

**CAN THE ARTS COMBAT THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF GENTRIFICATION?:
THE PAO ARTS CENTER IN BOSTON'S CHINATOWN**

(Working Paper)

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Abstract

The Pao Arts Center is a two-year old cultural institution in Boston's Chinatown. It was founded on the assumption that the Chinatown community has offered social and health benefits to Asian- American and Asian immigrant residents in the Boston area due to its community cohesion. Chinatown faces rapid and powerful gentrification that disrupts community cohesion and could, in turn, cause harmful social outcomes. However, the arts can strengthen people's connection to their community, thus mitigating the damage done by gentrification.

In this study, a highly interdisciplinary team of social and health scientists, humanities scholars, and community residents observed and analyzed art performances and collected data from artists and audiences, community members, and key informants to generate a methodologically innovative case study. The resulting narrative largely confirms the assumptions on which the Pao Arts Center was founded and lends support to the thesis that The Center builds community cohesion, although the study also identifies nuances and complexities. The impact of this new Center on the whole community remains to be seen.

Background: The Community Benefits of the Arts

The Pao Arts Center opened in 2017 in Boston's Chinatown. According to its website, the Center "brings together community members across generations to reclaim a critical piece of Chinatown history and to create healthy families and vibrant communities." It offers performances, exhibitions, educational activities, and events in a new, custom-built facility.

This study, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts investigates the impact of the Center on Chinatown's cohesion as a community. The neighborhood's cohesion is threatened by rapid economic and demographic change, which many (but not all) residents would label "gentrification." This is a case study of the potential of arts to combat the negative effects of gentrification.

Previous research suggests that the arts can enhance civic life, which itself is an important ingredient to successful and resilient communities. The arts can bring various interests together, help create understanding across difference, and help create a stronger sense of community identity (Matarasso, 1996; Matarasso, 1997; Williams, 1997; Jones, 1988; Matarasso, 1998; Kay and Watt, 2000; Lowe, 2000; Newman et al., 2003; Delconte, 2013). Community arts particularly help create contexts where individuals can build a strong sense of connection to others as well as develop their own ability to act (Carrington, 2010; Delconte, 2013). These centers can create unique public spaces where both the individual and the collective grow and thrive (Grodach, 2010; Carr & Sevron, 2009; Delconte, 2013).

For example, in an exploration of the role that the arts played in civic and social participation in Western Australia, McHenry (2011) found that the arts provided opportunities for social interaction, built a sense of place and community identity, created context for the understanding of differences, and built resilience to inequality. The arts can also help residents grow and see value in their own communities (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010; Delconte, 2013). By bringing together a variety of interests and talents, arts centers provide a space to help individuals realize new skills and capacities, including the ability to create and make (Grodach, 2010, 2011; Delconte, 2013). They also might focus on assisting local artists, a particular town or county, or a specific ethnic group (Grodach, 2010; Kay, 2000; Newman, Curtis & Stephens, 2003; Matarasso, 2007; Loukaitou-Sideris & Grodach, 2004; Delconte, 2013). Finally, community-based arts centers create opportunities for participation which has been linked to positive individual outcomes such as better health and improved well-being (Bush & Baum, 2001; Torjman, 2004).

"Creative placemaking" emphasizes artistic and cultural diversity, activate cross-sector partnering, and strategically attends to revitalizing local economies and social and environmental capital via arts and culture (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Placemaking refers to a collaborative process by which people shape their community public realm to maximize shared value. Placemaking capitalizes on assets in local communities with an intention of promoting public health and happiness. The use of arts and culture in placemaking is a strategy to shape the physical and social change and improve community well-being.

The potential of the arts to sustain and strengthen community fabric is particularly relevant in Boston's Chinatown. This neighborhood exemplifies the rapid demographic changes going on in many cities today. These changes can be seen in the rise of luxury commercial and residential development as well as the closing of older businesses, which are being replaced by new and "hip" places. Although individuals draw different conclusions about whether the changes are detrimental, there is no disagreement that the content and character of the neighborhood is changing. Social services are being forced to open satellite offices in the outlying, newer, suburban Chinatowns, such as Malden and Quincy. New housing is being built in modern, contemporary architecture.



The Asian population of the neighborhood has declined, the median income of Whites in the neighborhood has more than doubled, but the percentage of Asian households living in poverty has increased (Li, Leong, Vitiello & Acoca, 2013). These could be seen as signs of gentrification.

In some respects, the Pao Arts Center reflects the broader change. A new "multi-functional arts space with a performance theater, an art gallery, classrooms, an artist-in residence studio, and other public meeting space[s]," it has been created within a very large, multipurpose new building that includes affordable housing along with expensive apartments (which

have a separate entrance). The building reflects the shift toward more expensive, modernist, large-scale development in Chinatown (Sacchetti, 2015).

About the Pao Arts Center

The Pao Arts Center is a two-year old cultural institution. It was developed in partnership between the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), Bunker Hill Community College, and the Asian Community Development Corporation (ACDC). ACDC was the nonprofit developer of the building. Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), a second nonprofit, leases space for the Pao Art Center.

Overall, BCNC offers programs to about 8,000 individuals and is committed to retaining the cultural heritage of the neighborhood and combating dislocation, isolation, and conflict.

Given rapid changes in Chinatown due to luxury development and displacement, the Center was developed with the following premises in mind:

1. Chinatown has been a *community* that has offered social and health benefits to Asian-American and Asian immigrant residents due to its community cohesion, which could also be conceptualized as social capital or as a cultural resource.
2. Gentrification disrupts community cohesion, which causes harmful social outcomes (apart from any other outcomes, positive or negative, that gentrification may have). *But ...* The arts can strengthen community connections, thus mitigating the damage done by gentrification.

The land on which the Pao Arts Center is built has significance to many in the Chinatown community. The land was originally taken away from Chinatown during urban renewal in the 1950s when Highway 93 and the Massachusetts Turnpike were being built. In the 1990s, during the era of the “Big Dig” the community fought to reclaim the land and it was successful.

Methodology

In this study, we sought to understand whether the community shares these assumptions and whether community-members see the potential of the arts and the Pao Arts Center to improve the health of Chinatown. We defined “the community” broadly since Chinatown is meaningful to many people who do not reside there.

The research team approached these questions using a community engaged research approach. Community engaged research is a strategy that involves the community as partners in the research process. Community members are involved in the development of the research questions, the collection and analysis of data, and the dissemination of results.

The research team included Cynthia Woo (Pao Arts Center), Virginia Rall Chomitz (Tufts Department of Public Health and Community Medicine), Carolyn Rubin (Public Health and Community Medicine), Susan Koch-Weser (Public Health and Community Medicine), Annie Chin-Louie (Tufts Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute), Noe Montez (Tufts Department of Drama & Dance), Yizhou Huang (Drama and Dance), Yang He (Tufts Department of Public Health and Community Medicine), Roshan Patel (Tufts Department of Public Health and Community Medicine), Ju Ying Hung (Tufts Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning) and Joyce Chen and Kaiyan Jew (community researchers). Representing Tufts’ Tisch College of Civic Life, Peter Levine was the Principal Investigator. This document is written by Chomitz, Rubin, Levine and Woo with considerably assistance from Chin-Louie.

The team collected survey data from audiences, interviews with community members (defined broadly, since not everyone who identifies with Chinatown currently resides there), surveys of community-members, interviews with artists and other Art Center stakeholders, surveys of audiences, and expert analysis of artistic events at the Pao Arts Center, which ranged from Cantonese Opera performances to spoken word poetry events and readings. The community field researchers conducted data collection (interviews and observations) in Chinese with residents and business owners. All interview protocols and survey instruments were approved by the Tufts IRB. Study documents were translated into Chinese and back-translated for verification.

For the key stakeholder, artist, resident, and business owner interviews, we utilized purposeful and convenience sampling strategies. We sampled key stakeholders across Chinatown, reaching out to individuals who represented a variety of perspectives across the neighborhood. We talked to individuals who worked for art and culture, community development, and health care institutions. Because one of our community field researchers was a resident herself, we utilized her contacts and knowledge of the community to reach out to residents and local business owners.

The online community survey was assembled in Qualtrics based on questions developed by the research team addressing the respondents' relationship to Chinatown, arts and creativity, and the Pao Arts Center. Additional questions were modified from existing instruments on neighborhood cohesion, health, and flourishing. The questionnaires were sent to email lists of the Pao Arts user community and the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC) social services user community. Both lists include clients/community members who reside in and out of Chinatown, and have connections to the Pao Arts Center and/or receive services through BCNC. BCNC serves clients who live in Chinatown and/or are of Chinese/Asian heritage.

This preliminary report is based on 24 interviews (12 with key stakeholders, including representatives from community nonprofits, businesses, city official, school, and health care and artists; and 12 with community residents, including old timers, new immigrants, youth, Pao Arts Center users, and businesses) and survey and observations at 17 events at the Pao Arts Center. The interview data has been rigorously coded and classified. 102 community members responded to the on-line survey; however, only 78 respondents completed the entire survey. Thus, the results are based on the number of respondents who answered each question, which may vary from question to question. Frequencies were stratified by the respondents' self-reported resident status (Chinatown versus non-Chinatown residence). This report gives a flavor of what the research team has learned and draws on the team's reflections and deliberations.

Preliminary Findings

What does Chinatown mean to people?

First, interviewees frequently describe Chinatown as a “gateway” or a “cultural hub.” As one person said, “Its greatest asset is itself.” Collectively, the stakeholders point to the role of Chinatown as an ecosystem for the local Chinese American and broader Asian American communities, an ecosystem that is not always apparent to the outside eye, with certain cultural norms going “unsaid or unknown.” One community leader observed that it is “complicated to describe Chinatown to somebody that’s not familiar with Chinatown.” She went out to describe that Chinatown residents “rely on close services, like hospitals, translation, and restaurant pickup.” This leader went on to say that this proximity is important for many of the elderly immigrants, noting that some of these residents, because of language barriers, have trouble navigating the public transportation system in Boston. This is also an ecosystem sustained by relationships and the sense of mutual support is palpable in the community. One interviewee commented on the role of small businesses:

They have a stake in this community. They’re a mom-and-pop store. Their kids are going to local schools or do local things and they want local people to shop. They want all local people to come down.

This ecosystem is an important resource for the immigrant community. A Chinese immigrant who came to the U.S. three years ago affirmed Chinatown’s importance and its unique role in Boston:

I don’t know any places other than Chinatown. I came to the USA three years ago. My whole family lives here. I think Chinatown give a big help to new immigrants. There are the convenient transportation and so many activities in Chinatown for children.

Another resident said, “Chinatown is important to me. Chinatown is center of Chinese people. For the new immigrants who don’t know English, Chinatown is so important.” An Asian artist said, “I like Chinatown because there are lots of activities and Chinese culture.”

Chinatown, one interviewee observed, is the “heart of the mainly working class community, connected by Orange and Red lines [of the Boston subway system] to Malden and Quincy” [suburban communities with substantial Asian populations]. For this extended community, Chinatown can serve as a place of a place of employment, a place of consumption of goods, a place to get services. Many Chinese immigrant families move out of Chinatown in search for more space for their multigenerational families. Yet, many come back for their core services, such as groceries, seeking medical care at South Cove Community Health Center, getting their prescriptions filled at Tai Tung Pharmacy. In essence, people come back to Chinatown in order to be “connected to their roots” and because they feel that they will be “treated well” there. Echoing the sense of familiarity and comfort, one artist remarked, “Chinatown is like a parent’s home.”

It can be a central gathering place for the broader Asian American community. One interviewee shared her observation that other Asian restaurants have opened up in the neighborhood. An interviewee who is Asian, but not Chinese, and works in Chinatown noted her sense of comfort with the neighborhood.

Even when I don't speak the Chinese language. I can walk around and people recognize me or say hi to me or help me out...It's important for me for the sense of belonging in a community, being a member of social networks in that way.

One Asian (non-Chinese) artist talked about how when he first came to Chinatown, he sought it out because he said, "You know, I'm with other Asian people." He also talked about how art helps to create a broader community.

Even though I'm not Chinese or Chinese American, I was able to share parts of me. Also for the non-Asians who came, actually broadened the whole aspect of that, too.

Community leaders, service providers and residents alike point to the feeling of "mutual support in Chinatown." Chinatown has been a cohesive community, at least for some residents. Community members who were interviewed for this project reported feeling "warm" about Chinatown, being able to find friends there who are "from my hometown in China," and having access to institutions and programs that served their family. They reported a sense of belonging. One resident described a specific incident of strangers helping here: "I experienced that I fell down at Chinatown and someone helped me up. One time when I was going to have dinner, I fell down again and a person came to help (me?) up also. I felt I could get help at any time in Chinatown." Another resident echoed this statement, "The people in Chinatown always help me. People here help each other's. When I was new here, people helped me to find school for my kids." One resident said, "It is easy for us to communicate so that I can have many friends here. I like the environment in Chinatown. I feel warm." This resident went on to talk about how Chinatown acts as a buffer against the stresses of immigration: "Because I do not know English, without Chinatown, I do not know how to continue to live in this county." Even those who do not live in the neighborhood can feel this way. One community leader noted that "It's nice to walk down the street and probably every block, I'll meet somebody that I know." The sense of mutual support is also very palpable in the neighborhood. One interviewee described a group of elderly Chinese who act as a sort of "neighborhood watch" in the area and try to take care of the latch-key kids after school. Another pointed to the Chinese moms as forming another important social network in the neighborhood observing, "These moms are the backbone of this community."

Chinatown has had an important role both in the past and in the present. Several pointed to a "fighting" spirit of the community and this spirit helps with the "survival" of the community. Mutual support was institutionalized in the Chinatown community in the early twentieth century with the establishment of family associations, which continue to help new immigrants with their transition to the U.S. Stable, affordable housing units maintain Chinatown as a vibrant, stable community. In the 1980s, the community fought for the establishment of the

South Cove Community Health Center. One interviewee pointed to the 2,000 units of affordable housing as a “stabilizing force” of the community, saying:

Without urban renewal, there is no Chinatown today. Urban renewal provided the sites for the towers, and at least half of them are owned by community development corporations.”

While some feel that Chinatown is under “attack” right now, stakeholders also recognize that the community is fighting for self-preservation.

From the survey, it was clear that Chinatown was a cultural hub for the respondents. Twenty-five percent (25.5%) of the respondents reported living in Chinatown (zipcode 02111) and 84.5% reported being of East Asian or Southeast Asian descent. Sixty percent (60.8%) came to Chinatown for shopping (restaurants, food, clothes, goods) and nearly 50% (47.0%) came for arts and culture (parades, library, and performances). Overall, survey participants responded that they *agreed or strongly agreed* that people in their neighborhood are willing to help each other (82.0%), people in the neighborhood can be trusted (87.2%), they are proud to live in their neighborhood (85.9%), they feel like they belong in the neighborhood (78.21%), and that their home is well located to meet everyday needs (88.5%).

On the other hand, some community members noted aspects of Chinatown that are challenging, calling it dirty, unsafe, short on parking, and disorganized. While some praised the availability of services and programs, one person viewed the non-profits “tripping over each other.” A few interviewees pointed to the internal politics of the community as one of its biggest challenges. One person expressed her frustration:

We have too many internal factions and all have an agenda. And sometimes, the agendas actually overlap, but their personalities are so strong that they can’t meet in the middle.

In the community survey, only 39.7% *agreed or strongly agreed* that their neighborhood was close knit. Somewhat surprising given the interviewees’ comments regarding warm feelings of closeness, non-Chinatown residents versus Chinatown-resident survey respondents were more likely to *strongly agree* that people in their neighborhood are willing to help each other (16.4% vs 8.7%), were proud to live in their neighborhood (25.5% vs 17.4%), that their home is well located to meet everyday needs (30.9% vs 21.7%), and that their neighborhood was close knit (10.9% vs 4.4%).

Challenges facing Chinatown

Asian American and immigrant families are under a lot of stress. One interviewee worried about the pressures on the parent-child when so many working parents either don’t have the time or are too tired to sit down with their children at mealtime. Parents are fearful that their children will lose their cultural heritage. In being an immigrant in the US, one often feels like

the “other.” One interviewee who grew up in Boston remembered that as a young person, he felt “shame and self-loathing” about being Chinese American. Asian Americans and Asian immigrants face discrimination in everyday acts that can make them feel like they do not belong. One interviewee described it in the following way:

You were to feel like in your everyday life you were told in little discrete ways that maybe you don’t belong. Folks don’t really understand your language or they give you a weird look when you eat something or make comments about your culture that are ignorant. So in a lot of different ways, you’re kind of bruised navigating different communities.

One interviewee, who spent a lot of time in Chinatown while growing up after her family immigrated from China, appreciated the community for a place as a place she found “comfort” and where she felt like she “fit in. The loss of community memory can lead to isolation. Being the “other” in society can cause stress, anxiety, and a sense of isolation. The sense of belonging can affect one’s emotional well-being. Interviewees point to other risky behaviors that arise such as smoking or gambling, noting that these behaviors are actually “mental issues undiagnosed.” Because of the need to focus on survival issues, sometimes parents do not focus on the arts. Instead, as one interviewee observed, “Sometimes people struggle so much. They only know how to be practical.”

Luxury development and displacement in the neighborhood exacerbate the stress that many immigrant families are under and many feel they have no choice but to stay in Chinatown. One resident said:

I have lived in Chinatown for six years since I immigrated to the US. Life in Chinatown is very different from life before. Now there are so many new buildings and apartments and the rent is so expensive. Chinatown does not have many affordable apartments for low-income families. We felt heavy burden by the rent. Although the rent is expensive, we have no choice to not stay in Chinatown.

One community leader likened these current trends of displacement to historical acts of exclusion. She described that the community still suffers from the historical trauma of being “excluded from America” and the historical development of Chinatown which includes Kneeland Street, which is like a “mini-highway” that puts pedestrians at risk and the lack of open and green space in the neighborhood. This sense of historical trauma can be exacerbated by neighborhood pressures of displacement. One interviewee described a Chinese immigrant mother whom she works with:

Her family had moved to Chinatown and they saw, one by one, their family and friends being displaced. Because they felt like it was too big to tackle landlords and push back on people telling them they can’t be there any more or they can’t afford it. So they’re now displaced to Quincy. But she comes here to Chinatown every week and she says she is tired of moving. And she’s tired of having to be displaced and uproot her family.

The impact of luxury development and displacement

Gentrification does cause a sense of disruption to the ecosystem of Chinese American life. Some community members who were interviewed reported rising rents and an increasing supply of housing for middle-income residents but not enough housing for others. One long-term resident of 41 years said:

I think Chinatown is too small. Because there are more and more new buildings, I think Chinatown is getting smaller than before. Chinese business stores are getting less and less... If it continue getting smaller, Chinatown will not exist. I disagree to build so many luxury apartments in the neighborhood. That is not good for us.

It is possible that gentrification is also impacting local businesses. One business owner admitted, "I open my store in Chinatown 11 years ago. Chinatown is small, not many people here. It is hard to do business here." If Chinese immigrant workers are no longer able to live in Chinatown, it makes getting picked up for work in restaurants in outlying suburbs more complicated. For those who are only able to come into Chinatown once a week, this can make getting everyday tasks, like getting one's prescriptions filled, challenging because of the time constraints.

In addition to the ecosystem being challenged, one interviewee worried about the loss of cultural identity and "cultural erosion" of the neighborhood. She described it in the following way:

It could be a loss of community memory of what used to be in this space. There are generations who grew up in Chinatown and they know the history of the struggle. When you talk about trauma of a neighborhood, they've lived through it and they've resisted it.

One artist worried that the newer residents would not be aware, value, or respect the history of the neighborhood.

Where is a neighborhood where other people who have more financial means can come and go freely and they may only look at the surface of what they think is valuable or meaningful without understanding the cultural value and understanding the history of the place?

Others find the new buildings, constructed in contemporary forms, disruptive to the traditional cultural footprint of the neighborhood.

On the other hand, by no means does everyone in Chinatown see luxury development as a negative thing. Gentrification is almost always defined as a negative trend, a process of disruption or displacement caused by outside forces and suffered by residents of a neighborhood. In *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Ta-Nehisi Coates calls gentrification "a more

pleasing name for white supremacy” (Coates 2011). One point of debate in the community is the changes on Washington Street. Washington Street historically had been the adult entertainment, or “red light” district of Boston. In the 1990s, the City rezoned that area, took out most of the adult entertainment stores and replaced it with the luxury developments of Kensington Place and Millennium Towers.

One interviewee welcomed these new market-rate developments, which rejuvenated Washington Street, while another interviewee saw these luxury developments as ushering in more luxury developments that displaced working immigrant residents later on. However, there is a different discourse that emphasizes economic growth and development and upward-mobility. Some people in Chinatown see rising rents and residents moving out to suburbs as signs of progress, attributable to their own success rather than outside forces. One interviewee recounted a conversation he had with a college student who saw some of the new businesses as signs of displacement. He told this student, “No, it’s a sign of vitality for Chinatown that the new bubble tea and hip places come in.”

Some of the changes in Chinatown are due to natural forces and that the community is evolving is inevitable. Families are moving out to outlying suburbs in search of bigger housing. Owners of small businesses are retiring. One interviewee observed:

I think they’re tired of doing their business. They’ve been doing it for 20 years. That’s what we’re seeing right now. They’re retiring their business and then leaving.

Because families have moved out of Chinatown, there is the need to try to bring families and children back to the neighborhood because as one interviewee noted, “[Kids] help to promote the vibrancy of the community.”

The survey confirmed that there is a sense of negative change in some aspects of life in Chinatown, and found evidence of housing stress. Of all the respondents, only 10% (9.9%) thought there had been no change in the cost of housing and 15% (14.8%) thought there had been no change in the availability of housing. Of those reporting a change, 90 percent (90.4%) thought the cost of housing was getting worse and 79 percent (79.1%) the availability of housing was getting worse. 34.8% of Chinatown resident respondents vs 18.2% of non-Chinatown CT respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were worried about being forced from their home. In addition, compared with non-Chinatown residents, residents of Chinatown were less likely to feel safe in their neighborhood “all or most of the time” (90.9% vs. 66.1%).

The community survey reflected some complex feelings and diverse relationships to Chinatown. When asked about changes to Chinatown in the past few years, about a third of the respondents thought that safety had changed (33.3%) and of those, 70% thought safety was getting better. 36% percent thought job/business opportunities had changed, and of those, 66.7% thought opportunities were getting better. There were similar responses for healthcare, shopping, and education. About 25-50% of respondents thought the sense of community,

services for Chinese people, and quality of life had changed over the past few years, and the majority of those respondents reported that that things are getting better (62.9%, 77.4%, 60% respectively).

The role of arts in building a thriving neighborhood

Some community members endorsed the community-building role of the arts. No one seemed to think there was a dearth of artistic and cultural offerings in the neighborhood, though one person observed that some offerings fly “under the radar.” Several interviewees pointed to the culture of the neighborhood as part of the community’s “vibrancy.” Residents pointed to annual festivals for Lunar New Year and August Moon Festival. One interviewee was empathic about the role of arts: “There is no community; there is no Chinatown without the arts and culture.” Some arts events and products represent traditional Chinese culture, such as Chinese opera, calligraphy, lion dancing and other types of martial arts. For some parents, they see these art offerings as a way for their children to stay connected to their Chinese culture. One parent said, “I like art and culture activities. That is why I let my son to learn lion dance, kung fu.” Other art offerings represent newer Asian American culture, such as the Boston Asian American Film Festival. Several interviewees pointed to needing to broaden our understanding of what art is outside of “formal art” and noted that creativity is evident throughout the neighborhood. When asked the question about art, one respondent said, “What about restaurant signs? Are those art”? Another person observed that “everyday things” such as gardening should be included in our definition of Chinatown art and creativity. Others cited the role of the arts in healing some of these traumas of immigration.

One interviewee saw the Pao Arts Center as “One big step towards institutionalizing local Chinatown art” because it is a “permanent fixture.”

The Pao Art Center also has a role in community building across the pan-ethnic Asian American community. One Filipino American artist was able to develop an exhibit about immigration and microaggressions that resonated across specific Asian ethnic communities. A few did note, however, that there needed to be more public art, such as more murals. One resident did point to the challenge of needing to work that impeded her from attending community-wide festivals.

Because of the stigma associated with mental and behavioral health, the Pao Art Center can be “innovative, creative, and tapping into the emotional well-being without directly saying it.” In further reflections on the potential of the Center, this interviewee noted:

[The Pao Arts Center can be] the bridge between the arts and then healing with mental health. So many of our families suffer from depression, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and all of that. Whether it’s diagnosable or not, we all feel it and the ability to go to a Center where it’s not medically focused which could be pathologizing.

With the struggle of day-to-day survival, one artist observed that art gives people something beyond “just survival” and that art can be a “universal language.” A repeated theme was the ability of the arts to bridge gaps among generations. Particularly in immigrant communities, parents and children may have trouble communicating, but the arts cross those boundaries. One interviewee remembered a time in which she observed a mother sharing with her daughter a piece of art that reflected the mom’s memory of her home country. The essence of the conversation was that “They’re actually talking about their depression, but through pictures and art.” One respondent described the power of art as a “universal language” because sometimes immigrants cannot express their feelings in either Chinese or English. There was enthusiasm for events that draw whole families, such as karaoke nights. Interviewees specifically cited the Pao Arts Center as a place that can bring families together and help people explore their roots. A Filipino American artist who created an exhibit about immigration and microaggressions describe reactions to his exhibit

A number of Asian college students and also adults came up to me and said “Wow, these are things that I buried. And they’re surfacing again.” Another said, “This exhibit helped me kind of deal with old wounds.”

Art can also heal some of the contemporary emotional wounds being created by gentrification. Gentrification can hurt those displaced and gentrification can also hurt those who call Chinatown their “home away from home.” To counter these negative effects of gentrification, one artist said,

I feel like art can do the things that we’re always trying to do to transmit history. To remember something. To create space to acknowledge things...And art can just do it in a way that we can feel in our bodies and it bypasses some of the messiness of our brains.

This artist went on to describe the powerful role art has in healing wounds that the Asian immigrant and Asian American community faces in difficult, challenging, political times.

Even if it’s painful. Even if it depicts the current violence that happens right now, it doesn’t have to be cheery and positive. Like it could be said and depressing, but if it validates how you feel that even is good.

Art can have health impacts. One interviewee reflected on the power of art on one’s individual development asking: “Can we be truly human if we don’t have the arts? I would say that’s what makes human living interesting.” Similarly, another interviewee observed that engagement in art helps one to “expand your mind” and “see a different perspective.” One artist said that art can “promote understanding of a different culture.”

For Asian Americans, art can also have a deeper impact on one’s well-being. Because of the lack of Asian American representation and/or the static representation of Asian Americans in the arts, one stakeholder noted the power of seeing images through art that reflect her experiences. The arts had helped her feel valued and confident. It enabled her to share with

others who she is and process her experiences as a Chinese/Asian American. One artist talked about how he tries to make his work bright and happy, reflective of the island that he is from. He described his work:

Brightly colorful images can make you feel good and at home. Even if you were just stressed out after work and had a bad day, but if you see happy art. Of it doesn't have to be positive, happy art; it could just be art that resonates and people relate to.

This is particularly important for immigrant families. Though they are often working and focused on survival, art gives one time to reflect and to connect to oneself and others. Art can help improve one's emotional well-being. In the words of one resident, despite the challenges of being an immigrant, about the role of arts she said, "I felt happy. My children were happy too."

Another resident said,

Art and culture can be good for people's health. It will reduce stress. After I attended it, I felt relax because we share stories in activities and having someone help me out if I have something that I did not understand."

One business owner shared this sentiment and added, "The events bring happy to Chinatown and build the connection in Chinese community." An artist who has worked with the immigrant community said, "Art can help people talk about their current lives. Those who cannot speak English, they can draw."

In addition to the impact that arts can have on the individual, community art holds the potential to impact the overall well-being of the neighborhood because "arts and culture helps make where you live livable and worth investing into. "Placekeeping" can help to anchor the neighborhood and "reassert" its identity by "activat[ing] a space and make it a place for preservation." Using art to highlight the community's history can help to instill a sense of pride. One interviewee described this process:

When [our youth] learn the history of the space and what people have done to fight for that space, they walk around the neighborhood with a sense of pride. So instead of feeling ashamed of growing up in Chinatown, you walk around with pride about your neighborhood. You want to start to connect to other community members...When you know history, you start internalizing that and you start wanting to contribute to that story.

Art can help Chinatown maintain its sense of history and pride:

Having a physical, cultural space to be able to anchor that, like a home base, to be able to go out and promote community storytelling and art is so essential. And actually, I would say like every really resilient of evolving community has had a cultural space.

The role of the artist in Chinatown

Several stakeholders said that artists are storytellers who connect people to community. One interviewee believed “[Artists] want to make sure our story is told, whether it’s through spoken word, painting or sculpture.” One of the artists interviewed reflected that artists can help to provide an alternative space in a neighborhood like Chinatown challenged by pressures of development.

I think certainly community building seems important. Bringing people together. Creating space for relationships to form. For conversation. For healing. So create a little space.

Another interviewee also hoped that the Pao Art Center could be a place that “redefined ourselves as artists and experts.” Artists can also have an important role in community empowerment.

There is the need I see for artists who can work with the community, and help a community recognize its power. Not empower them by giving them power, but just letting them, affirming the power that the community already has.

The survey provides some information on respondents’ reasons for attending artistic, cultural, or creativity events (in general, not just at Pao Arts Center). Most of the respondents attended arts events one or two times per year (29.6%) or three to five times per year (37.0%). The top five reasons for attendance include to have fun (81.2%), to connect and learn from others (58%), explore new cultural traditions (48.2%), to reconnect with their cultural heritage and identity (44.4%), and to be moved or inspired (43.2%). Interestingly, Chinatown residents versus non-Chinatown resident respondents were more likely to prioritize having fun (91.7% vs. 57.9%), to get energized about community activism (41.7% vs. 19.7%), and to participate in discussions about the community (33.3% vs 10.5%). Non-Chinatown residents versus Chinatown resident respondents were more likely to prioritize exploring new cultural traditions (40.7% vs 33.3%). At least half of the respondents strongly agreed that creativity and culture are very important to the following: bringing diverse people together (54.0%), encouraging people to care for their community (52.0%), their own happiness (51.9%) and their own health and wellness (50.0%).

The Pao Art Center as a new civic art space in Chinatown

Many people recognize the potential of the Pao Art Center as an important civic space in the community. This is in line with neighborhood trends in which Chinatown has been gaining more political power over the last few decades, evidenced by the winning of the bilingual ballot measure and the return of the Chinatown library after it closed over fifty years ago. For one interviewee, the establishment of the Pao Arts Center is seen as a “sign of [Chinatown’s] coming of age.” An artist felt as though the Center had “great potential...It can do a lot to make

the connection between the community and the larger city of Boston and surrounding areas...give a little visibility to the Asian American culture.” The Pao Arts Center can be a place that incubates art and creativity and serves as a place for “people to find new ideas” according to one artist.

This idea is corroborated by audience surveys across 17 performances in the Pao’s first year. These performances ranged in scope and target audience. Some performances focused on traditional Chinese culture, like the Cantonese Opera, or contemporary Asian American spoken word art like artist Bao Phi. Many of the offerings in the first year were partnerships with established Asian American art organizations, such as the Boston Asian American Film Festival, Genki Spark, or Kundiman, and with local art organizations such as Fresh Ink Theater. Audience surveys indicated that patrons of the Center primarily came to “celebrate cultural heritage and identity” followed by “learn new culture” or “be moved/inspired.” Sometimes to “see the work of a specific presenter” and “energize own creativity” was highlighted with performances of specific arts organizations, like Kundiman and Fresh Ink Theater. Words commonly used to describe attendees emotional reactions to performances included: sad, proud, aware, moved/moving, interesting, inspired, joyful/happy.

This potential of the Pao Art Center as a new civic space is particularly important for what one artist called “the new generation.” Comparing herself to her parents who work in restaurants, she said for her generation: “We search for leadership, get a better education, and look for chances to give back to the Chinese community.” Another artist of a local theater company talked about the value of having the Art Center to do readings for plays. For her, the Center is not just a physical space that is “great for reading; it is also a safe space for artists. This same artist described it this way:

Female stories aren’t heard as much and it follows that sort of thing as well – minorities of any type aren’t heard as much as the white man’s story. So, we’re trying to gravitate towards that kind of content even if we don’t put it formally in words or in a mission statement.

The Pao Art Center also explores partnerships with organizations in which they share mutual goals. One artist who leads a local theater group said it was “fresh to reach out to new people who might not be as familiar with us.” Some companies have been grateful for the infrastructure the Pao Art Center can provide, such as the space and help with logistical issues such as outreach to reach a wider audience. This artist said, “If I could have all my readings here and all my workshops here, hell, I could have rehearsals here, I would!”

Of the survey respondents, 89.7% had heard of the Pao Arts Center and 77.8% had been to an event at the Center. The top five activities attended were: a gallery exhibit (42.3%), a music performance (28.2%), a community partner event (28.2%), a BCNC non-Pao Arts center event (23.1%). Respondents would like to see cultural classes, workshops, performances (like cooking, brushpainting, Chinese opera) (61.5%), community events (51.3%), gallery exhibits (50%) and music performances (50%). As an indication of the positive impact of the Pao Arts Center, over

80 percent (82.7%) of the respondents thought that opportunities for arts and culture in Chinatown had changed over the past few years, with virtually all (98.2%) saying it had changed for the better.

The Pao Arts Center is a complex entity that doesn't have one unified influence. It hosts discrete events and exhibitions that draw various demographic groups and have diverse purposes and impact. For example, the space was full for a screening of a socially conscious Filipino documentary film entitled *Sunday Beauty Queen* (directed by Baby Ruth Villarama, 2016). Most audience members surveyed at this event said they had attended the Pao Arts Center on other occasions and frequently attend artistic events at other venues. Their most common reasons for attending were to "celebrate cultural heritage and identity" (29%), "explore new cultural traditions" (21%), and be moved/inspired (16%).¹ The most common words they provided as reactions to this serious work of social commentary were "sad" (5), "proud" (3), and "aware" (3). In contrast, the Kundiman Literaoke Night was billed as a "night of readings and music as writers take the stage to read their work and sing their fave songs."¹ This event also filled the room but very few members of the audience had been to Pao before, and they most commonly said they had come to "see the work of a specific presenter" (23%), to "energize their own creativity" (19%), or to be "moved and inspired" (19). The most common words they offered to describe their own reactions were "joyful/happy" and "moved/touched" (5 each). These two examples demonstrate that the same space can have very different impact on the community, depending on how it is used.

As an entity, the Pao Arts Center is very new, just developing an audience and brand. In interviews of community members, some said that they had heard of the Pao Arts Center but didn't know much about it, or were unsure of where it was. One Chinese immigrant mom indicated that she wanted to bring her children there to learn more traditional Chinese art and perhaps be a place for "children to play together."

Discussion

Despite the pressures and forces impacting Chinatown, the neighborhood continues to be a vibrant, thriving, community as evidenced by its strong community institutions (non-profits, businesses, affordable housing) and active residential and activist community. Because of this, Chinatown is a place, defined by geography or imagination, that still has important meaning for the local and greater Asian and Asian American community. For some it is home, for others it is a home away from home. For many it acts as a safe place, a place that speaks one's language, a place where you know the unspoken rules, a place you see people who understand you. In this sense, it can act as a buffer against the larger pressures facing the Asian immigrant and Asian American families and communities.

The data collected for this study reveal a great deal of disagreement about the community (its condition, challenges, and even its boundaries) and about the role of the arts. Just for example,

¹ <http://kundiman.org/announcements/2018/4/18/chinatown-presents-literaoke-night-at-the-pao-arts-center>

housing prices are rising and causing some displacement, but not everyone thinks this is bad: the economic situation is also giving rise to a perception of higher safety, cleanliness, and vibrancy with different kinds of people and industry entering the area. One important lesson for groups considering a similar intervention is to not assume everyone in the “beneficiary or target group” perceives changes in the same way or shares your opinion and thus make sure to build in ways to get input from a variety of people on a variety of topics.

Still, the Pao Art Center, the first Asian American cultural center in Boston Chinatown, symbolizes a “coming of age” of the community. One community leader said, “Chinatown is no longer a victim” and through the Pao Art Center the community has the opportunity to make a path forward despite these development pressures from outside. It has cultural agency in the performers that they invite and the exhibits that they present.

The Pao Art Center is a place where the negative effects of immigration can be mitigated. There is a large and thriving art and culture scene and community and Chinatown, though it can be invisible to an untrained eye. The Chinese immigrant parents we talked to want their children to be connected to art and culture, particularly traditional forms of Chinese culture, and they see art as contributing to their and their children’s well-being.

Though there was an arts and cultural community in Chinatown before the opening of the Pao Arts Center, the Center still serves an important central, civic space that integrates arts and culture more intentionally and deliberately into the fabric of social and cultural life in the neighborhood. In an immigrant community that is always worried about losing its history and heritage, it functions as a space where one can learn about traditional Chinese arts, such as calligraphy and Chinese brush painting. For the newer and younger generation, it is a place where they can create the identity and meaning of Chinese and Asian American art. Art serves an important function of bringing people together and art can serve an important function to heal from community trauma.

The power of storytelling and the need for storytelling emerged throughout the interviews. There is the need for the community to capture the stories of residents and former residents before the neighborhood changes too much. While there are these discrete projects that different interviewees recommended that the Pao Arts Center engage in, the Center itself is crafting a narrative about the Chinese and Asian American community through their varied programming.

Despite the challenges and complexities we observed, Chinatown is not without its assets and opportunities. One interviewee noted, “In the next five years, we could get together as a community, build a coalition, and say “This is how we envision ourselves to be.” The Pao Art Center has the potential to be an important civic and cultural space in the neighborhood. The Pao Arts Center as a permanent space for the community holds the promise to be a “bridge” and “broader umbrella” in a neighborhood that is divided by politics, race, income, and language. The Pao Arts Center also has a role in the fabric of the Chinatown community.

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