before long the two groups were not on political speaking terms. Each formed their own Overseas Chinese Association and other civic groups, each supported their own Chinese school in the community. They were all Chinese, trying to make their homes in Japan, but they remained separated by mutual suspicion and differing political positions influenced by homeland. There was no division made by dialect such as Cantonese or Mandarin, but rather by political ideology.

A strained atmosphere swept Chinatown during the post-war years, with two distinct political viewpoints vying for legitimacy. Political animosity sometimes degenerated into physical confrontation. Bloodshed occurred when both sides violently disagreed on what version of modern Chinese history to teach in their community schools or how to use school facilities, which were in theory owned by the entire community. The 1960's and 1970's, when China itself was swept by the extreme rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, were politically turbulent times for the residents of Yokohama's Chinatown who felt forced to take political stands on issues that did not seem to directly affect their community.

5. Diversity and Localization are the Rule in Yokohama Chinatown

Happily for all concerned, the group that was able to emerge victorious was the Yokohama Chinatown Development Association. It was set up in 1956 as a middle-of-the-road, politically neutral organization dedicated to fostering economic development in the Chinese community. Chinatown may have been a colorful place after the war, but its standard of living was still lower than the surrounding Japanese communities and its political divisions made it difficult for the community to develop economically. In the eyes of many Japanese citizens living nearby, it was a section filled with dirty streets and peopled by shopkeepers who were surly and gave poor service. The Development Association realized that if economic improvement was to be brought to the area, clearly Chinatown needed to change its image.

Efforts to improve conditions in Chinatown really took off in 1971. The Chinatown Development Association registered itself under the Japanese government's Small and Medium-scale Enterprise Cooperation Law, and developed a plan that called for an economic revitalization of the area. Under the plan Japanese and Western businesses were welcomed into Chinatown and new Chinese-run businesses were encouraged. Many of the newer residents from Hong Kong or Taiwan were savvy businessmen with good educations who lent their expertise to the plan. The Development Association was also aided by the decreasing political tensions that predominated from the 1980's on.

Profiles of the first three presidents of the Development Association reveal much about how the Association itself, and the Chinatown community as well, evolved over the years. The first president was a Japanese, Takahashi Teisuke, who owned a small butcher shop in Chinatown. Although he was a Japanese, he had close ties to the Yokohama City Government and was able to elicit cooperation from Yokohama city officials for Chinatown's development plans. The Yokohama Municipal Government helped to promote tourism into the community, especially by promoting some of Chinatown's unique community festivals.

The second president was Mr. Lin Qingwen, a leader in the local Taiwanese Association who was on the board of the Yokohama Overseas Chinese Bank. He was proud of his Taiwanese roots and was an astute businessman. The third and current president is Hayashi Kensei, a second generation ethnic Chinese who uses a Japanese name because he has obtained Japanese citizenship. (Japanese law formerly required that all Japanese citizens adopt a Japanese name.) He was educated in English. He is a Cantonese and owns one of Chinatown's largest restaurants, the *Manchinro*. He is in many ways a symbol of the new Chinatown; a multi-cultural individual completely at home in Japan yet proud of his Chinese

heritage. He is leading the effort to have Yokohama's Chinatown reach out to the international community.

Unlike many Chinatowns, where the community tries to limit itself to members or descendants of the same clan, hometown or Chinese merchant association, the Yokohama Chinatown community has always accepted everyone living or doing business in the area. Thus from its earliest days Japanese as well as Chinese were able to play active roles in the life of the community through official community organizations. From its very beginning, Japanese and Chinese enjoyed equal status as members of the Development Association.

6. Community Building and Reconstruction of the Ethnic Culture

One of the most visible and celebrated projects of the Development Association has been the construction of prominent gates along the roads leading into the Chinatown area of Yokohama. The city of Yokohama gave a boost to the building of gates in the 1950's, when the city mayor was looking for ways to rebuild from the destruction of wartime bombing. Chinatown was one of the areas designated for redevelopment, and the hope was that it would become a shopping area drawing in both foreign and domestic visitors.

In 1955 the first gate, with the word "Chinatown" (Chukagai) carved on it, was constructed. The gate was in the architectural style known as a memorial arch (*pailou*) similar to those that had once been found in many mainland Chinese cities. An elaborate tiled roof supported by a few tall pillars is set across a busy road, adding a sense of orderliness and grace to the bustling thoroughfare.

So distinctive and popular was the first arch that it was rebuilt in 1989. Recently, the Development Association collected donations and built ten more new gates surrounding Chinatown. The arches were designed by Nakayama Gen, a third generation ethnic Chinese who has also taken Japanese citizenship. Compared with the former arch which basically consists of green and red tiled pillars, these new arches are more various and each has several storeys. In order to design these arches Nakayama studied Chinese philosophy and took hints from "*feng-shui*." He chose the color and the name of each arch based on "*feng-shui*", and also carved a guardian fabulous animal on them. This successfully added an even more traditional Chinese atmosphere to the town.

The stately gates are only the most obvious symbol of Chinatown's resurgence. Other projects being carried out by the Development Association are the installation of multilingual directional signs and information boards at street corners, the holding of regular community events and festivals, conducting surveys of visitors to the area, and running seminars on business development. Other results not so readily noticed by casual visitors are more frequent trash collections, the gradual move toward replacing overhead telephone wires by underground cables, and plans to build a cultural center.

7. How a Popular Deity United the Community

In spite of the many positive accomplishments in uniting their community, residents of Chinatown have had to face the fact that old divisions die hard and lingering differences



Picture 1 Former *Guandimiao* destroyed by fire in 1986.

take effort, and time, to overcome. The issue surfaced in 1986 when the shrine dedicated to the popular deity *Guandi* (*Guandimiao*) was destroyed by fire.

In his human life *Guandi* was a loyal general *Guan Yu* (died in 219) whose exploits have been recounted for hundreds of years in popular histories. Because he never betrayed a trust, he came to represent steadfastness and loyalty; because of his fearlessness in battle, he came to represent bravery; and he came to represent a love of learning because he insisted on reading a book of history even while being treated for a painful wound. He is said to be able to bring wealth to businesses and success to students, and many businesses in Chinatowns all over the world have a small altar dedicated to *Guandi* in their shops.

The 1986 fire at the *Guandimiao* was only the most recent of a series of catastrophes to befall the venerated site. The first *Guandimiao* in Yokohama was built in 1887, but was destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. A second Shrine was destroyed in the massive bombings of World War II. It was the third Shrine, dedicated in 1946 just after the war, which was consumed by fire on New Years Day 1986. A determination to rebuild the Shrine was nearly universal among the residents of Chinatown, although at first lingering political factionalism threatened to scuttle the project.

The first steps toward rebuilding were taken by the pro-Taiwan Overseas Chinese Association, but they were blocked by the pro-PRC Overseas Chinese Association which had control over four proposed sites for the new structure and did not want to cooperate with the pro-Taiwan group. The reason was a political one, since the pro-PRC group felt that they represented the true China, while Taiwan was only a renegade province. Both sides were still engaged in legal battles because of their disagreement over issues involving the Chinese community schools. The project was put on hold for a year while the two sides bickered.

Reconstruction efforts finally got underway again when it was proposed that the shrine site be moved away from the pro-Taiwan school where it had been located, and reconstructed at a location more accessible to the general public. The new compromise also said that despite political differences, the majority of Chinatown citizens wanted to proceed with rebuilding, and the mutually agreed goal was to construct a Shrine that would bring pride to future generations of Chinatown residents.

The new *Guandimiao* was dedicated in 1990. Its construction had cost 450 million yen, a sum gathered through contributions from other Chinese communities in Japan and from many Japanese citizens. In design the Shrine complex adopted features from the popular *Longshan* Temple in Taipei, such as the ornately carved pillars that add so much color to the complex, with other features reminiscent of the Forbidden City in *Beijing*, such as the Forbidden City's stately steps punctuated by a ramp in the middle where dragons are depicted. Drawing many visitors annually, the proud residents of Chinatown say the festivities surrounding *Guandi's* birthday, celebrated each August, now attract large numbers of Japanese visitors, international tourists and ethnic Chinese alike.



Picture 2 *Guandimiao* became a famous tourist spot.

8. Festivals Revive the Community

As well as traditional Chinese architecture, much of the resurgence of the Yokohama Chinatown has been because of the reconstruction of traditional festivals and cultural events which add excitement and liveliness to the town. The festival for *Guandi's* birthday is one of them.

Since the mid 1980's, the Development Association has planned and organized many events based on Chinese tradition. Yokohama started a Chinese New Year festival in 1986. It is held according to the lunar calendar and attracts many tourists to visit the town in the cold winter time, usually a slack season. Lion and Dragon dancers parade down the streets amid the noise of popping firecrackers. Many local people dress in traditional Chinese costume. Even tourist associations from nearby Kanagawa Prefecture and next-door Yokohama contribute funds to the event.

In 1995, just before the Yokohama Chinese New Year festivities were scheduled to take place, the southern Kansai region of Japan's main island of Honshu was hit by a massive earthquake. This was the *Hanshin* Earthquake of January 1995. Much of the city of Kobe was devastated, especially the area of Kobe's Chinatown. Some leaders of the Yokohama Chinatown community thought celebrations in Yokohama should be cancelled as a sign of respect for their compatriots in Kobe still struggling to crawl out from under the rubble of the earthquake. But remembering how the Chinese community in Kobe had contributed to the rebuilding of the Yokohama Chinatown after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, community leaders in Yokohama decided to proceed with the New Year celebrations, turning them into an event to collect money to help Kobe rebuild. Besides contributions in kind, the Yokohama Chinatown sent a very large donation to Kobe's Chinatown.

Recently, the Lantern Festival, the Dragon Race Festival, the Mazu Festival, the mid-autumn Festival etc. have become famous cultural events of Chinatown. The revitalization of ethnic culture surely pulls many tourists to the town. Not only the synergy of cultural events and tourism, this also recalls Chineseness to many of Chinese descent who participate in these activities.

9. Localization of Ethnic Food Culture

Today, most people come to Chinatown to eat Chinese food and enjoy the exotic atmosphere. This is natural because the town is wall-to-wall Chinese restaurants and food stands selling steaming meat buns (*nikuman*) and chestnuts from Tianjin. However, it is not so long ago that Chinatown became a touristic place famed as "the theme park of Chinese cuisine".

I myself was born and raised in Yokohama Chinatown. I still remember that there were many shops such as drug stores, book stores, tailor's shops etc. which were closer to the needs of the people who lived in the town. There were also Japanese restaurants which provided Soba and Sushi. No matter that it was called Chinatown, half of the 6,000 people who lived there were Japanese or Korean. There was even a narrow street called "Korean market" where local people could always buy fresh *kimuchi* (Korean pickles) and other Korean food as well.

Until the 1980's, before Chinatown strengthened its image as a tourist spot, there was a very clear division of labor in the town. The Chinese mainly ran Chinese restaurants. On the other side, the Japanese dealt with perishable foods, liquor, tableware etc. and provided them to the local Chinese restaurants.

However, after the 1980's, a "gourmet boom" occurred along with the bubble economy in Japan. The popular media such as travel journals and television programs often covered

the food in Yokohama Chinatown. As the image of “the theme park of Chinese cuisine” grew, more and more Japanese-owned shops changed their business and started to come out with Chinese style marketing. For example, the butcher shop became a famous “*Nikuman*” shop and a fresh sea food shop became a Chinese sea food restaurant and so on.

Ethnic culture is taken up and capitalized on even by non-Chinese people who live and work in the town. This is natural because it is much more profitable for them to do business with tourists rather than just sell their merchandise to shop owners in Chinatown. In recent decades, many Japanese who live in Chinatown have started to utilize the brand image of Chinatown, and also identified themselves as members of Chinatown. It is very interesting to observe that the more non-Chinese joined in the town, the more the image of “Chinese theme park” deepened. The localization of ethnic Chinese food culture was in some way led by the Japanese media and also supported by local Japanese residents.

10. Conclusion

These days the residents of Yokohama’s Chinatown are less divided by China-related political issues than at any time during the past fifty years. Both the pro-Taiwan and the pro-PRC groups can subsume their political differences in order to deal with the economic depression that continues to linger in Japan. Their goal is to continue pulling in tourists and visitors to enjoy the shopping and cuisine of Chinatown.

Starting from the reconstruction of the *Guandimiao* as well as the revitalization of ethnic cultural festivals and the localization of ethnic food culture has inspired the town with a new life as a tourist spot. At the same time, the revival of cultural events with the development of the town is recalling Chineseness to many of those of Chinese descent. Also, many non-Chinese local residents are willing to join in the Chinatown Development Association and participate in Chinese cultural events.

The residents of Yokohama Chinatown are reshaping their local identity to define it as not being based on a single nation. They rather see themselves as a transnational and multicultural community not confined by any particular nation or by a particular set of politics (Anderson 1991). They practise just what Aihwa Ong called Flexible Citizenship (Ong 1999). Increasingly, they are reaching out to other like-minded individuals beyond the borders of Yokohama’s Chinatown. This kind of “glocalized” mentality is something that led the town to become today’s famous tourist spot.

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