

A Close Reading:

# Unity and Community: The Chinatown Mural 1986- 2002

A Story of Oppression on the Fading  
Chinese Community in Boston

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38 Oak Street, Boston, Massachusetts

## History of Boston's Chinatown

In the late 19th century, many Chinese immigrants came to the United States because of economic opportunities. A lot of Chinese laborers from different states, like California, moved to Boston as factories realized they could pay them lower wages with higher outputs. Some of these families settled in an area called West End, which was a diverse and densely populated neighborhood in Boston.

However, in the early 20th century, West End became the target of urban renewal efforts, and many buildings were demolished to make way for new development projects. As a result, the Chinese community was forced to move to the current location of what is now Boston Chinatown.

Source: Global Boston



## Chinatown's Community

In the 20th century, Boston's Chinatown community remained closely connected, but they continued to face many challenges. Due to their low-income status, many immigrants confronted economic and social challenges, which included limited access to resources and services, as well as language barriers.

Despite these challenges, the Chinese community continued to persevere, creating strong networks of support and advocacy. During the mid-20th century, the people of Chinatown actively engaged in political activism and community organizing, advocating for improved living conditions, equitable access to healthcare and education, and the end of racism. In addition, the community established new businesses, cultural institutions, and organizations.

Source: BU



## The Unity and Community

During this time, Boston was also experiencing significant social and political changes, including the women's suffrage movement and the rise of labor unions. These movements helped to empower marginalized groups and improve working and living conditions for many people in the city. Life in Boston in the early 20th century was challenging, but it was also a time of great social and political transformation that helped to shape the city and the nation as a whole.

Through the involvement of a steering committee and interviews with over 100 locals, the Chinatown Unity Community Mural was produced and can be found at its original location of 38 Oak Street in Boston's Chinatown. This mural visually portrays the community's 100-year history, responding to their challenges, aspirations, and experiences in America.



## The Artists

### Wen-ti Tsen



Wen-ti Tsen was born in Taiwan in 1948 and later relocated to the United States to complete his MFA degree at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. After attending school, he traveled to Europe and studied more about art.

He often incorporates traditional Chinese and Taiwanese symbols and motifs into his work, blending them with contemporary imagery and techniques. Wen-ti Tsen explores themes of identity, history, and Chinese culture in his pieces. His vision for Unity Community was to bring attention to the threat of development and gentrification in Chinatown.

David Fichter was born in New York City in 1944 and received his MFA degree from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where he later taught for many years. His artwork primarily focuses on political and social issues. His work adds a lot of components of bright colors to bring life into his art.

Source: Global Boston and Harvard Magazine

### David Fichter



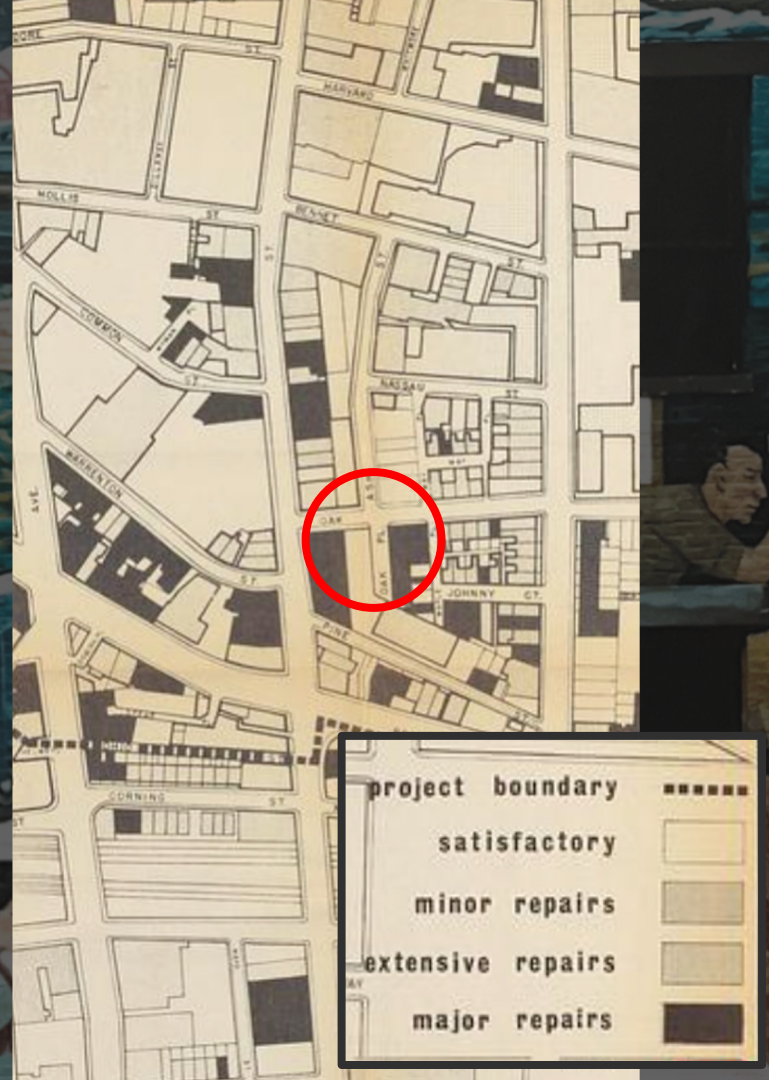
## The Chinatown Leventhal Map (1963)

“The New England Medical Center development area existing building condition”

Published by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the “T-N.E.M.C. development area existing building condition” illustrates the city planner’s views on the existing residential areas in Chinatown. They deem the buildings, including the residential home the mural was painted on, in need of “major repairs.”

The sheer existence of this map exemplifies the ongoing gentrification of Chinatown into a rich neighborhood. The purpose of this map served to carve a portion of Chinatown’s community to expand the Tufts Medical Center.

Source: Leventhal Map Center



## The Surrounding Area

The mural's strategic location near a residential area allowed the surrounding community to connect and relate to the piece most. Permanent Chinese families and residents pass by these streets every day, with many of them taking part in its creation. As mentioned previously, one of the mural's primary purposes was to fight the gentrification of Chinatown, and after it ironically got taken down, there was even more construction of new infrastructure replacing old buildings around 38 Oak Street.



# Surface Level Interpretation

## 1. The Campsite

After many Chinese workers were laid off, a community was formed in Boston as those former workers set up camp in present day Chinatown.

## 2. The Construction Work

The first job that many Chinese individuals were able to acquire in the city was construction based. The depicted construction site includes laborers building the Pearl Street Telephone Exchange.

## 3. The Garment Worker

Non-English speaking Asian immigrants found work creating garments after the Immigration Act of 1965. However, after the 1980s, textile imports from other countries began to overtake the demand for textiles from garment workers.





#### 4. The Laundryman

Laundry was one of the few jobs Chinese people were allowed to work, and was a mark of new independence for many families.



#### 5. The Cook

Apart from construction, borrowed money from help organizations allowed culinary work to become a staple job in Chinatown.



#### 6. People on Boat

Many asian people fled from their countries of origin to the United States via transportation by boat. Often these refugees faced exceptionally dangerous conditions.



## 7. Vans

As asian restaurants began to open throughout neighborhoods, vans began to make runs into Chinatown to shuttle workers and their groceries back and forth.



## 8. Community Garden

Chinatown residents utilized open parking lots to grow vegetable gardens to be more sustainable and environmentally friendly.



## 9. Health Care

Local healthcare was supported by the neighbouring community as a joined effort, supporting the weak and sick especially during times of need.





### 10. English Class

The Chinese community organized ESL classes to open job opportunities to the new immigrants who learned English as their second-language.



### 11. New Markets

The new enterprises and markets brought diversity to Boston's culture, food, and ideas.



### 12. Children playing ball

The new youths playing volleyball represents the future of the Chinese Community.



## MAIN IDEA

Through the small motifs present throughout the mural, the artists Wen-ti Tsen and David Fichter hope to rally the community of Chinatown, specifically the younger generation, to protect the historically prevalent Chinese culture from the effects of gentrification.

Traditional Chinese ideals are utilized to remind the community of their roots in hopes of connecting them together under commonly shared beliefs.

- The idea of a family structure is used on multiple occasions to fill up the space of the mural. For example, the daughter and father gardening in the parking lot, the father and son getting a medical checkup, the mom and son working a food stand, and the family picking up groceries.
- The ideals of “unity” and “helping one another” is placed above the murals, with their colors and patterns mimicking the traditional Chinese New Year red banner blessings.



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The illustrations of younger people urges the new generation to rise up and protect their community's culture.

- A group of students is learning English, writing on the blackboard, "I am," representing the prosperous opportunities the next generation can potentially achieve.
- A child can be seen looking over at a protest for Asian American rights and gentrification, exemplifying the younger generation's need to participate in social movements.



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The garment worker's fabric represents Chinatown's hard-working origins, with it being utilized to weave the community together.

The lines that outline the the fabric, gradually grow larger for the textile to encapsulate more space on the mural. In a way, it warps the viewer's perspective to highlight parts of the community activities, showing how Chinese history still affects the present community.



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The mural speaks up for the minority narrative of the Chinese community that is losing housing due to gentrification.

The position of the housing protest being in the center-left, while being in relatively large proportions, amplifies its significance in comparison to the rest of the mural.



## Close reading Mural's Sections

The mural depicts the various phases of Boston's immigration history while narrating the story of how Chinatown gradually established its identity and contributed significantly to building a cohesive community.

The camp and workers shown at the top of the mural reveal the starting point of the difficult journey that immigrants had to undertake in order to make their way to America.

This section of the mural illustrates the "call to action" that the Asians took and how they rallied together to build and strengthen their community.

This part portrays the Asian community's positive outlook toward the future, as seen through their smiling faces. It symbolizes the hopeful outcome of their hard work in establishing their community.





## Why was the Mural Destroyed

In recent years, Boston Chinatown has experienced significant changes as a result of gentrification and development. New luxury housing and commercial projects have been built in the area, and long-term residents have been displaced. The community continues to face challenges, including high levels of poverty and limited access to affordable housing.

The fact that this mural was taken down due to gentrification shows the unproportionally large power imbalance the wealthy landowners withhold in comparison to the Chinatown community. They are able to enforce their goals without objections despite facing large amounts of backlash from local residents.



## The Impact of the Mural

Although the original mural has been taken down, there are replicas of the original at other locations, including the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC). Before the mural was destroyed in 2002, the BCNC scanned the mural to recreate a 7 feet tall replica by pasting a thick poster on a wooden block.

However, this is obviously not the same, and its original impact of support for the marginalized Chinese community in Boston was lost when it was destroyed. Location is as vital to the mural as the actual artwork itself because of the community it is placed in and its implications for that chosen spot. The mural speaks up for the minority narrative of the Chinese community that is losing housing due to gentrification. So, naturally, when it was taken down for expansionism within Boston, it represented the destruction of the old Chinese community, in a way martyring the mural and further solidifying its intended message.



## The Impact of the Mural

However, the mural's existence is not entirely destroyed, as the aforementioned mural's recreation symbolizes the community's withstanding bond to continue fighting gentrification. According to the BCNC, the ideas the mural embodies live on in the hearts and minds of many residents of the Chinatown neighborhood. Although the mural was a hopeful lighthouse for the residents to appreciate daily, its bright message still resonates among the locals who still commemorate the Unity and Community mural.



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