The Gentrification of Asian American Communities in New York City: A Race or Class Issue

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Abstract

Why study the gentrification of Asian American communities? Since 2010, the Asian American population in New York City has increased by 345,000 and now makes up 15.6 percent of the entire city population.[1] Despite this, there is little research on how this community interacts with the larger city society. While New York City is often cited as an example of gentrification, those research projects tend to explore the displacement of black and Hispanic people, rather than Asian Americans. It is pertinent to not place the movement of Asian Americans under the same umbrella because of the unique challenges that they face — most critically, the language barrier and the concept of being a "model minority".

Keywords: Asian American Communities, New York, ethnicity and class, immigrants, changes

1. Introduction

66% of Asian Americans in New York City are immigrants for whom English was not their first language and 45% have Limited English Proficiency (LEP), meaning that they spoke English less than "very well."[1] As a result, these people have limited access to a variety of public and social services, including health care, workforce development, and civic engagement. However, the language barrier extends past public services and into daily life. Tasks as simple as buying groceries or taking public transportation become nearly impossible, thus making a community that understands them critical to surviving.

In addition to struggling to understand the main language in the city, Asian Americans are also uniquely disadvantaged because they are labeled as the model minority. The title "model minority," though born from positive attributes such as being hardworking and resilient, prevents progress and change for Asian Americans.[2] In the conversation about gentrification, it is harmful because it scrubs away the diverse experiences Asian people have in America and implies a monolithic success. It is this belief in a singular experience that perpetuates the unique gentrification of Asian

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[1] Fisayo Okare and April Xu, (2019, January 2). "Language Gap Drives Growing Asian American Poverty in NYC," Documented, https://documentedny.com/2018/09/04/language-gap-drives-growing-asian-american-wealth-disparity/.

[2] "Model Minority," United Asian American organizations · deconstructing the model minority at UM · AAPI, accessed July 3, 2023, http://aapi.umhistorylabs.lsa.umich.edu/s/aapi_michigan/page/UAAO.

Americans because it ignores ethnic and class divides.

2. Methods

This research is inspired by the changes that I see in my community. For the past eight years, I've been watching my parents run their own flooring supplies store and I've found that the larger half of their obstacles stem from the fact that they are immigrants. Because they don't speak fluent English, they struggle to communicate with suppliers and customers. At the same time, I've seen my neighborhood undergo subtle changes. Large companies have started replacing the mom-and-pop shops that long lived here and the authentic culture is being lost. Seeing what my parents go through and also the shift in my hometown has inspired me to research why these changes are happening. The question guiding this research project was "How do ethnicity and class play a part in the gentrification of Asian American communities in NYC?"

Answering the question "How do ethnicity and class play a part in the gentrification of Asian American communities in NYC?" is critical to understanding the future development of the larger city community and ensuring equal opportunities are accessible to all types of people. The original hypothesis to this research question language plays the biggest part in the gentrification of Asian Americans. However, results seem to render this hypothesis incorrect. Although language plays a large part in the issue, the greater problem is a systemic lack of resources and aid.

The research was conducted primarily through a literature review. This project started with the research of the gentrification of New York City communities broadly. The initial research was through Google Scholars and had no filters for a location within the city or time frame. The next step in the research process was looking into specific neighborhoods and how they have changed within the past 10 years. The two focal points of the research were Brooklyn Heights and Flushing. Literature and previous case studies available on JSTOR aided the next part of the research process. Finally, findings were concluded extrapolating and consolidating information, as well as reaching out to members and leaders of a large Chinese-American community in Queens, New York.

3. Findings

3.1 Ethnic Enclaves

The first step to understanding why Asian American communities are undergoing such changes is understanding the foundations of these neighborhoods and the history behind them. These neighborhoods are ethnic enclaves which are geographical areas where a particular ethnic group is spatially clustered and socially and economically distinct from the majority group. Ethnic enclaves typically protect immigrants from potential health hazards due to increased family ties, familiar culture, and assistance in finding work. Ethnic enclaves are specific localities where ethnic minorities congregate, and possess three common features: co-ethnic owners and employees, spatial concentration, and sectoral specialization. [1] Enclaves protect from hostile elements in society, aid in the retention of cultural norms (including language), offer work in, and sometimes the option of owning, an intra-ethnic business, and allow for participation in community, religious, and cultural organizations and residence with members of the same ethnic group.

Before the establishment of black communities in New York and Chicago, and in contrast to white immigrant neighborhoods that sprang up in the 19th century as transitional sites for acculturation into U.S. society, Chinese immigrants formed Chinatowns as defenses against racial violence upon their arrival in the 1850s. [2] In the first part of the 20th century, Japanese and Filipino immigrants also built ethnic enclaves. These enclaves grew to become community centers where new immigrants lived and worked together, shared resources, built social and political organizations, and nurtured distinctive social and cultural lives. More recently, starting in the 20th century, these neighborhoods became more successful and birthed activism movements that turned them into "a source of strength and a source of pride,"

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[1] Michael Dill et al, (2000). Ethnic Segmentation in the American Metropolis: Increasing Divergence in Economic Incorporation, 1980-1990, accessed July 25, 2023, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/019791830003400105.

[2] Michael Liu and Kim Geron, (2008). Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768486.

for the people living there.[1]

Michael Liu and Kim Geron, authors of "Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice" dove into the history behind ethnic enclaves and defined four major categories: traditional enclaves, satellite enclaves, new enclaves, and ethnoburbs. It is critical to note that a neighborhood can be more than one since communities are constantly evolving.

Traditional enclaves are enclaves that were created before World War II by Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants because of segregated housing and discriminatory laws. Ian Shin, a University of Michigan Asian American studies professor, tells Axios, that there was a coordinated effort to "push people into Chinatown to exclude them from other neighborhoods" as white Americans increasingly associated Chinese people with disease and blamed them for economic turmoil and thus, Chinatowns were both "an outcome of racism as well as a place for the community to gather."[2] They created their own institutions and their own internal labor markets.[3] Centers for residential housing, community and religious organizations, ethnic shopping, and employment naturally followed that.

Satellite enclaves developed after the 1965 Immigration Act when new immigrants arrived in urban areas and overcrowded traditional enclaves forced them to create new enclaves to live in while keeping the traditional enclave accessible for goods and services. [4]

New enclaves serve even more recent immigrant and refugee populations. Ethnic entrepreneurs first create stores that provide goods and services to the ethnic community. These enclaves

may or may not have a residential component. South Asians, Koreans, and refugees from Southeast Asia have all built new enclaves. Many cities have encouraged the development of these enclaves, for the new immigrants have revitalized blighted or underutilized land.[5]

Ethnoburbs refer to suburban regions within major metropolitan areas that are characterized by the clustering of residential areas and business districts with distinct ethnic identities. These ethnoburbs are typically marked by a robust ethnic economy that maintains strong connections to the global economic landscape. Ethnoburbs are also diverse and inclusive communities where a particular ethnic minority group holds a notable presence, although they may not constitute an outright majority.[6]

All four types of enclaves are what house millions of immigrants across the United States. They provide refuge, a sense of community, and a way to make a living for these migrants.

3.2 Defining Gentrification

Although there is a generally understood definition of gentrification, the replacement of ethnic communities with white ones, for this research project, the word gentrification only means "the displacement of large amounts of people with less resources for people with more resources." The motivations of gentrifiers and those who get gentrified are the same, a concern for defining and preserving identity in the modern world: what differs between them are the means at the disposal of each group.[7] Those who get displaced are equally as concerned with defining and maintaining their identity and culture, but do not have access to the same amount of resources as gentrifiers.

Yet across all kinds of gentrification, typical gentrifying and non-gentrifying neighborhoods have relatively similar actual displacement rates[8]. The difference is that spaces sit vacant for relatively longer in gentrifying neighborhoods

[1] Shawna Che, Megan Rose Dickey, and Keldy Ortiz, "Chinatowns in America Resist Gentrification Attempts," Axios, March 30, 2023, https://www.axios.com/2023/03/30/chinatowns-america-gentrification-immigrants.

[2] Shawna Che, Megan Rose Dickey, and Keldy Ortiz, (2023, March 30). "Chinatowns in America Resist Gentrification Attempts," Axios, https://www.axios.com/2023/03/30/chinatowns-america-gentrification-immigrants.

[3] Anatalio Ubalde, (1996). Filipino American Architecture, Design, and Planning Issues. Los Angeles, CA: Flipside Press.

[4] Michael Liu and Kim Geron, (2008). Changing Neighborhood: Ethnic Enclaves and the Struggle for Social Justice, accessed July 3, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768486.

[5] ibid.

[6] Wei Li, (1998). "Anatomy of a New Ethnic Settlement: The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles," *Sage Journals*, accessed October 8, 2023, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0042098984871.

[7] P A Redfern, (2003). "What Makes Gentrification 'Gentrification'? - JSTOR," What Makes Gentrification "Gentrification"? accessed October 8, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43100503.

[8] Rachel Meltz, (n.d.). Gentrification and Small Business: Threat or Opportunity? https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328273.

and who replaces them. [1] Gentrifying neighborhoods attract more new types of services and multiple-establishment businesses than both non-gentrifying and established higher-income neighborhoods[2]. Neighborhoods undergoing gentrification lose businesses without the upside of new amenities[3].

4. Case Studies

Gentrification is ultimately a byproduct of an insurmountable wealth gap. Global cities such as London and New York that attract intense investment and conspicuous consumption by a new generation of extremely wealthy populations profiting from the ever-growing global finance and corporate service industries have become hubs for an advanced stage of gentrification characterized by extreme economic and social transformation, referred to as "super-gentrification."

4.1 Brooklyn Heights — Racial Gentrification

Brooklyn Heights, a neighborhood in New York City has become a fantastic example of super-gentrification. Brooklyn Heights, historically a diverse and vibrant community, has undergone a dramatic transformation over the years. Super-gentrification has manifested in this neighborhood through the influx of wealthy, predominantly white residents, skyrocketing property values, and the displacement of long-standing, lower-income communities. This transformation has reshaped the social fabric and physical landscape of the neighborhood.

Real estate and city policies are two of the driving factors of super-gentrification in Brooklyn Heights. Developers and investors have capitalized on the area's desirability, leading to the construction of luxury condominiums and the conversion of historic buildings.[4] City policies, such as rezoning and tax incentives, have facilitated and aided these changes, further fueling the process of super-gentrification.[5]

The consequences of super-gentrification affect both long-time residents and newcomers. One of the most prominent consequences of super-gentrification is the displacement of long-standing, lower-income residents. As property values rise and luxury developments proliferate, it becomes increasingly difficult for low-income individuals and families to afford housing in the neighborhood. This led to forced relocations to less expensive areas, disrupting established communities and social networks.[6] Similarly, the influx of affluent residents drives up rents and the overall cost of living in the neighborhood. This has a cascading effect, making it unaffordable not only for low-income residents but also for middle-class individuals and families who have lived there for generations. The rising cost of housing has led to economic disparities and social tension. Rising commercial rents can force long-standing mom-and-pop shops to close, making way for high-end boutiques and upscale restaurants catering to the new, wealthier residents. This can alter the character of the commercial landscape and limit economic opportunities for small, locally-owned businesses.[7]

The sudden increase in wealthy residents also places additional demands on public services such as schools, transportation, and healthcare facilities. This strains resources and explains disparities in the quality and accessibility of public services between different parts of the neighborhood.[8] The culmination of the effects of super-gentrification is the erasure of the cultural and historical character of a neighborhood. As wealthier newcomers move in and the

[1] ibid.

[2] Rachel Meltz, (n.d.). Gentrification and Small Business: Threat or Opportunity? https://www.jstor.org/stable/26328273.

[3] ibid.

[4] Loretta Lees, (n.d.). Super-Gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City ... https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1080/004209803 2000136174?journalCode=usja.

[5] Loretta Lees, (n.d.). Super-Gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City ... https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1080/004209803 2000136174?journalCode=usja.

[6] Vivian Yee, (2015 November 27). "Gentrification in a Brooklyn Neighborhood Forces Residents to Move On," *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/nyregion/gentrific ation-in-a-brooklyn-neighborhood-forces-residents-to-m ove-on.html.

[7] Themis Chronopoulos, (2020, September 5). "'What's Happened to the People?' Gentrification and Racial Segregation in Brooklyn," Springer US, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12111-020-0949 9-y/figures/18.

[8] Vivian Yee, (2015, November 27). "Gentrification in a Brooklyn Neighborhood Forces Residents to Move On," *The New York Times*, , https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/nyregion/gentrific ation-in-a-brooklyn-neighborhood-forces-residents-to-m ove-on.html.

neighborhood becomes more homogenized, the distinct cultural identity and heritage of the area can be lost. Local traditions, businesses, and community institutions that once defined the neighborhood may be pushed out or marginalized.

Now, the shift in racial demographics is obvious. In 2000, census data reported that nearly 42% of the Brooklyn Heights population identified as black.[1] In 2021, the same census data reported that less than 21% identify as black.[2]

4.2 Flushing — Class Gentrification

However, for Asian American communities, super-gentrification becomes more convoluted. While Brooklyn Heights was primarily gentrified by white people, Asian enclaves are being threatened by the wealth of other Asians. Flushing, Queens is a community that faces such a threat.

A waterfront district building luxury developments is the epitome of gentrification in action. Still, there's one major difference that separates it from the classic racial gentrification: Chinese American developers and wealthy Chinese immigrants are gentrifying a majority Chinese working-class neighborhood.

The developers F&T Group, Young Nian Group, and United Construction and Development Group — who own most of the property on the waterfront and have formed a development consortium, FWRA LLC, to push aggressively for its development — are Asian. Young Nian Group is a subsidiary of Zhonggeng Group, an international conglomerate headquartered in Shanghai. The founder of United Group, Chris Jiashu Xu, immigrated from China as a teenager and now serves as president. Sunny Chiu and Michael Lee, the founders of F&T Group, which is headquartered in Downtown Flushing, are Taiwanese-American immigrants. Knowing this advantage they have over white people looking to revitalize the neighborhood, the developers emphasize that they are not outsiders to Flushing, which is 69% Asian.[3] Ross Moskowitz, an attorney for them said "They've been here,

they live here, they work here, they've invested here," at a public hearing in February.

The increase in transnational capital and luxury developments is displacing longtime immigrant residents and small business owners and disturbing their cultural and culinary landscape. The median income per person in downtown Flushing, the area of the waterfront, is only $25,000.

The catalyst for this rapid change was Michael Bloomberg's administration identifying the Flushing waterfront as an underutilized area. In 2008, American banks were hesitant to lend due to the financial crisis, so Chinese real estate investors stepped in. Now, two-bedroom apartments in Tangram, the two-tower luxury mixed-use development built by F&T last year, started at over a million dollars a unit.

Seonae Byeon, an immigrant who was raised in Flushing and works as a tenant organizer with the Korean community action organization MinKwon Center, frequently encounters stories of individuals resorting to living in basements, attics, or sharing a bedroom with two or three others. In more exceptional cases, as many as eight to nine individuals may share a single room. While this has been a longstanding practice in the area, she notes that the number of people compelled to adopt such living arrangements has been rising significantly due to the effects of gentrification. According to data from the Department of Buildings, reports of unlawful home conversions in Flushing's community board district, where apartments are often subdivided into multiple dwellings in potentially unsafe ways, have consistently grown since 2010.

The largest change to Flushing due to this gentrification is happening in the food scene. Between 2000 and 2015, food and drink retail has more than doubled, from 400 stores to more than 800. However, many of the new stores are high-end venues, such as the upscale Sichuan restaurant Guan Fu and international Asian chains like Papparich. Helen Lee, executive vice-president of F&T, who selects retail tenants for more than 300,000 square feet of space under development in Flushing, told Eater in 2019 that she chooses businesses that cater to Flushing's changing population and that will change its

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[1] "Fort Greene — Brooklyn Heights Neighborhood Profile," NYU Furman Center, accessed October 2, 2023, https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/fort-greene-brooklyn-heights.

[2] ibid.

[3] "Flushing/Whitestone Neighborhood Profile," NYU Furman Center, accessed October 2, 2023, https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/flushing-whitestone.

"cheap eats" reputation.[1]

The proliferation of upscale dining establishments has had an adverse impact on the small, family-owned businesses in Flushing. James Chen, who runs a Flushing food delivery service, grew up in Queens and remembers Flushing for its "good food and good times". He says, "Now we try to avoid Flushing." Chen outlines a series of transformations: the traffic has become unmanageable, the area is excessively crowded, and a staggering 90% of the restaurants he used to visit regularly in his youth have closed down, primarily because of a threefold increase in rental prices.[2]

Even those businesses that have survived thus far are facing difficulties. The owner and founder of Main Street Imperial Taiwanese Gourmet, which has been operating since 1999, Tom Lin (Chef Lin), immigrated from Taiwan when he was 21, over 40 years ago. Annie, his wife who handles financial and operational matters, notes that rental and mortgage costs in their neighborhood have increased twofold and even tripled over time. Many of their Taiwanese friends who own restaurants have been forced to close shop because of the escalating rents. To cope with these rising expenses, Chef Lin initially extended his working hours to compensate for the work of two employees.[3]

Unfortunately, this displacement goes unstudied and underrepresented in media because it is one slightly more privileged minority group replacing another minority group. John Choe, the executive director of the Greater Flushing Chamber of Commerce says, "This displacement has been going on since 1996; it hasn't been highlighted in the media primarily because it's co-ethnics displacing other co-ethnics."[4]

Ying Yu Situ was raised in a working-class family in Manhattan's Chinatown and currently collaborates with predominantly East Asian

youth at MinKwon. Recently, they have selected the waterfront matter as their primary campaign focus. "We address the fact that the people trying to displace us are other Chinese people… When we went to a community board hearing, the developers were seated on one side, and they were clearly other Asian people," she says.[5]

Although the three developers responsible for the waterfront district stated that a significant portion of their investments originate from the United States, it is evident that they depend on an international financial network. Young Nian Group operates under the umbrella of a conglomerate based in Shanghai. F&T's partnership with Shanghai Construction Group led to the creation of their most recent luxury development, Tangram.[6] Additionally, United Group and its associates secured a $100 million loan from the Bank of China for Court Square City View Tower, which is the tallest condominium in Queens and the first to surpass a billion dollars in value.[7]

The importance of transnational investments lies in their ability to intensify the process of gentrification, as explained by Dr. Tarry Hum, who serves as a professor and chairs the Urban Studies department at Queens College. Despite the city administration's longstanding intentions, dating back to the Bloomberg era, to revitalize Flushing's waterfront, what had been lacking was the necessary financial resources.[8]

5. Implications of Findings

Both case studies have shown how gentrification has affected communities. They've faced the loss of a sense of community, culture, and prosperity. Even though the gentrification of Brooklyn Heights, a common case study location, is often reduced to a racial issue, as shown, the root of the issue is a lack of access to resources — homeowners, renters, business owners, and more were unable to sustain their lifestyle

[1] Carla Vianna, "How a Real Estate Boom Shaped Flushing's Highly Competitive New Dining Scene," Eater NY, February 25, 2019, https://ny.eater.com/2019/2/25/18235344/flushing-restaurants-real-estate-boom-impact-nyc-chinese.

[2] Vera Haller, "Downtown Flushing: Where Asian Cultures Thrive," New York Times, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/realestate/downtown-flushing-where-asian-cultures-thrive.html.

[3] Sarah Ngu, "'Not What It Used to Be': In New York, Flushing's Asian Residents Brace against Gentrification," The Guardian, August 13, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/13/flushing-queens-gentrification-luxury-developments.

[4] ibid.

[5] ibid.

[6] "History," FandT, September 5, 2023, https://www.fandtgroup.com/about-us/history/.

[7] Konrad Putzier, (2016, September 1). "Flushing Developer Refis LIC Skyscraper Project with $100M from Bank of China," The Real Deal, https://therealdeal.com/new-york/2016/09/01/flushing-developer-refis-lic-skyscraper-project-with-100m-from-bank-of-china/.

[8] Sarah Ngu, (2020, August 13). "'Not What It Used to Be': In New York, Flushing's Asian Residents Brace against Gentrification," The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/13/flushing-queens-gentrification-luxury-developments.

because they couldn't afford it and there was no aid in dealing with extreme price escalation. The same is true for Flushing.

Neither neighborhood can effectively battle the ongoing changes because the context within gentrification takes place is inescapably related to access to resources. This lack of resources stems from both a race issue and a class issue. Wealthy white communities are the ones most served by the government. Asian American ethnic enclaves are neither wealthy nor white, leaving them with the privilege of neither as well. These communities lack the resources needed to survive.

Resources can mean financial capital, but it is not only limited to that. Resources also means government aid in the form of programs, funding, and education. The difficulty with this in Asian American communities is the language barrier. Even if these programs existed, it would be hard to ensure that they would be accessible.

The fate of these ethnic enclaves hinges on the votes of the city planning commission and higher government. For communities comprised of a majority of immigrants with limited English-speaking capabilities, bringing concerns to the government's attention may be a difficult ask. However, new enclaves and ethnoburbs, as well as well-established traditional enclaves evolved to prioritize advocacy.

In the case of Flushing, the struggle against the waterfront district has rallied people already. Activists such as Byeon, Bobby Nathan (a Flushing tenant organizer, and others affiliated with the Flushing Anti-Displacement Alliance and other coalitions have outlined their specific demands: increased availability of affordable housing, improved sanitation services, enhanced educational facilities, dedicated centers for seniors and youth, the creation of union jobs, and the establishment of green space.[1] This represents their vision of the potential transformation of the waterfront area. It is now up to the government to hear their requests. All of the things that advocates are asking for are programs and affairs handled by the government. The residents of Flushing need increased public investment rather than relying on private funds.

The same goes for other ethnic enclaves. They require the government investment of not just money, but also manpower and time. To separate the development of luxury properties from the creation of affordable housing, to achieve genuinely public benefits, will necessitate a government response to the widespread grassroots movement that unites first-generation and second-generation immigrants from diverse backgrounds.

The best way to ensure the government responds to the people is to ensure that the people are voting educated. Both community centers and government organizations and programs should be working to ensure that true information is available to the people of ethnic enclaves is critical.

Improving the educational infrastructure available to adults in these communities is equally as important. Not only should they be educated about their voting, but they should have the opportunity to learn English comprehensively should they choose to.

These priorities need to be reflected in government and community leaders. Promoting self-advocacy and empowering not just the community, but also individuals is the most promising way to prevent further gentrification and reverse the damages already done. Only the government has the power to ensure every community has the resources it needs.

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