Introduction
WHY CHINATOWN STILL MATTERS

Chinatown has two or three percent of the Chinese population in the county. So, does L.A. Chinatown matter as a community? Is it relevant? How important is it? . . . Are we [Chinese Americans] going to knit ourselves into the fabric of Chinatown so that there’s room for others?

—EUGENE MOY, community leader since the 1970s

In 2013, a Walmart Neighborhood Market opened in Los Angeles Chinatown. Its presence and the conflict leading up to its eventual opening raised important questions about the future of Chinatown for the Chinese American community across the region. The market was located in Grand Plaza, a mixed-use development that was home to affordable senior citizen housing units on the southwestern border of Chinatown and downtown. When Grand Plaza was originally proposed in the 1980s and opened in 1992, an on-site grocery store was an especially critical amenity for the senior citizens who would move directly into the building. A grocery store in this location was also more physically accessible to the Chinatown residents than the smaller grocery stores located in the neighborhood’s commercial area, which residents would have to walk through hilly terrain to access. At the time, the grocery stores in Chinatown primarily consisted of small butcher shops and produce stores, as well as one major ethnic supermarket, Ai Hoa Market. While at one point there was another major ethnic supermarket, 99 Ranch, a Chinese supermarket chain started by a Taiwanese American in Southern California in the 1980s, it was only in operation for a few years before shutting down. Some saw the inability of a 99 Ranch to thrive in the neighborhood as a sign that Chinatown was no longer a center for the Chinese American community. In the 1980s, at the same time Grand Plaza was being developed, the smaller cities and suburbs in the San Gabriel Valley
emerged as competition for Chinatown, as it not only had several 99 Ranch markets, but other ethnic grocery and retail stores. Amid these changes across the region, this space in Grand Plaza remained vacant for over two decades and was a major unfulfilled promise for the Chinatown community. There were rumors in the community about different markets moving into the space, but none came into fruition until the proposal for the Walmart neighborhood market in 2012.

As the Chinatown community learned about the possibility of a Walmart Neighborhood Market opening in the vicinity, different community voices began to publicly express either their resistance or support—while some maintained a purposeful silence about it. Some community leaders, including those involved with the Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID) and some of the long-standing organizations such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), not only were relieved that the space would no longer be vacant, but argued that Walmart would bring resources to a predominantly low-income community and address a retail gap in the neighborhood. Walmart also promised community benefits, which included financial support to some of the community organizations. Progressive activists representing the Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) and the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) countered by pointing to the long history of Walmart’s labor violations and the potential to drive out the immigrant-owned small businesses. They also saw its presence as fundamentally at odds with the cultural and historical character that made the neighborhood a distinct place of community for generations of Asian American immigrants. Walmart’s presence was a part of the homogenization of urban spaces, as corporations would start to displace small business owners, which would ultimately have ripple effects on low-income residents. Labor activists across the city were also a part of the conflict in Chinatown, having historically campaigned against Walmart establishing a presence in the city. They aligned with the new progressive groups in Chinatown and organized a protest in the neighborhood to try to prevent its opening. Recognizing the resistance to Walmart, the City Council proposed an interim ordinance to prevent the Walmart from opening. But this ordinance was not specific to Chinatown; it generally blocked major box stores from opening throughout the city, which generated even more political conflict. This ordinance ultimately was a moot point, as Walmart obtained the building permit a day before the ordinance unanimously passed.
While this conflict played out publicly in the media and in local politics, it also played out privately in community spaces in Chinatown. Intense debates would happen among community organization leaders and members about the value of the Walmart Neighborhood Market for the community, even after it opened. In these debates, people were often silenced by the questioning of their personal stake in the neighborhood. How could they speak with authority about the community if they did not live, work, or own property here? For some, it also led to a confusion about what gentrification meant for Chinatown. If Chinatown has been grappling with empty storefronts and vacant lots for decades, isn’t the Walmart Neighborhood Market a benefit? Would it not help bring vibrancy and resources to the community, especially low-income households? They also had to contend with the contradictions of trying to define what a contemporary Chinatown should look like. Were they concerned that it was not an ethnic-specific supermarket? Would a 99 Ranch be more of a Chinatown business? The debates about Walmart were magnifying and creating conflict within the community.

The Walmart Neighborhood Market was ultimately only in operation for two and a half years. A corporate decision shut down all the neighborhood markets across the United States in January 2016. A press release was announced on a Friday and shared through email among different community leaders that weekend. Two days later, the sign was removed, and the space was empty. While Walmart’s physical presence in Chinatown was now gone, the conflict surrounding this space lingered, revealing the complexities of how the community grapples with gentrification and forced displacement. It showed the different hopes and fears of change in a neighborhood that is intrinsically a part of the history and identity of Chinese and Asian Americans. But it also reflected the tenuous relationship that Chinese Americans now have with Chinatowns. Los Angeles Chinatown is no longer the only residential or commercial center for the Chinese American community in the city or region. A small proportion of the Chinese American population in the county live in Chinatown—and it is specifically a concentration of low-income, working-class Chinese Americans. As one of those Chinese Americans who did not live in Chinatown, but was concerned about the consequences of the Walmart, I had to also step back and pose questions for myself and my community: Why does the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown even matter for the Chinese and Asian American community today, especially for Chinese Americans like me, who no longer live and work there? Even as a symbolic site of heritage, what role do Chinese Americans play in shaping
Chinatowns today? And how can we critically examine our political engagement in controlling preservation and change in urban Chinatowns?

*The Power of Chinatown* examines why historic urban Chinatowns continue to matter and how place-based ethnic community politics are reshaping these spaces as a physical neighborhood, as well as a political and cultural community, amid the threats of gentrification and forced displacement. Chinatowns are historic urban neighborhoods that continue to persist; however, these spaces are not ahistorical and static. They persist and change simultaneously, shaped by the continuous and evolving political engagement that happens in Chinatown, especially among Chinese Americans. Yet Chinese Americans are not a political monolith, and their political engagement is informed by class and socioeconomic status, generation, immigration history, and ideologies. Chinatown also remains a home for many community organizations that promote civic engagement for Chinese Americans, providing a sense of community, belonging, and shared heritage across different generations. But the neighborhood is first and foremost a residential home for low-income, working-class immigrant communities who have been an integral part of shaping the neighborhood’s physical, social, and cultural landscape since its establishment. While Chinatown has been a space for the broader Chinese American community to come together and assert political representation, as the Walmart conflict showed, their engagement also cannot be divorced from addressing local community needs and material conditions of the neighborhood.

Urban Chinatowns across North America are experiencing the pressures of gentrification, contributing to concerns that they will soon disappear from the urban landscape.² Los Angeles Chinatown is no exception, especially in the past two decades. In the late 1990s, art galleries began to open in old trinket shops in West Plaza, one of the oldest commercial spaces in the neighborhood. In the early 2000s, along the border of Chinatown and downtown, Geoffrey Palmer, a controversial real estate developer in Los Angeles, constructed the Orsini Apartments, an all-market-rate housing development a couple of blocks away from the former Walmart market that many in the community continue to see as an incongruent space that is not truly part of Chinatown. In the 2010s, the Jia Apartments, a mixed-use market-rate apartment development also opened and is now home to the neighborhood’s first Starbucks. Along with the Walmart market, new retail and restaurants were also opening in older storefronts. These changes and pressures facing Los Angeles Chinatown—and other urban Chinatowns—raise important questions
about how this may be threatening to displace the cultural heritage of these spaces and the low-income, working-poor residents and workers, exacerbating social and economic inequities across the city. They also raise important questions about how the civic engagement of Chinese and Asian Americans in the neighborhood addresses these changes.

Thus, the political responses to gentrification in urban Chinatowns are not simply about identity and representational politics; it is an issue of how Chinese and Asian American communities engage in spatial justice. Spatial justice centers the importance of geographies and place in understandings of urban inequities. Spaces provide the material resources and social conditions that shape our social and everyday lives, but they are also socially constructed and in constant flux by the communities and individuals that interact with this space. Edward Soja argues that an analysis of urban development must consider not just the outcome, that there is a fair and equitable distribution of resources and opportunities across spaces, but also the process of development, as whoever has access to urban public spaces and the political power to determine how these spaces develop can also contribute to producing “unjust geographies.”

In his theorizing about the right to the city, Henri Lefebvre critiques urban policies for supporting capitalist production over human rights that have led to these spatial injustices. The right to the city demands transformative political changes so that historically marginalized groups have the power to control the trajectory of change in their neighborhood and community’s future.

Embedded within these arguments is the conflict between collective rights and individual rights in the creation of a just city. Collective rights prioritize the creation of public spaces that address the needs of those who have been historically disadvantaged and oppressed, while individual rights often ultimately prioritize the economic and political elite in maintaining their control over property and development and, ultimately, in shaping the urban landscape. Spatial justice is also intrinsically linked to mobility justice, as the ability to freely traverse spaces is differentiated by political and economic power, which is intrinsically linked to race. In places like Chinatown, spatial justice has unique complexities; residually it is home to low-income, working-class Chinese and Asian American immigrants, but it also continues to hold symbolic and historic meaning, as well as economic value, for a geographically dispersed Chinese American community. Their various attachments to Chinatown shape if and how they are politically engaged in the neighborhood and whether their advocacy is in the collective interest of both the local and ethnic communities.
This book highlights the perspectives and experiences of Chinatown’s community leaders, who are engaging in community development efforts that may resist or encourage gentrification and the implications of this political engagement on our understandings of spatial justice among racialized groups. Community leaders have been active place makers, contributing to the political decision-making and practices that determine the housing, economic, and cultural character of the neighborhood throughout its history. However, they are also working within the institutions and policies that structure Chinatown’s development and navigating the racialization of Asian Americans that marginalizes the residents and workers of Chinatown. Their political engagement raises important questions about how Chinatown continues to be represented as an ethnic space and how much control both the Chinese American and local Chinatown community have in steering neighborhood change amid these contemporary threats of gentrification. Who is representing Chinatown and what representations of neighborhood and community are they producing? What are the implications of their political engagement for creating a just, equitable present and future for Chinatown and Los Angeles?

**RECOGNIZING GENTRIFICATION IN URBAN CHINATOWNS**

The term *gentrification* was first formally introduced by British sociologist Ruth Glass to describe the “back-to-the-city” movement of the middle-class to working-class spaces in London in the 1960s. Since then, *gentrification* has become a somewhat ubiquitous term in the debates and discussions about contemporary urban change. With that ubiquity, there are now many ways to define and identify gentrification, which has contributed to general confusion over the term, as it can be conflated with a depoliticized perspective of neighborhood change.

This book is guided by a specific definition of *gentrification* as a type of neighborhood change that is politically contested and contributes to an urban restructuring that continues to segregate and limit opportunities for low-income communities, especially non-White racialized groups. Gentrification occurs when public and private investment into low-income neighborhoods results in changes that indicate socioeconomic improvements, such as increases in household income and property values. Yet these
changes are not necessarily an indicator of new opportunity structures that were created for the current residential and business tenants. Instead, these changes are attracting relatively wealthier newcomers to the neighborhood, contributing to the forced displacement of long-time community members who experience socioeconomic and cultural barriers to their ability to freely move to and live in other spaces. This book emphasizes that gentrification is a process, and different policies set the conditions for the practices, interactions, and activities of different community and political actors to respond to the threats of forced displacement. Furthermore, the historical and social context of the community matters in understanding how gentrification unfolds and whether a community has a choice to be in these neighborhoods and, relatedly, to leave these spaces.

While gentrification is often described as a movement and displacement of people across space, structural and political forces create the economic and sociocultural conditions for these movements. Since the early 1990s, urban policies that sought to upscale and modernize urban areas have often led to the forced displacement of the working poor and non-White racialized communities. Neighborhoods that were close to urban downtown cores were often home to Black and immigrant communities. They were targets for urban redevelopment and revitalization because of their perceived “slum” conditions. However, these determinations were often made by the city and those outside the community. Furthermore, rather than creating opportunities for social mobility for the community living and working in these spaces, these strategies often sought to attract a relatively wealthier and upwardly mobile population from outside the area to spend and invest in these spaces, whether through commercial or housing developments. These urban revitalization and redevelopment policies and practices tend to favor economic growth and profit for the city, property owners, and developers. This criticism has characterized revitalization strategies throughout time, from the City Beautiful Movement and post–World War II federal urban renewal programs to contemporary policies and programs, including business improvement districts and economic empowerment zones.

A distinct outcome associated with gentrification is forced displacement. The forced displacement that happens due to gentrification is also multifaceted, as it includes material and symbolic forms of displacement. Often gentrification is measured through demographic changes, including racial turnover and population shifts toward a higher socioeconomic status, and changes to the built environment, from the increased presence of boutique
small businesses, such as coffee shops and restaurants, to large-scale commercial developments, such as stadiums, shopping malls, and chain businesses. Yet documenting the neighborhood’s demographic and physical changes has not always provided a holistic understanding of the process of gentrification in neighborhoods. Most notably, research examining demographic changes among residents in Harlem, a historic Black neighborhood in New York City that was popularly recognized as gentrifying in the late 1990s, led to debates as to whether rapid forced displacement was occurring.

Scholars have thus also argued that gentrification can lead to other forms of displacement that are not always evident in short-term economic or demographic indicators. In addition to direct displacement through new developments, there can be a relatively slower secondary displacement process, or what Peter Marcuse has described as displacement pressures. New developments that may be built in neighboring areas or in vacant spaces and promote upscaling can lead to potential rent increases for neighboring areas, eventually leading to economic displacement. Gentrification can contribute to cognitive and social disruptions that challenge a sense of place and community for longtime stakeholders, which can be a form of cultural displacement. These community stakeholders also may experience political displacement as more affluent and educated newcomers begin to outnumber them in gentrifying neighborhoods. The threat of gentrification can vary and include concerns of not just physical displacement of buildings and people, but also the symbolic displacement of the current community who may feel psychologically, culturally, and politically disconnected from their neighborhood because of the physical changes.

Forced displacement distinguishes gentrification from other types of neighborhood change, and it is one reason why Chinatowns may often be misinterpreted theoretically in both gentrification studies and public discourses. Often recognized as ethnic enclaves, Chinatowns are a distinct immigrant and racialized space. In contrast to ethnic ghettos, which have limited opportunity structures for residents, ethnic enclaves have a neighborhood social structure that can lead to social and residential mobility. Spatial assimilation theories have traditionally framed the logic of neighborhood change in ethnic enclaves, which argue that changes occur due to voluntary migration in and out of the neighborhood. Ethnic enclaves are steppingstone neighborhoods for first-generation immigrant communities who will use the social networks and resources in these spaces for their socioeconomic mobility.
and political incorporation. Due to voluntary out-migration, the neighborhood transitions to support a new immigrant community. Chinatowns are often framed as ethnic enclaves because of their robust social and economic infrastructures that have provided social capital, support, and resources for the ethnic community throughout history. Furthermore, with the striking down of residential segregation, post–World War II residential patterns suggested that Chinatowns fit this spatial assimilation model, as Chinese Americans were more likely to live in suburban areas and were more residentially dispersed than other non-White groups. Thus, the theories of ethnic enclaves assume that neighborhoods such as Chinatowns were never meant to be a permanent part of the urban landscape and instead would change with the ebbs and flows of different immigrant groups as they “assimilated” into mainstream society.

Yet Chinatowns have persisted and are still present today. The liberalization of immigration policies after World War II struck down exclusionary immigration policies targeting Asian nation-states, which led to an increase of immigration from these areas. However, the residential populations of Chinatowns are a specific segment of new immigrants and refugees. Many low-income Chinese American immigrants continued to move into and remain in the neighborhood because of ongoing social, cultural, and economic exclusion. Furthermore, upwardly mobile Chinese Americans did not necessarily have to reside in urban Chinatowns, but these spaces continued to hold important economic purposes for the Chinese American community. Since the 1980s, immigration scholars have argued that the enclave economy has been a driving force in sustaining historic urban ethnic enclaves for subsequent generations. The upwardly mobile segment of the ethnic community maintained social ties and economic investments in ethnic enclaves, regardless of whether they lived there or not. For working-class community members, especially first-generation immigrants living in the neighborhood, the economy provides socioeconomic opportunities through ethnic networks. Min Zhou argues that the Chinatown economy is a protected sector of the labor market for immigrants to obtain jobs through co-ethnic ties in the neighborhood that they would not have in the mainstream labor market. While the theorizing of ethnic enclaves has evolved to account for why urban Chinatowns have sustained themselves, it alone does not suffice in explaining the politics of urban redevelopment that have also contributed to both the persistence of these spaces and the ongoing threats of displacement.
Today, most urban Chinatowns remain predominantly Asian American residential spaces, even if they are not home to a majority of the Chinese or Asian American population within that region. But they are also predominantly low-income neighborhoods that are close to downtown cores, which historically have been targeted for redevelopment initiatives that have ripple effects to surrounding neighborhoods. Chinatowns may go unnoticed, as they are relatively small downtown-adjacent neighborhoods and the socioeconomic, cultural, and regional differences of Chinese and Asian Americans are not always accounted for in statistical and quantitative studies that traditionally inform public policy. Yet Chinatown is a place where forced displacement can occur and is occurring. Chinatowns, and specifically Los Angeles Chinatown, are critical and contested sites that can expand upon our understanding of gentrification and urban inequities. By presenting the story of the community politics that have come to define Los Angeles Chinatown and its struggles with gentrification, we can start to unpack how gentrification may similarly and differentially impact different racialized communities in the urban landscape. We can further understand how community actors are impacted by the larger structural forces of gentrification, while also recognizing that they are agents of change who can both resist and contribute to this process as they assert a community voice in urban politics.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC POWER IN CHINATOWN: CONTROLLING COMMUNITY AND SPACE

As much as it is important to understand how the outcomes of gentrification contribute to urban inequities, it is also just as critical to understand the procedural and deliberative processes that create the conditions for gentrification and the forced displacement of the most economically and socially vulnerable in the neighborhood. Gentrification is a politically and economically contested process in which those who have the power to steer neighborhood change may not always represent the most marginalized in the neighborhood. According to political economy perspectives, neighborhood change occurs through political conflicts over the production of space. These conflicts determine the economic and social value of neighborhoods. Whoever has the right to define those values ultimately contributes to the rearticulation of the neighborhood identity and who it serves.