Preservation Approaches to Preserving Sites of Chinese American Heritage in New York City

Yuexian Huang

University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract
The history of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans has long been overlooked by the main society of the U.S. Specifically, in New York City, a city with a rich history of Chinese immigration and historic preservation, there is still no locally designated landmark or district showing explicit connection with the city's Chinese community. This does not respond to the increasing focus on cultural diversity in the field.

Based on interviews and policy reviews, this research examines various groups that have played direct and indirect roles in preserving the physical fabric of Manhattan's Chinatown. Evaluated are preservation agencies, including the New York State Historic Preservation Office and New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission; non-profit organizations, including the Museum of Chinese in America, the Tenement Museum, the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, and the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative; and other organizations and community groups, such as the New-York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, and the W.O.W Project. The analysis of current efforts shows that better preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City needs not only improved work from each group but also more collaboration among all of them. The goal of this research is to get the history and culture of Chinese immigrants recognized and preserved through historic preservation. This would increase the visibility of this minority group and bring them more social justice. In this way, historic preservation is not an end itself, but a means to a larger social end.

Keywords
historic preservation, AAPI, ethnic heritage, Chinatown, social history

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Yuexian Huang

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______________________
Advisor
David Hollenberg
Adjunct Professor

______________________
Program Chair
Frank G. Matero
Professor
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I. Introduction

Attitudes toward historic preservation are valuable windows into much broader issues of social and cultural change in society, beyond the specific battles to preserve individual buildings and places.¹

Although the history of historic preservation in New York City is not the longest in the U.S., it has become one of the leading cities in the field. The demolition of Pennsylvania Station in New York City in 1963 not only aroused a movement in the historic preservation field, strongly contributing to the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, but also directly led to the city’s enactment of its Landmarks Preservation Law in 1965. As a result of the Law, the Landmarks Preservation Commission was created to manage the city’s historic resources by identifying, designating, and regulating New York City’s landmarks and historic districts. Now monitoring over 36,000 New York City landmark properties, it has become the largest municipal preservation agency in the country.² Moreover, there are numerous non-profit preservation organizations taking care of various historic sites and historic neighborhoods around the city.

However, in terms of preservation of heritage sites, in particular those related to minority groups, New York City still needs to improve its work. Given that the city has a

long and rich immigration history and a diverse population composed of various ethnic
groups, it is surprising that local designations have not yet come close to reflecting its
diversity. Especially, although Manhattan’s Chinatown has been the largest in the
country since the 1970s based on population, there is still no locally designated
landmark or district showing explicit connection with the Chinese community in the
city.³

The lack of cultural diversity in New York City’s landmarks does not correspond
to several of the transformations that have broadened the historic preservation field. As
the field has been turning to a value-centered approach, in contrast to a traditional
fabric-centered approach, more attention has been paid to intangible values such as
cultural, social, and political values. Also, in addition to monuments, preservationists
have begun to honor ordinary architecture and landscape that used to be overlooked by
the society. Most importantly, based on these two changes, it is increasingly recognized
that preserving historic structures need not be the end of preservation work but can be
a means to other social ends. Guided by this idea, preservation of the heritage of
minority groups has been regarded as a tool to address social justice issues. By telling
the unknown history of minority groups and recognizing their heritage, preservationists
help increase the visibility of these people and acknowledge the role they have been
playing in shaping both the tangible and intangible parts of the society.

Thus, several actions have been taken to increase cultural and ethnic diversity in the preservation field, responding to the awareness of racial inequality issues in our society. These include designation of sites directly related to the history of minority groups and new interpretation of those unknown history in existing historic sites. In particular, two initiatives at the federal level have set a national context to preserve Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage, which includes Chinese American heritage. In 1992, Congress designated May as Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month to appreciate AAPI’s contribution to the country. May was chosen because the first Japanese immigrant arrived at the U.S. in May 1843 and the transcontinental railroad was completed in May 1869, constructed mostly by Chinese immigrants.\(^4\) More recently, in 2012, the National Park Service initiated the Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Theme Studies, which is supposed to be finished this year.\(^5\) As do other such theme studies, it would set a historic context to understand the significance of AAPI heritage and serve as a precondition for future designation of National Historic Landmark.

Despite all these indicators of a raising awareness, when it comes to the practice, minority groups still face a lot of challenges to preserve their heritage because it is hard to convince the main society about its value and significance. Besides, even among minority groups, uneven attention and efforts exist: compared with African Americans,

\(^5\) Interview with Franklin Odo, interview by Yuexian Huang, January 23, 2018.
Chinese Americans have relatively less interest in their heritage preservation; also, due to the absence of political power in this country, they are facing more challenge to preserve their heritages. The absence of officially recognized Chinese American landmarks in New York City indicates that the field is still on its way to increase cultural diversity and to increase its social impact.

Based on all the contexts mentioned above, this research takes a close look at preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City, with a focus on Manhattan’s Chinatown. The research purpose is to try to determine why New York City has been so inactive in preserving Chinese American heritage sites. Based on interviews and policy reviews, this research examines preservation efforts of state and local agencies, non-profit organizations, and community groups, which have directly and indirectly contributed to preserving the historic Chinatown. After an analysis of current preservation approaches, it offers several recommendations towards improving preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City. The ultimate goal is to get the history and culture of Chinese immigrants recognized and preserved, which would contribute to leading to a city with more racial justice.
II. Literature Review

Preservation of Chinese American heritage sites is still to be explored in the field. More often than not, it is incorporated into discussions on preservation of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) heritage. Since AAPI is usually regarded as an ethnic community in American society, their heritages are also brought to the table as a whole. As for Chinese American heritage sites specifically, research on them is limited to particular sites and thus lacks holistic viewpoints. Considering the Chinese community, along with other AAPI communities, is still on its way to be recognized by the main society, it is not surprising that their heritage is underrepresented in the preservation field. However, the field has a longer history of valuing historic sites related to minority groups. To get a bigger picture of preservation of Chinese American heritage, literatures reviewed here include topics such as the multiplicity of heritage values, cultural diversity, racial and ethnic diversity in the cultural resources management field. In addition, due to the focus of this paper, research on Manhattan’s Chinatown is examined here.

Traditional preservation practice has tended to highlight mainly architectural features of historic buildings. As the field has moved from a fabric-centered to a value-centered approach, other values not necessarily tied to a building’s specific fabric such as historical, cultural, and social values are increasingly and more deeply recognized. Various values in heritage have been identified by scholars such as Alois Rigel, William
The multiplicity of values was also recognized in the Athens Charter (1931), the Venice Charter (1964), and the Burra Charter (1998). However, when it comes to the management of cultural resources in daily preservation practice, intangible values such as cultural value are still too often overlooked.

As one of those responses to the change in preservation field, a study was conducted in 1983 by the American Folklife Center and the National Park Service. The study, *Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage in The United States*, surveyed federal efforts to protect the full spectrum of cultural resources in the United States, going beyond a fabric-centered approach. The report identified two weaknesses in the national system; first, the system for historic preservation devotes its main effort to physical structures and often neglects “the living context and many traditional expressions of culture”; second, the system supporting cultural resources doesn’t pay enough attention to documentation and thus “misses a major chance in cultural preservation”. Based on a thorough evaluation on cultural conservation efforts by private and public local, state, and federal levels, the report offers a series of recommendations. A goal for the National Park Service is to coordinate its efforts, as well as those of others, to incorporate the intangible cultural value of historic sites.

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As preservationists become more aware of the cultural meaning of historic places, they have started to frequent the idea of cultural diversity. The idea is boosted by the increasingly diverse population around the country due to immigration, which in turn has led to more and deeper discussions on racial and ethnic diversity in the preservation field. For example, in the National Trust’s 1991 National Preservation Conference, which marked the 25th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act, diversity was identified as a major force that would shape both historic preservation and the larger American society. This conference resulted in the following conference’s focus on diversity and more discussions around it.

When Antoinette Lee wrote “Cultural Diversity and Historic Preservation” in 1992 for the *Historic Preservation Forum*, cultural diversity was not something new in the field. According to Lee, the idea has its roots in the origins of the preservation movement, and preservation of historic sites related to groups other than Native American “began in the 1940s when the George Washington Carver Monument in Diamond, Missouri was added to the national park system”. 8 According to Lee, this concept gained momentum in the 1960s in response to “the civil rights movement, new trends in historical research and interpretation, and the coalescing of cultural groups interested in their heritage”. 9

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9 Lee.
The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and its ensuing regulatory policies incorporated criteria to include the social history of structures and the importance of properties with local significance, which was regarded by Diane Lea as an addition to the national focus of the 1930 Historic Sites Act. As Antoinette Lee puts it in From Historic Architecture To Cultural Heritage: A Journey Through Diversity, Identity And Community, although the Act and its implementation guidelines did not explicitly mention diversity, the expansion of the National Register of Historic Places to include properties of state and local significance “set the groundwork for identification and recognition of historic places associated with minority groups”. As a consequence, in the 1970s and 1980s, preservationists started to make serious efforts to address cultural diversity in “numerous survey and inventory projects, nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, rehabilitation and restoration projects, and interpretation and educational efforts”.

Among all ethnic groups, African Americans to date have perhaps benefited the most from the growing attention to ethnic heritage. According to Alanen and Melnick, as early as 1930s, there were some efforts to record oral histories of early enslaved people during the Depression. In Place, Race, And Story: Essays on the Past And Future

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of Historic Preservation, Ned Kaufman notes that by the 1980s, several states such as New York, as well as Alabama, Georgia, and other southern states, created preservation groups and guidebooks to recognize and preserve historic African-American properties. Moreover, some historic sites, including Colonial Williamsburg, Monticello, and Independence Hall, also began to interpret their historic involvement with slavery.

Compared with African Americans, other ethnic groups such as Asian Americans are more underrepresented in the nation’s preservation efforts, let alone Chinese Americans as a subgroup within the Asian American community. In 2004, Ned Kaufman made an effort to evaluate to what extent minority ethnic groups were represented in the National Register of Historic Places. It was not easy, since most properties were not listed by their association with any ethnic group. Out of over 77,000 listings included in the National Register, there were about 1,300 explicitly related to African American heritage, 90 with Hispanic, and 67 with Asian. These numbers show an uneven focus on heritage associated with different ethnic groups.

Luckily, there has been increasing attention to AAPI heritage. Focusing on the West Coast, Gail Dubrow analyzed the imprints of immigrants from Asia and Pacific Islands in 2010. She identified two main reasons behind the invisibility of their heritage: those immigrants “left remarkably few obvious cultural imprints on the built environment and landscape” and instead settled in altered American buildings;

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14 Kaufman.
preservation agencies didn’t have enough knowledge and guidance to effectively identify, evaluate, and preserve those resources.\textsuperscript{15} Since AAPIs have made significant contributions to the western landscape of America, Dubrow called for more efforts to preserve their cultural resources. She suggested more surveys to identify historic sites, involvement of ethnic communities, and development of useful frameworks to evaluate significance of ethnic heritage. She also highlighted the importance of new designations of Asian American properties to improve their coverage in the National Register program and parallel programs at the local level, as well as overlooked ethnic resources in existing Historic Districts.

More recently, as a response to the fiftieth anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, Michelle G. Magalong and Dawn Bohulano Mabalon examined historic and cultural preservation of heritage sites of AAPIs. Based on the fact that AAPI heritage sites have not gained enough recognition at municipal, state, and federal levels, they offered four policy recommendations to better preserve, designate, and interpret AAPI heritage sites. What they suggested are broader preservation approaches to deal with cultural diversity, more support to local non-profits organizations in ethnic neighborhoods, more partnerships with AAPI communities, and more diverse and broader representation in the National Register of Historic Places. They pointed out that

the National Register of Historic Places should “reflect the population size and diversity
of AAPIs”.16

Based on historic sites across the country, research on Chinese American
heritage, although incorporating various themes, all call for better heritage preservation.
For example, Leland T. Saito documented the negotiation between the Chinese
community and city officials over the architectural and historical significance of the
Chinese Mission in San Diego, California. He pointed out that even though current
designation policies seemed racial-neutral, they still favored the history of white people
over the history of racial minorities, and thus led to racialized results.17 Peter Nien-chu
Kiang, on the other hand, looked at the historic Chinese immigrant burial grounds within
Mount Hope Cemetery, a public cemetery in Boston. By exploring the site’s role in
founding and sustaining the Chinese Historical Society of New England and its
involvement in the Asian American Studies program at the University of Massachusetts
Boston, he demonstrated its social, cultural, historical, and spiritual values to not only
the local Chinese population but also the Southeast Asian communities.18

In terms of Manhattan’s Chinatown in New York City, researchers have been
demystifying this old ethnic enclave by telling its history. Michelle Chen, for instance,

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16 Michelle G. Magalong and Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, “Cultural Preservation Policy and Asian Americans
and Pacific Islanders: Reimagining Historic Preservation in Asian American and Pacific Islander
Communities,” AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community 14, no. 2 (January 1, 2016): 105–16.
17 Leland T. Saito, “From ‘Blighted’ to ‘Historic’: Race, Economic Development, and Historic Preservation in
18 Peter Kiang, “Asian American Studies Praxis and the Educational Power of Boston’s Public Chinese Burial
explored the stories of Chinatown’s tongs in the early 20th century and explained how they reflected the development of the Chinese American community.\textsuperscript{19} Kenneth Guest focused on more recent history about Chinese immigrants from Fuzhou, Southeast China. These newer immigrants have not only revitalized the Chinatown in Manhattan but also developed satellite Chinatowns in Queens and Brooklyn. What’s more, Guest also identified real estate speculation and gentrification as main challenges for Manhattan’s Chinatown to serve new labor immigrants.\textsuperscript{20} In addition to the history of Chinatown, other interests include Chinatown’s gentrification and economic development as well as cultural identity of Chinese Americans.\textsuperscript{21}

Although those historical narratives of Chinatown usually focus on its intangible aspects, such as history, culture, and tradition, some literatures also examine physical structures. In \textit{Chinatowns of New York City}, Wendy Wan-Yin Tan used historic maps, accompanied by historical images and corresponding contemporary ones of buildings and streetscape, to show physical changes in Chinatown.\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, in \textit{New York City’s Chinese Community}, Josephine Tsui Yueh Lee explored the street life and experiences of

the Chinese community in New York City through historic photographs. These researches, although not specifically aimed at heritage preservation of Chinatown, correspond to preservationists’ interest on historic buildings.

The physical fabric of Chinatown and its transformation have been explored in some detail through the lens of urban planning by some scholars. Greg Umbach and Dan Wishnoff, for instance, reviewed three failed proposals, including “China Village”, Chinatown Revitalization Plan, and The Unity Arch, introduced between 1950 and 2005. According to them, although these initiatives were put forward by city officials, business leaders also strategically made use of these urban planning policies to orientalize the physical space of Chinatown and its residents to gain more economic benefits. Thus, the physical fabric of today’s Chinatown is to some degree shaped by the negotiation between the city and Chinese American merchants.

So far, little research has been specifically targeted at preservation in Chinatown in New York City. One rare example is Chuo Li’s study on preservation practices of Chinatown in “Commercialism and Identity Politics in New York’s Chinatown”. In this paper, he notes that the transformation of physical fabric of Chinatown reflected the socioeconomic changes in both local and international levels. Thus, the architectural and landscape representation of Chinatown, which tends to show exoticism, is to some degree associated with commercial interests. These socioeconomic changes and efforts

to orientalize Chinatown urged preservation to save the collective memory and the
community’s identity. Here, Li examined several actions including early endeavors to
preserve actual historic buildings, as well as the shifted focus in the 1980s to the
“reconstitution of the diluted social and cultural memories of the Chinese community”,
exemplified by the New York Chinatown History Project.25

As we can see from literatures discussed above, much research on New York
City’s Chinatown, and other cities’ as well, has been conducted by Chinese American
professionals. It is self-explanatory that Chinese Americans are more concerned about
their heritage due to their cultural and historical roots in Chinatown. However, it also
reflects the mainstream academic field’s lack of interest in these heritage sites and their
preservation. Therefore, efforts are needed to raise the awareness of importance of
Chinese American heritage in historic preservation field.

25 Li, “Commercialism and Identity Politics in New York’s Chinatown.”
III. Background

3.1 The Transforming Preservation Field in The United States

The field of historic preservation in the United States has changed a lot since its emergence in the 19th century. One of the earliest preservation efforts, as commonly recognized, was the grand success of saving Mount Vernon by Ann Pamela Cunningham and her colleagues in 1853.26 The way we think about preservation and the way we practice it continue to steadily evolve. Major changes have included the transformations from an almost exclusive focus on individual monuments to valuing vernacular landscape, from a fabric-centered approach to recognizing the multiplicity of values, and from honoring a selected past to appreciating the full spectrum of history. Most importantly, the field has been involved in a larger context of social movement by recognizing that preserving a historic structure is not always or only an end by itself, but a means to other social ends. Due to all these transitions, the heritages of minority groups, which used to be invisible to the public, have been getting more attention from preservationists and are thus increasingly seen by the society.

Historic preservation in the U.S. has its patriotic roots in the early period.27 When Ann Pamela Cunningham endeavored to save Mount Vernon, she was aiming at preserving stories of the founding fathers so as to educate future generations about patriotism.28 Similar to Mount Vernon, other historic sites preserved in the same period

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26 Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History.*
are mainly signs of patriotism, such as Washington’s Headquarters in Morristown, New Jersey and Valley Forge in Pennsylvania, saved in 1873 and 1878 respectively.29 For a long time, monuments, representing directly the heritages of great men, were the focus of preservation.

Following the passion for history of heroes and leaders, preservation work was later led by wealthy individuals who regarded preservation as a way to express their vision of American society’s past and present.30 As a response to industrialization, several “historic villages” were established or preserved. For example, in 1929, Henry Ford founded Greenfield Village, an open-air history museum composed of almost 100 buildings, structures, and objects, which were moved from their original locations, to memorize pre-industrial history.31 A more well-known effort is the recreation of Colonial Williamsburg backed by John D. Rockefeller in 1920s, as a celebration of American history. Here, the purpose of preserving historic places is to capture the history and to commemorate it.

Although the field started from preservation efforts by a few activists, it did not remain long in the hands of a small group of individuals and institutions before it began to go through professionalization and bureaucratization.32 Before 1930 there were very

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30 Barthel, “Historic Preservation.”
few attempts to create a national preservation organization. An early effort to create a regional preservation organization is the founding of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) in 1910. Led by architectural historian William Sumner Appleton, SPNEA focused its preservation work on architecture. It did not take long before architects and historians became more crucial in preservation field. Also, paralleling the series of nation-wide legislative achievements that took place in the 20th century – including the 1906 Antiquities Act, the founding of the National Park Service in 1916, the Historic Sites Act of 1935, the Historic American Buildings Survey in the 1930s, the founding of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949, and the National Preservation Act of 1966 – led to an increasingly organized preservation field, in both institutional and legal ways.

The preservation field has been through many movements since its origin, and it keeps moving forward. Among all the transformations, the evolution of the way we value historic structures is remarkable since a range of values has been central to why we preserve historic buildings. As the field changes, the scope of social values has been enlarged. The traditional preservation approach focuses on physical fabric, and architectural and historic values are highlighted when identifying the significance of a historic site, which is probably the result of architects’ and historians’ dominant early role in the field. However, preservationists have been embracing the idea of a more

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33 Barthel, “Historic Preservation.”
34 Hosmer, “Preservation Comes of Age.”
values-centered approach and started to recognize the multiplicity of values. This idea could be traced back to 1902 when art historian Alois Reigl defined age, historical, commemorative, use, and newness values of heritage. Since then, several scholars and organizations, such as William Lipe, Burra Charter, English Heritage, have explored and broadened the typology of heritage value, recognizing various values such as social, cultural, and economic values. These changes have been reflected on the designation criteria of National Register of Historic Places since three out of four criteria are not about architectural design. Benefitting from this transition, historic sites that do not have distinctive architectural features but are socially and culturally significant are able to get protected.

Another benefit of recognizing the multiplicity of heritage value is that it helps the field go beyond physical structures and get connected with the whole society through those intangible factors. To put it another way, by admitting various values of heritage, preservationists recognize various ways by which heritage can contribute to the society. This, in turn, supports the importance of preserving a broader array of historic places.

However, it was not until recently that the preservation field started to relate itself more to the outside world. This trend is reflected on preservationists’ effort to

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36 Reigl, Alois. 1902
interpret the history of historic preservation through the lens of social movement and to practice preservation as a tool to build a better society, looking into both past and future. According to Randall Mason, when considering preservation field’s relation to society, there are two impulses, one looking inward while the other looking outward.38 The former one, termed curatorial impulse, is rooted in preservation’s fundamental goal to conserve artworks; the later one, termed urbanistic impulse, seeks to relate historic preservation to other disciplines. The whole field, as Mason sees it, is becoming more outward-looking, trying to respond to social issues in collaboration with other fields.39

While the field has been transforming, it is still exploring ways to be better. The fundamental questions, the ones preservationists have always been trying to answer, include why we preserve, what we preserve and for whom. The answers have been changing, in a broader way, and will surely continue to be so. Although the field has its root in overt links to patriotism, over time, it has related to more social issues like urban development, social well-being, cultural expression, discrimination, and immigration.40 Especially, as Max Page and Randall Mason stated in “Rethinking The Roots of The Historic Preservation Movement”, due to a series of political revolutions since the 1960s, from civil rights movement to women’s rights movement to postmodernism, “the political values of preservation, and its value in shaping personal, social-group, and

39 Mason.
40 Mason.
national identity, are paramount”. Thus, preserving historic places is no longer merely for memorializing the history of founding fathers but is more about to preserve our sense of stability, our identity and social memories, which have become explicit component, for example, of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act’s introductory language.

In terms of what we preserve, the field has not only been broadening its scope to look at intangible values contained in physical structures but has also been exploring a fuller sense of our past. Keeping architecture intact is no longer the full content or end of our work. While historic and aesthetic values are still critical, contemporary values such as economic value are equally important since they help heritage keep up with the modern world. In addition, preservation reflects its society in ways of choosing what to preserve, how to preserve, and how to interpret and for and by whom. If we look at the history of historic preservation, it is relatively easy in retrospect to identify histories and memories that were usually filtered and selectively presented. For instance, structures related to the history of African Americans and immigrants were kept off the National Register for many years, revealing a perpetuated white supremacy in the society. Many early registered buildings, such as Mount Vernon, although contain the history of slavery, do not include them in their nomination reports. Also, the history of other minority groups such as women and the LGBTQ community were invisible to the public

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41 Page and Mason, *Giving Preservation a History*.
42 Page and Mason.
for a long time. Luckily, as a result of social reforms, a broader spectrum of history is getting acknowledged by preservationists. Actions include designation of sites directly related to history of minority groups at federal, state, and local levels, and new interpretation of invisible history in existing historic sites.

In 2016, marking the 50th anniversary of the National Historic Preservation Act and 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, preservationists reflected a lot on the history of the field and kept seeking for changes at the same time. A commonly shared idea is that “preservation is about people.” Last year, as a follow-up, the National Trust for Historic Preservation published an issue named Preservation for People: A Vision for the Future. In this vision, three key concepts of a people-centered preservation movement are proposed: highlighting the full diversity of American story, more equitable and sustainable communities, and more partnerships to address fundamental social issues. In the narration of the first concept, it points out that current designation and interpretation have not fully represented the stories of all Americans. Based on the current situation, it pictures a future where the full American experience is understood, where historic sites tell their full stories, and where people are able to get places, as well as the untold stories of places that are already recognized, that matter to them recognized by the society. As a response to these goals, this paper will look at specific heritage of minority groups, Chinese American heritage sites, and

preservation in New York City to explore better approaches to improve the preservation work there.

3.2 Historic Preservation in New York City

Although New York City does not have the longest history of historic preservation in the U.S., as the field has its origin in New England and Virginia, it has become one of the leading cities in the field. There are more than 36,000 New York City landmark properties under the protection of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.\(^{45}\) In addition, various preservation organizations have been active in preserving the city’s heritages throughout all five boroughs, including city-wide ones like the Landmark Preservation Conservancy and Historic Districts Council and neighborhood-based ones such as the Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts and Landmark West. Also, historic sites around the city are managed by not-for-profit organizations and foundations. The diversity of historic landmarks and preservation organizations makes New York an ideal city to research and practice historic preservation.

Historic preservation in New York City is usually considered to start from the destruction of Pennsylvania Station. However, as argued by Randall Mason, by the turn of the 20th century, preservation was already thriving in New York City and was active between the 1890s and 1920s.\(^{46}\) The history of historic preservation in New York is

\(^{45}\) NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, “About LPC - LPC.”

consistent with the nation-wide history of the field, as it emerged with two seemingly opposite approaches – curatorial approach and urbanistic approach – one looking inward while the other looking outward. However, it is also distinctive as the field in New York City came into being when the city was going through drastic changes. Here, historic preservation was part of the Progressive movement at the turn of the 20th century and the modernization of the city. Born in the largest metropolis in the U.S. and still one of the largest in the world, preservation was “first transformed from an occasional hobby of elites into an urban reform movement”.47

Preservationists have been fighting for the protection of heritages in New York City, as seen in saving Grand Central Terminal and the Broadway theaters to the campaign to preserve Greenwich Village. Yet, among all those efforts to save historic places, preservation of sites related to minority groups, such as ethnic heritages, is relatively new as it is in the preservation field in U.S. Thus, although the city has a long history of immigration and rich historical resources of different ethnic groups, for a long time, preservation was not the primary, or even a major way, by which those stories were told. Among diverse ethnic heritages, African American heritage might be the earliest to gain attention from New York preservationists. An example is the discovery and preservation of African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, which reflects national awareness of facing the slavery history. However, compared with African Americans and

47 Mason.
Latino Americans, other ethnic minority groups such as Asian-Americans still have not gotten their heritages recognized in New York City.

Table 1. Racial/Ethnic Makeup of New York City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian &amp; Pacific</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islander</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New York City has always had a diverse racial population, and its diversification continues. According to the 2010 census, 33 percent New York City residents are white, 26 percent are Hispanic, 26 percent are black, and 13 percent are Asian (Table 1).

Compared with census records in 1990 and 2000, white and black populations have been decreasing while Hispanic and Asian populations are growing. These demographic changes, however, have not been reflected in preservation field. On the contrary, the heritage of Asian-Americans, for example, is still underrepresented in the city. As the

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field of historic preservation is changing towards a people-centered approach, it is to be expected that the histories of all Americans are understood with valuable heritage recognized and preserved. This is especially important in New York City due to its rich history of immigration, historic preservation, and social movement. As the racial makeup of the city becomes increasingly diverse, preservation of minority groups’ heritage should gain more attention.

3.3 Chinese American and Their Imprints

Although the first wave of Chinese immigration into the United States began as early as the mid-19th century during the California Gold Rush, Chinese immigrants have not left many distinguishable physical imprints on this continent. The main reason is that the Chinese community went through a long period of explicit discrimination in this country. Also, Chinese immigrants who first came to the U.S. mainly worked as laborers, originally in railroad construction, and later in laundries, restaurants, and grocery stores. Thus, on the one hand, early Chinese people in the U.S. did not have the ability to build great architecture to be memorized by later generations and, on the other hand, they didn’t want to be targeted by the mainstream society by attaching their Chinese identity to buildings in which they lived. Therefore, the lack of existing Chinese American

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heritages as well as social recognition towards them comes from both inside and outside the community.

Discrimination towards Chinese immigrants started from the very beginning when Chinese workers arrived at the San Francisco Bay Area for mining in the early 19th century. The Naturalization Law of 1790 prohibited non-white immigrants from getting U.S. citizenship. So even before they came, the country had been excluding non-white residents. As the number of Chinese laborers grew, there was increasing animus towards them from white laborers, which led to the Congress’s enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a well-known act that completely suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers. This Act was originally aimed for 10 years but was renew in 1892 and later made permanent in 1902. Later, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 mitigated the animus towards immigrants by allowing their entry through a race-based quota system. It was not until the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act of 1943 that Chinese people were finally allowed immigration and naturalization, around 60 years later. However, this Act still prohibited property ownership and business by the Chinese community. Finally, the Immigration and Nationalization Act of 1965 abolished the quota system and allowed the entry of a large number of Chinese immigrants. This was a sign of official termination of discrimination towards ethnic Chinese. However, due to the long tradition, Chinese people, along with their heritage, are still underestimated in the U.S.
Despite the difficult past, early Chinese immigrants left a valuable heritage to their future generations. The most common form of Chinese American heritage is no doubt Chinatowns. As a result of racial discrimination and cultural difference, early Chinese immigrants tended to concentrate in some areas in major cities, and this is how Chinatowns came into being. These ethnic enclaves provided Chinese immigrants with “protection, affordable housing, jobs, ethnic products and community support”. However, since Chinatowns are mostly located in or near center areas in cities, they often have been threatened by urban development. What’s worse, since the history of Chinatown is not usually appreciated by the larger society, buildings here are under larger risk of demolition. Today, the survival of these downtown Chinatowns becomes uncertain as they are no longer the main starting points for new immigrants who come with more knowledge, skills, and capital.

As many other cities in the east coast, New York shares a similar story of Chinese men being driven out of the western states as their work on the first transcontinental railroad came to an end. The history of Manhattan’s Chinatown could be traced back to 1858 when a Cantonese man named Ah Ken resided on Mott Street and ran a cigar store on Park Row. As more Chinese workers moved in from the West Coast, later joined by new immigrants, Chinatown in Manhattan has expanded a lot. However, Chinese people have traditionally settled along Mott Street and its surrounding areas since the 1870s.

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51 Lin, “Polarized Development and Urban Change in New York’s Chinatown.”
52 Li, “Commercialism and Identity Politics in New York’s Chinatown.”
With the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, a large wave of new immigrants flooded into New York City, bringing several transitions to the Chinatown neighborhood including the growth of population and real estate investment. Since Manhattan’s Chinatown was not able to accommodate such a large amount of population and capital, many residents and residents were forced to leave the downtown area and moved to new ethnic enclaves such as Flushing in Queens and Sunset Park in Brooklyn.

As for the initial Chinatown in Manhattan, the immigration wave has made it the largest Chinatown in terms of population since the early 1970s. Since then, it has experienced a series of physical transformations as a consequence of a few architectural and landscape projects. Especially, due to its close proximity to the economic center of Manhattan, it has been targeted and influenced by several urban redevelopment projects. For example, as early as early 1950s, a “China Village” plan called for a clearance of the central area of Chinatown, a then notorious slum, to be replaced with Chinese-style modern public housing at the place. This proposal, although failed, is one of those planning-involved efforts to exoticize the physical fabric of Chinatown in order to attract tourists. Other similar initiatives include the 1976 Street Revitalization Plan, which suggested more cultural and artistic display to represent Chinese identity. Like the “China Village” plan, it did not succeed as well. However, some of its ideas materialized later, such as the visitors’ information kiosk, which was built in 2004.

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53 Li.
54 Umbach and Wishnoff, “Strategic Self-Orientalism.”
55 Xu, “Why Chinatown Has Gentrified Later than Other Communities in Downtown Manhattan.”
These initiatives caused lots of negotiations among authorities, business and association leaders, and residents, which have influenced the physical fabric of Chinatown to varying degrees.

The preservation of historic Chinatown faces more challenges in addition to those planning schemes. Due to a large amount of international capital since the early 1970s, steel-and-glass and tall buildings have been replacing traditional small-scale and low-rise ones.\textsuperscript{56} Also, rapid urban development in the area has made it hard for old-fashioned business to survive. In the early 1980s, many traditional Chinese stores were forced to close as a result of unaffordable rents. Some others have expanded their businesses to target new immigrants and tourists. The September 11 Attacks in 2001 also brought about a series of economic downturns in Chinatown and caused shutdowns of many stores. These economic transformations of Chinatown have made it hard to preserve its heritage, in both tangible and intangible ways.

The development of Chinatown is part of the city’s history and is also related to the history of Chinese immigration around the country. Preservation of Chinese American heritage in New York City, especially Manhattan’s Chinatown, is meaningful to both the local and national Chinese community. As the discrimination towards Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans has not come to an end since the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, preservation of Chinese American heritage would be a crucial tool to increase the visibility of this ethnic group. By appreciating their history,

\textsuperscript{56} Li, “Commercialism and Identity Politics in New York’s Chinatown.”
their heritage, and their role in American history, preservationists would contribute to a more equal and broadly inclusive society where Chinese Americans, along with other minority groups, will have a better quality of life.

While sections of Manhattan’s Chinatown appear vibrant during the day — particularly East Broadway and Canal Street — the old core of Chinatown, including Mott, Elizabeth, Doyer and Pell streets, is largely deserted in the evening. Rising rents have driven many long-term residents out of the neighborhood. Dramatic shifts are already taking place on the edges of the new Chinatown as old tenements are being renovated to make luxury condominiums, while trendy nightclubs and bars frequented by young professionals from outside the neighborhood are popping up next to long-time local businesses. Increasing development of luxury housing is spurring increased gentrification, rising costs and instability for local businesses.\footnote{Guest, “From Mott Street to East Broadway.”}
IV. Power and Regulatory Dynamics in Preserving Chinatown

4.1 New York State Historic Preservation Office

The New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), within the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, plays a role in preserving Chinese American heritage sites in New York City since the Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District is on the National and State Register. The historic district was listed in the New York State Register of Historic Places in 2009 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. By approving the designation, the SHPO recognized the significant role these two communities play in the history of immigration in America from 1800 to 1965. Here, Chinese American heritage, along with Italian American heritage, contributes to the significance of this historic district in terms of their social history, architecture, and archaeology.

The historic district is a narrow rectangular area containing 38 blocks in lower Manhattan (Figure 1). It is roughly bounded by Baxter Street, Centre Street, Cleveland Place and Lafayette Street to the west, Jersey Street and East Houston to the north, Elizabeth Street to the east, and Worth Street to the south. Within these boundaries are located historic buildings constructed mainly from the mid-19th to early 20th century, which form the original historic core of Chinatown and the historic extent of Little Italy. In total there are, as of the date of designation, 624 contributing resources, including

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59 Howe.
621 buildings, 2 parks and 1 structure, as well as 76 non-contributing buildings. In this area, Chinese and Italian communities coexist and have been closely interacting with each other for almost a century and a half.\textsuperscript{61}

\textit{Figure 1. Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District.}

\textsuperscript{61} Howe, “Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District.”
The Chinatown and Little Italy National Register Historic District meets three out of four designation criteria. Under these three criteria, its statement of significance highlights the social value and historic value of these buildings. First of all, the Chinese American and Italian American ethnic heritage and social history are regarded as nationally significant considering their association with the immigration history of the U.S. Also, the neighborhood’s history embodies important information about housing, commerce, industry, ethnicity, etc. The most impressive part of this report is its description of the architectural significance of this historic district. Instead of merely focusing on physical fabric such as architectural features and styles, the report bases the architectural significance on how numerous tenements in the area played their role in accommodating a large amount of immigrant population around 20th century. By detailing the stories of Chinese and Italian immigrants, the designation not only recognizes the contribution of these two ethnic groups to the built environment of New York City but also sets a national context to understand the significance of these ethnic heritages and the social history they entail.

The SHPO was involved in its role of determining the eligibility of the proposed listing and reviewing the nomination report. Early in the listing process, the SHPO supported the designation by admitting that both the tenement architecture and the area’s cultural and social history make the proposed district worth preserving, according
to Dan Keefe, spokesperson of SHPO. After the eligibility for designation was determined, Kathy Howe, the SHPO Historic Preservation Specialist, was assigned to work with the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, sponsor of the nomination, to complete the nominating process.

By approving the designation of Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District, the SHPO also allows property owners to have access to potential financial stimulus. According to the federal policy, owners of income producing historic properties that are contributing resources in a historic district may be eligible for a 20% federal tax credit. New York State also offers a similar tax credit program, which must be used in conjunction with the Federal Investment Tax Credit Program. Besides, rehabilitation work on historic residential buildings may qualify for a tax incentive from the State. Through various tax credit and incentive programs, the SHPO helps preserve the physical fabric of the neighborhood.

However, the State and National Register have their limits in preserving historic buildings in the historic district. First of all, alterations on private property paid for with private money are not protected or regulated in National Register. Secondly, unlike the local designation, although the designation honors heritage of Chinese and Italian immigrants, neither State or National Register can prevent historic buildings from demolition. The SHPO does not monitor physical changes of the historic district except

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in certain situations, such as when Section 106 is involved. In addition, the historic
district only includes the historic core of Chinatown. Chinatown nowadays, although it
has no official boundaries, continues to grow well beyond its historic core. Thus, historic
buildings located outside the area that the National Register historic district
encompasses are under no protection.

In addition to the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places, the
federal historic rehabilitation tax credit program, and the state historic preservation
grants program, the SHPO also conducts a Statewide Historic Resources Survey, which
can be a potential tool to preserve Chinese American heritage in New York City and
elsewhere in New York State. A Historic Resources Survey is a process of identifying and
documenting historic resources which have local, state and/or national significance. As
it is written in *New York State Historic Preservation Plan 2015-2010*, to preserve New
York State’s diverse cultural resources, the SHPO has been working on surveys of
historic sites related to minority groups such as the LGBT and Puerto Rican
communities.63 If the SHPO were to initiate a survey related to Chinese community, it
would set a state-wide context to identify and further preserve Chinese American
heritage sites.

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York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Division for Historic Preservation, 2016).
4.2 The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) is the municipal preservation agency in New York City. It was created in 1965 with the enactment of the Landmarks Preservation Act, which was a response to the demolition of the architecturally significant Pennsylvania Station in 1963.64 The Commission is responsible for identifying, designating, and protecting New York City’s landmarks, including individual landmarks, interior landmarks, scenic landmarks, and historic districts. Currently, there are more than 36,000 landmark properties throughout all five boroughs and most of them are located in 141 historic districts and historic district extensions. Besides, the LPC has granted landmark status to 1,405 individual landmarks, 120 interior landmarks, and 10 scenic landmarks.65 However, none of these designated landmarks is explicitly associated with Chinese immigrants or Chinese Americans. Although several landmarks are located in Chinatown, the designations of these sites are based on their architectural value and thus have nothing to do with the neighborhood’s people or their heritage. Additionally, there is no pending landmark designation related to the Chinese community.

To determine why the city lacks officially recognized Chinese American heritage sites, the first step may be to examine the designation process of New York City landmarks. The Commission identifies potential landmarks and historic districts through

65 NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, “About LPC - LPC.”
surveys and research. Some of them are initiated by the Commission staff, while others are suggested by the public through submission of Request for Evaluation (RFE) forms accompanied by any related information or photos. Staffs from the agency’s Research Department first review those RFEs and take them into further consideration if they meet designation criteria (Table 2) and are “in line with agency priorities”.66 Selected properties or districts are brought to the 11 Commissioners who vote on whether to calendar a public meeting to further consider their designation. If a property or district is calendared, the Research Department then writes a designation report and makes a presentation at one or more public hearings. A vote by a majority of the Commissioners in favor of designation at the hearing will lead to the designation of a landmark or a historic district. After all these processes, City Planning Commission and City Council have to review the designation and finalize the designation decision.

Although no Chinese American heritage sites have been designated, there have been efforts to nominate individual landmarks and historic districts since the 1970s.67 In the Commission’s archives, there are around ten files documenting these efforts, most of which are RFEs from the community. Among them, only one site, Citizens Savings Bank, has been successfully designated, while others all failed at the first step. The nomination effort of Citizens Savings Bank started in 1975, but it was not until 2011 that it was finally designated as an individual landmark. This building designation, however,

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67 Correspondence from Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association to Beverly Moss Spatt, 10 June 1975, Block 202, Lot 18, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission Archives, New York City, New York.
is not related to the culture of the Chinese community. As it was written in a letter to
the Commission by the We Won’t Move Committee, a tenants group in Chinatown, “the
architecture of the bank bears little relationship to Chinese culture” although they
admitted the significant role that the bank played in the development of Chinatown.68
Ironically, it was finally designated due to its architectural significance. According to its
designation report, the building is a “fine example of the Beaux-Arts style bank building
of the late 19th and early 20th century”.69

Table 2. Designation Types and Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Landmark</td>
<td>At least 30 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have &quot;a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, state, or nation&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior Landmark</td>
<td>Be at least 30 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have &quot;a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, state, or nation&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customarily open or accessible to the public, or to which the public is customarily invited, such as a theater, a courthouse, or office building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenic Landmark</td>
<td>Be at least 30 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have &quot;a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, state, or nation&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be a landscape feature or aggregate of landscape features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic District</td>
<td>Represent at least one period or style of architecture typical of one or more eras in the City's history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have a distinct &quot;sense of place&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have a coherent streetscape</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

68 Correspondence from We Won’t Move Committee to Beverly Moss Spatt.
Some rejected RFEs either failed the age test of designation – the building should be at least 30 years old – or did not provide enough information for evaluation. For others that passed both the age test and material requirement, the Commission pushed them back for two main reasons. One is that the nominated site did not meet designation criteria, and the other is the designation did not match Commission’s priorities at that time. A noticeable example is the nomination of Quong Yuen Shing & Co. building at 32 Mott Street in 1995. Founded in 1891, it was the oldest Chinese general store at that time and was nominated as an individual landmark and interior landmark. Although the nominator Rachel Saltz provided a lot of materials to evidence the building’s significant role in Chinatown’s early history, the Commission decided not to designate it based on their assessment of the property’s architectural and historical qualities. In 2003, due to the economic downturn in Chinatown since September 11th, 2001, the owner, Paul J. Q. Lee, shut down the store permanently.70

Another notable fact is the discussion around designating a local Chinatown Historic District in early 1980s. Due to growing awareness of Chinatown’s valuable heritage at that time, the Commission cooperated with the New York Chinatown History Project, which later became the Museum of Chinese in America, in completing architectural and historical survey work.71 According to former Chairman Kent Barwick,


71 Correspondence from Kent Barwick to Anna Caraveli, 14 July 1981, Chinatown Historic District, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission Archives, New York City, New York.
the Commission was interested in possible landmark designation of sites identified by the Chinatown Project. Besides, when responding to the request for designating Chinatown and Little Italy as historic districts, the then Manhattan Field Director Frank Sanchis stated that the Commission had considered the designation but did not implement the idea due to the challenge to distinguish these two areas in both their architectural and cultural aspects. A staff member Rita Caviglia later expressed her interests in future designation of individual landmarks in Chinatown and regarded it as the first step toward the more complicated designation of a historic district. The Commission did not formally deny the request for designating a Chinatown Historic District. Yet, as we can see today, despite such strong interests from the Commission 30 years ago, Chinatown still has not been locally designated.

There are various reasons for the absence of local designation of Chinese American heritage sites, which can be divided into issues of identification and designation. In terms of identifying potential landmarks, there is a lack of effort from both the Chinese community and the Commission. The Commission reviews approximately 200 RFIs each year, but as evidenced by the number of files found in its Archive, only very few of them are about Chinese American heritage sites.72 Thus, people from the community do not have enough interest in local designation. From the Commission’s perspective, they have compiled surveys of the Lower East Side, which includes Chinatown, and some of them might have resulted in designation of individual

72 NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, “LPC - Propose a Landmark.”
landmarks in Chinatown. However, these surveys have not led to designation of any Chinese American heritage sites or a local historic district. So, there is a disconnection between the surveys and actual identification of historic sites.

In terms of designation of potential landmarks, the criteria are vague in a way and the Commission’s interpretation of these criteria favors architectural or aesthetic value of buildings. This can help explain why all designated individual landmarks in Chinatown are not relevant to the Chinese community, why existing surveys have not led to designation of Chinese American heritage sites, and why many RFEs got pushed back. The core issue is that when we talk about Chinese American heritage sites, we do not usually mean great buildings with Chinese architectural features, which are in fact also barely seen in Chinatown. Instead, the idea of Chinese American heritage sites indicates buildings that tell the social history or culture of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. And it is more likely, if not always, that these buildings will have ordinary facades and interiors. As a result, they are less noticeable in architectural surveys. It is also hard to prove their significance when physical features are preferred in decision-making process.

4.3 Museum of Chinese in America

Located in New York City’s Lower East Side, the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) has been committed to preserving and presenting the history and culture of Chinese people since its founding in 1980. Like many other museums, MOCA tells stories mainly
through exhibition and interpretation of historical objects. Since its work does not focus on historic buildings, it seems that MOCA does not contribute much to the preservation of Chinese American heritage sites as some preservation organizations do.

However, if we look at its history and current work, it is not hard to find some explicit and implicit associations with the preservation field. Most importantly, through its almost 40-year dedication to making the history of Chinese people visible and accessible to everyone, MOCA helps to set a context for the public to understand and value the heritages of people of Chinese descent. This supports preservation of physical heritages by raising people’s awareness of their significance.

MOCA began as a small grass-roots organization named the New York Chinatown History Project. Its founders, Chinese-American historian John Kuo Wei Tchen and activist Charles Lai, met at the Basement Workshop, an arts-oriented Asian-American resource center.73 They noticed the changes in Chinatown in the late 1970s, when new immigrants crushed in, and realized the importance of documenting the lives of Chinese in New York City. They started to collect cultural objects such as shop signs and Chinese letters from the streets and initiated the Chinatown History Project for which they continued to collect artifacts and oral history and document Chinatown by photographs. As their collections and documentations expanded, they had their first exhibit, *Eight Pound Livelihood*, about the history of laundries in 1983.

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The project moved into four rooms of the former Public School 23 at 70
Mulberry Street in 1984 and functioned there till 2009 when it relocated to its current
spot at 215 Centre Street. The original space is now used for the museum’s collection
and research center. Throughout the years, it changed its name several times before it
was finally named Museum of Chinese in America in 1995, indicating its transformation
from a community museum to a cultural institution with an expanded mission of telling
its stories of Chinese people around the country. Currently, visitors can experience
MOCA through its museum galleries and Chinatown walking tours. The museum holds
one core exhibit, *With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America*, and one
temporary gallery. It also organizes walking tours outside the museum building from
April to December when the weather is suitable.

Although buildings are not the main vehicles for story telling within MOCA, we
can still find various evidences showing how the museum’s work is related to
preservation. First of all, two historic buildings have been renovated to provide space
for the museum’s operation. Since 1984, the Museum has been occupying a previous
school building, P.S. 23, at 70 Mulberry Street. To support the expansion of the
Museum, Chinese American designer Maya Lin renovated a tenement building at 215
Centre Street, which became the Museum’s new home in 2009. By adaptively reusing
these two buildings, the Museum helps maintain the historic fabric of the
neighborhood, even though doing so is not an explicit part of its mission.
In addition, even though most of the Museum’s work is related to cultural objects, it also does space-based and building-based interpretations. For example, in its core exhibit, there is a room housing a recreated Chinatown general store (Figure 2). As stated in its description, this “store” is not modeled after a specific store but rather is “a composite of salvaged objects and memories from Chinatown stores across the United States” and displayed artifacts here are all donations from stores all over the country. This interpretation approach is similar to what the Lower East Side Tenement Museum has been using, as described in Section 4.4 below. In this recreated space, visitors are able to experience a typical store existing only in the memories of the older generation. By placing historical objects in their context, the exhibit provides a more authentic experience for visitors to understand critical roles that such a store played in the community, such as everyday goods supplier, pharmacy, post office, and community center.

The Museum also holds exhibitions and walking tours with different themes, some of which have been related to historic buildings in Chinatown. For example, from September 2015 to March 2016, MOCA had a survey exhibition named *Chinese Style: Rediscovering the Architecture of Poy Gum Lee, 1923-1968*. This exhibit examined Chinese American architect Poy Gum Lee’s projects in New York and China and his influence in New York Chinatown. Also, walking tour *Chinatown: A Walk Through History*

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75 Wall text, *With a Single Step*. 

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is MOCA’s another effort of telling history through physical structures. This tour highlights both ordinary buildings and historically significant places to show the relationship between neighborhood changes and community development. Both examples here evidence that MOCA’s interpretation of Chinese community’s history has gone beyond historic objects.

*Figure 2. A Recreated Chinatown General Store in MOCA. (Photo taken by author)*

Through its almost 40-year endeavors, MOCA has not only earned its reputation among the Chinese community but also become the go-to place for people or organizations who are interested in the history of Chinese immigrants and Chinese
Americans. Currently, MOCA’s Collections and Research Center houses more than 65,000 artifacts, photos, memorabilia, documents, oral histories, and art work, a lot of which tell the history of New York City’s Chinatown.\textsuperscript{76} Its Collections Department, a combination of collection, library, and archive, could be a valuable resource for preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City.\textsuperscript{77} In fact, MOCA has been providing research services to students, professors, and scholars, and lending its collections to other museums and cultural institutions for display.\textsuperscript{78}

An excellent recent example of MOCA’s contribution to the preservation work of Chinese American heritage is its help with the Tenement Museum’s new exhibit \textit{Under One Roof}, in which a garment shop was recreated. For this exhibit, the Tenement Museum referred to MOCA’s archive to understand what a historical garment shop looked like. In this way, although MOCA doesn’t directly work on interpretation of historic space related to the Chinese community, its resources help make the connection. If more such connections are made, it would help make Chinese community’s history more visible to the public and thus set a foundation for the preservation of physical structures.

\textsuperscript{78} Museum of Chinese in America.
4.4 The Tenement Museum

Founded in 1988 by historians Ruth Abram and Anita Jacobson, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum has been telling stories of immigrants who started their new lives in Manhattan’s Lower East Side between the 19th and 21st centuries. The Museum interprets these newcomers’ experiences in two tenement buildings through tours, exhibits, and workshops, and places them in the context of both the city’s and the country’s history of immigration. In doing so, it builds connections between visitors and former immigrants, and honors the past and ongoing role that immigrants play in shaping New York City and the United States. Here, Chinese immigrants, as new settlers in the neighborhood in the second half of 20th century, are among those groups whose stories are being narrated. In its new exhibit Under One Roof, which was launched in September 2017, the Museum discusses the lives of a Chinese immigrant family for the first time.

Based on two historic buildings located at 97 and 103 Orchard Street acquired by the Museum in 1988 and 2007 respectively, the Tenement Museum provides three kinds of experiences to its visitors. Visitors can tour around restored apartments guided by educators and listen to stories of past residents who settled here in different time periods. As the most common way to experience the Museum, these tours are held almost every day. The Museum also organizes more immersive and interactive tours.

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monthly, which allow visitors to talk to past residents at 97 Orchard Street played by costumed interpreters and learn about their lives more “directly”. The third way to experience the Museum is to walk around the neighborhood with a guide to find out how the Lower East Side has been shaped by immigrants and their culture. Currently, the Museum holds 9 daily building tours, 3 monthly costumed tours, and 3 weekly or monthly walking tours. In addition, the Museum also hosts Tenement Talks about the city’s history, people, and culture, as well as ESOL workshops for immigrant students and teacher workshops for teachers.81

Before the Museum purchased the tenement building at 103 Orchard Street in 2007, Chinese immigrants were only slightly mentioned, in its two walking tours Foods of The Lower East Side and Then & Now. In Foods of The Lower East Side, visitors explore how immigrants contribute to Americans’ tables by tasting various foods from German, Jewish, Italian, Chinese, and Dominican communities. Chinese food served in this tour includes pork and chive dumplings from Vanessa’s Dumplings, whose menu and décor have been constantly changed over the years to accommodate non-Chinese customers, Fu Zhou cuisine from a Fuzhounese restaurant operated by newer immigrants where servers barely speak English, and green tea cream puffs from Panade, a fusion bakery owned by the daughter of Chinese immigrants.82 By comparing food from different

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81 “About The Tenement Museum.”
82 Adam Steinberg, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Food: Using Food to Teach History at the Tenement Museum,” The Public Historian 34, no. 2 (May 1, 2012): 79–89.
places, visitors are able to understand how immigrant foods have been adjusted as immigrants have been adapting themselves to the new environment.

The other walking tour, *Then & Now*, focuses on physical changes of the neighborhood resulting from slum clearance, urban renewal and neighborhood revitalization.\(^3\) According to Annie Polland, the former Executive Vice President of Programs & Interpretation at the Tenement Museum, this tour touches on basic neighborhood changes in Chinatown but doesn’t go into deep discussion. The Museum has been trying to connect more deeply to Chinatown since it remains a dynamic immigrant community in the neighborhood. As Polland put it, “we have been really talking about trying to create another walking tour that will allow us to go a lot further away to [places] like Melb Park and Columbus Park and the area around there that is still a very vibrant Chinatown.” The main challenge, however, as Polland addressed it, is that the heart of Chinatown is not close to the Museum. Given that the Museum is located at the edge of Chinatown, it’s hard to organize a walking tour in Chinatown since all the walking tours are supposed to loop back to the building.\(^4\)

Before the new exhibit *Under One Roof* in 103 Orchard Street, stories of Chinese immigrants did not gain enough attention within the Tenement Museum compared to early immigrant groups in the Lower East Side such as Italian, Irish, and German immigrants. Although the Chinese community is brought to the table in the two walking

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\(^3\) Steinberg.

\(^4\) Interview with Annie Polland, interview by Yuexian Huang, February 25, 2018.
tours mentioned above, telling stories of Chinese immigrants was not the main goal in their narrative, and, despite the new exhibit, is still somewhat secondary within their overall interpretive program.

The primary reason why the Museum lacked a narrative about the Chinese community was that its tours and programs were mainly based on 97 Orchard Street. However, the tenement was converted into a commercial building in 1935.\textsuperscript{85} As a result, the Museum was only able to tell histories about early European immigrants between 1864 and 1935.\textsuperscript{86} Although 97 Orchard Street was home to approximately 7,000 people from twenty countries over the course of these 70 years, Chinese immigrants did not play a critical role in the neighborhood when the building was in residential use. It was not until the 1960s that a large number of Chinese immigrants arrived in the country, benefiting from the 1965 abolition of nationality quotas.\textsuperscript{87}

Acquiring the 1888 tenement building at 103 Orchard Street has increased the Museum’s capacity to more broadly address the history of American immigration. Since the building housed residents into the 2010s, it enables the Museum to “fully engage Americans whose origins date to more recent immigrations from Asia and Latin America”.\textsuperscript{88} The new exhibit is the first one in 103 Orchard Street, and the Museum takes a more integrated approach here than it was previously able to do. In 97 Orchard


\textsuperscript{86} Russell-Ciardi, “The Museum as a Democracy-Building Institution.”

\textsuperscript{87} Russell-Ciardi.

\textsuperscript{88} Kazal, “Migration History in Five Stories (and a Basement): The Lower East Side Tenement Museum.”
Street, apartments of seven immigrant families were restored to serve seven different tours. In 103 Orchard Street, however, the Museum has restored one single apartment to interpret stories of three families: the Epsteins, a Jewish family who survived the Holocaust, the Saez-Velezs, immigrants from Puerto Rico who moved into the building in 1964 and stayed till 2011, and the Wongs, a Chinese immigrant family living here from 1968 to 2014.89 During the tour, visitors first tour around Epsteins’s two daughters’ bedroom and their dining room, then walk into the restored kitchen and living room of the Saez-Velezs, and enter the Wong’s three daughters’ bedroom. The tour ends with a recreated working space modeled after garment factories where Mrs. Saez, Mrs. Wong, and many immigrant women used to work when they started over in the Lower East Side. In addition to the guided tour on site, visitors can also learn from an online visual tour on the Museum’s website.

It took 10 years for the exhibit to take shape.90 Starting from an idea of telling stories of families who lived in the building, Annie Polland and her colleagues did hours of interviews with former residents as well as historians and sociologists to learn immigrants’ stories and the historical and social backgrounds.91 They finally targeted these three families, and in-depth interviews were conducted since 2011.92 To recreate the apartment in which those families once lived, they collected oral history,

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89 Zax, “Tenement Museum, Nostalgic for the ‘Melting Pot,’ Highlights Contemporary Inequality.”
91 Kazal, “Migration History in Five Stories (and a Basement): The Lower East Side Tenement Museum.”
92 Interview with Annie Polland.
photographs, and décor from these families. In the Wongs’ section, the room is furnished with blue walls, a desk, a single bed and stacked twin beds both covered by flowered sheets (Figure 3). In this room, educators tell stories of how Mrs. Wong immigrated to the U.S. with her first daughter, Yat Ping, from Hong Kong to reunite with her husband. Visitors can also learn about lives of Allison and Kevin, the other two children of Mrs. Wong, as the second generation of Chinese immigrants. The most powerful narrative is an audio recording from Kevin where he talks about how he “chose” his English name when he was told by his teacher to do so.

Figure 3. The Recreated Bedroom of Wongs in Under One Roof. (Photo credit to Travis Roozée)

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93 Davis, “The Tenement Museum Explores the Lives of Three Post-World War II Families.”
94 Davis.
This tour not only tells stories of one Chinese family, but also reflects on the Chinese immigrant community at large and the immigration history of the U.S. It talks about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned entry of the whole ethnic group for the first time in the country’s history. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 is also brought to the table since it increased restrictions on immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe and other Asian countries. Most importantly, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, also known as the Hart Celler Immigration Reform Act of 1965, abolished the race-based quota system of 1924. This allowed families like the Wongs to enter the new country seeking new lives. To accommodate the following immigration wave where many immigrants were females, garment factories became the new industry in the Lower East Side. The remodeled garment factory space at the end of the tour is the place for visitors to learn about this history through various interactive experiences. By tapping one of the six sewing machines here, visitors can watch videos where Mrs. Wong and other Chinese Garment workers talk about their working lives. There are also Chinese Americans who share their experiences of growing up in immigrant families where mothers worked in the garment factories. Although the exhibit only discusses one Chinese immigrant family at length, as a typical and effective approach at the Museum, stories of this family help visitors reflect on other Chinese immigrants. It is also meaningful in the way that it functions as a lens through which the history of Chinese immigrants is extensively discussed in the Museum for the first time.

95 Solomons, “An Updated History of the Undocumented Immigrant.”
This tour echoes the Museum’s ongoing discussion about what it means to be American. By incorporating three family stories, the tour connects members of different immigrant groups that came to the Lower East Side in the same time period. Educators talk about how the Wongs and the Saez-Velezs interacted with each other when both families lived in the building. They also discuss common challenges these three families faced, such as the language barrier, and similar strategies they took to adapt – for example, their children took the role of translators for their parents. Given that New York City and even the U.S. are built by immigrants from diverse periods and backgrounds, these shared experience and memories can easily build connections between visitors and those whose stories are told here. In this way, the story of each immigrant family is understood in a larger social context. “It’s such a great window into a broader American experience,” says Annie Polland.  

The Tenement Museum has been pioneering in telling what has been the largely invisible history of immigrants through space-based interpretation of individual experiences. Traditional museums and historic sites usually honor great people and great architecture. In contrast, the Tenement Museum approaches history in a different way, by highlighting everyday lives of ordinary people.

The Museum was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1992 and was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1994 and a National Historic Site in 1998. However, the significance of the Museum is not based on those listings, but the

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96 Interview with Annie Polland.
fact that it keeps exploring the history of the buildings themselves to find out more stories about people. Due to this ongoing effort, stories of minority groups such as Chinese immigrants are made visible to the public. The new exhibit, *Under One Roof*, not only tells the unknown history of Chinese immigrants, but also recognizes their role in American history. This is exactly how historic preservation’s place-based interpretive strategies could contribute to the larger society.

To tell more stories about Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, the Museum has been working with other organizations such as MOCA and Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC). According to Polland, the Tenement Museum and MOCA have built close relationships and they visit each other’s exhibit from time to time. For *Under One Roof*, the Tenement Museum referred to MOCA’s photo collection in order to recreate a more authentic garment shop. Some photos from MOCA’s collection are also used in the Tenement Museum’s online visual tour for the new exhibit. In addition, the Tenement Museum is currently working with CPC to collect oral histories of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans for a project called *Your Story, Our Story*. This project, although not tied to specific buildings or spaces, shows the Museum’s effort to incorporate more stories of various immigrants. However, since stories are more powerful when they are narrated in the physical context, *Under One Roof* is still a better approach to tell unknown histories of Chinese immigrants.

97 Interview with Annie Polland.
4.5 Non-Profit Organizations Working on Designation of Chinese American Heritage Sites

In addition to interpretation of historic buildings telling stories of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans that used to be invisible to the public, non-profit organizations in New York City have also been working on designation of Chinese American heritage sites. Compared with interpretation, designation is a more direct approach to get the historic value of those sites recognized and, to varying degrees, protected at the national, state, and local level. Two organizations involved in this approach are the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council (TBNC), which designated the Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District in the National Register of Historic Places, and the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative (LESPI), which is working on landmarking a Chinatown historic district locally.

As a non-preservation-focused non-profit organization, the TBNC did not start out working on preservation related issues when it was founded in 1955. Instead, it was established as a civic organization to address racial conflicts in the area bounded by the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges and the East River. The turning point of its focus was its involvement in preventing AT&T from demolishing a large block of residential buildings on Madison Street for a telephone switching station in the 1960s. After its success in saving those residential buildings, the organization revised its mission to focus on neighborhood preservation and affordable housing in the early 1970s. Since then, it

99 “History.”
has been using preservation as a tool to better serve the neighborhoods in the Lower East Side and focusing on the State and National Register of Historic Places.

The first successful designation from the TBNC was the Two Bridges National Register Historic District in 2003. After that, the TBNC got the boundaries of the Lower East Side National Register Historic District extended in 2004 and successfully designed the Chinatown and Little Italy National Register Historic District and the Bowery National Register Historic District in 2010 and 2013 respectively. Its most significant contribution to the preservation of Chinese American heritage is undoubtedly its sponsorship to the designation of Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District. This successful listing recognizes the significance of Chinese and Italian immigrants’ heritage and social history, and helps preserve historic buildings within the historic district.

According to Victor Papa, the president of the TBNC who initiated the idea of nomination, the purpose of the designation is to not only preserve the architecture of the area, but also to appreciate the experience of Chinese and Italian immigrants. In addition, the designation is regarded as a way to draw national attention and promote tourism in the area. It also aimed at preserving the housing stock to provide more affordable housing to the community.

The designation was supported by many other non-profit organizations and community groups, including the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the

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101 Suzanne.
Chinese Chamber of Commerce, the Museum of the Chinese in America, Historic Districts Council, as well as the majority of property owners.\textsuperscript{102} As the nomination sponsor, the TBNC was responsible for researching and documenting the neighborhood and demonstrating its significance. Architectural historian Kerri Culhane was hired to work on the nomination.

While the National and State Register offers potential incentives and tax credits for contributing buildings in the historic district to motivate property owners and developers to renovate historic buildings, local register designation is much more powerful in preserving actual historic fabric. Once locally designated, a building is protected by the local preservation agency. In New York City, the LPC issues building permits to designated landmarks in order to make sure proposed changes are compatible with the original architectural features. Most importantly, demolition is not allowed unless necessary. Due to the effectiveness of local designation in preserving historic sites, the LESPI has been attempting to get a New York City historic district designated in Chinatown.

Different from the TBNC, the LESPI was formed as a not-for-profit preservation organization by a group of preservationists and local residents in 2007.\textsuperscript{103} It focuses on the preservation of historic buildings and streetscapes of the Lower East Side. According


to Richard Moses, the president and founder of LESPI, the organization regards New York City landmarking as “the only effective means of actually protecting the area in terms of preserving its architecture and culture”.104 As a result, since its founding, the organization has been advocating for New York City historic district designation in the Lower East Side and at the same time supporting designation of individual landmarks. So far, it has successfully gotten the East 10th Street Historic District designated, and it has also supported many individual landmark designations such as the Manhattan Savings Bank. Currently, LESPI is aiming at designating a district around the Tenement Museum, while working on the designation of the historic core of Chinatown, which will be their next priority.105

LESPI’s work on Chinatown started in 2016 with a survey of the historic core of Chinatown for potential designation. As shown on the map, the area is bounded by Canal, Bowery, Worth, and Baster Streets (Figure 4), which corresponds with the boundaries of Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District on the National Register. Moses worked in the LPC years ago and learned the survey method there. They applied the survey method and rated buildings on a basis of 1 to 5. Buildings with the highest quality are assigned number 1, meaning that they have the potential to be individually landmarked. Number 2 buildings are examples of predominant building type in the area with high integrity, regarded as primary contributing buildings. In the case of Chinatown,

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104 Interview with Richard Moses, interview by Yuexian Huang, March 25, 2018.
105 Interview with Richard Moses.
these are intact tenement buildings. Tenement buildings that have been stripped of most of their ornaments are assigned number 3, being secondary contributing ones. Other categories include background building and non-contributing building or site, such as parking lots and playgrounds. As we can see from the map, many buildings are colored red or orange, indicating the high integrity of this historic area. Thus, it is worthy to be landmarked and preserved.
Figure 4. Chinatown Historic District Study Area by LESPI. (Map provided by Richard Moses, President of LESPI)
Right now, LESPI is in the process of getting political support from the community. A photo essay book on historic Chinatown that they have been working on is scheduled for publication in 2018. This book, regarded by Moses as a tool to bring people’s appreciation for the neighborhood, is a collection of work by Chinese American photographers and Chinese writers in both English and Cantonese. To approach more community members, they are trying to get support from influential Chinese American Council member Margaret Chin. They are also reaching out to the Chinatown Working Group, a community-based planning initiative whose work focuses on “affordability, preservation, revitalization and the social and economic wellbeing of families, seniors and youths”. LESPI hopes to work with the Chinatown Working Group and other community groups to get people from the community interested in the designation. In addition to collaborating with Chinese American leaders and community groups, LESPI is planning to make direct efforts by setting a table in the neighborhood to talk to people and collect petition signatures. Their next step also includes reaching out to the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council and Kerri Culhane, the architectural historian who worked on the National Register nomination.

When talking about the challenges of designating a local historic district, Moses highlighted the difficulty of getting support from the Chinese community. According to him, some Chinese-American property owners do not want their buildings to be

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landmarked due to potential restrictions on their properties. A more common situation is that many community members are not aware of historic value of their neighborhood or the importance of historic preservation. Luckily, a lot of people are really receptive when they start to think about preservation. According to Moses, they find that “a lot of people who seem to be new to thinking about preservation become receptive to preserving the Lower East Side when [they] start to speak to them about it and point out local historic buildings and streetscapes to them.”  

But still, the community itself is not very active in getting their neighborhood designated. They hope to have members of the Chinatown community on their board to bridge the communication.

It is very exciting that LESPI, a non-Chinese-American group, is putting efforts on designating the historic core of Chinatown. As Moses puts it, members from the organization are all ultimately from immigrant families and they appreciate the history of Chinatown as an important part of the American story, which is going to disappear if they do not do anything. As it moves forward, hopefully it will gain more support from both inside and outside the community.

As it is detailed above, the TBNC and the LESPI both use historic preservation, especially designation, as a tool to preserve the historic neighborhood. Although they approach designation of historic Chinatown at different policy levels, their goals are similar, which is to preserve historic buildings in the area, value the history and culture

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107 Interview with Richard Moses.
108 Interview with Richard Moses.
of the Chinese community, and recognize the importance of their influence in the history of the city and the country. The work of these two organizations has been benefitting the Chinese community and is likely to be a great contribution to preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City.

4.6 Other Organizations and Community Groups

In addition to the main actors discussed above, some other organizations and community groups have increasingly become involved, if indirectly, in preservation work associated with Chinese American heritage sites in New York City. Their work is not related to physical structures in Chinatown, but instead, the intangible heritage of the Chinese community, including cultural traditions and oral history. Some of them are city-wide cultural institutions, which have temporary exhibitions and programs on the culture or history of Chinese immigrants. Some are not-for-profit organizations run by Chinese Americans who hope to preserve Chinese culture and traditions. There are also Chinatown-based community groups whose mission is to advance the development of Chinatown by offering various platforms for residents to discuss issues, concerns, and potential solutions. By keeping historic spaces in Chinatown occupied and functioning, they help preserve the physical fabric, even if they do so indirectly if not unconsciously. These organizations and community groups, although they might not even be aware of the idea of historic preservation, nevertheless play critical roles in various ways.
The New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) and the New York Public Library (NYPL) are two cultural institutions that have paid attention to the history of Chinese immigrants. As the oldest museum in New York City, the N-YHS was founded in 1804 and now has an important and extensive collection of art, objects, artifacts, and documents.\textsuperscript{109} As one of its efforts to achieve its goal of exploring broader history and its meanings, it organized an exhibition named \textit{Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion} from September 26\textsuperscript{th}, 2014 to April 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2015. This exhibition unfolded the history of Chinese in the U.S. from the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century to the present day, covering early trades between the two countries, challenges of Chinese immigrations, and the life of American-born Chinese.\textsuperscript{110} This exhibition, available online as well, was organized in partnership with the MOCA, which was simultaneously holding its exhibition \textit{Waves of Identity} exploring similar topics. While the exhibition at N-YHS examined the experience of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans across the country, the one in MOCA took a closer look at the Chinese American community in New York Chinatown. The conjunction of both exhibitions called for city-wide attention to the Chinese community and their history. The exhibition at the N-YHS was perhaps even more meaningful since it reached a broader group of audience to whom those stories were new.

Another major cultural institution, the NYPL, has also been a great resource for city residents to learn about history. Established in 1895, it is the largest public library


system in the U.S. As part of its Community Oral History Project, the library is currently collecting oral history about the Chinatown neighborhood. This project was initiated in 2013 by one of its branches, the Jefferson Market Library in Greenwich Village, and it has so far collected over a thousand stories from nearly 20 communities. For the Chinatown Legacy Project, previous and current residents and people who worked or are still working in the neighborhood have been invited to share their stories to document the past and present of this community. Different from the exhibition at the N-YHS, the Chinatown Legacy Project of the NYPL approaches the history of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans in a much smaller scale by looking at grass-root stories in a specific neighborhood. But similarly, they both deliver a message that the Chinese community is essential, and that its rich and complex history should not be overlooked. This helps to set a city-wide context to understand the importance of Chinese American heritage sites.

Within the Chinese community, although there is an apparent lack of interest in landmark designations, people do care about their history and culture. Various cultural institutions and community groups run by Chinese people not only concentrate on the Chinatown neighborhood, but also on other parts of the city with Chinese history and influence. These groups not only exist to carry on traditions among people of Chinese descendants, but also to promote Chinese culture to other communities. Take the New

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York Chinese Cultural Center (NYCCC) as an example. Founded in 1974 on the Lower East Side, NYCCC aims to “deepen the understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture in the global and local communities.” \(^{113}\) It has now expanded to become the leading Chinese cultural institution in New York City. By offering more than 3,000 classes and workshops in five boroughs and organizing Chinese performance, NYCCC helps keep the cultural heritage of the Chinese community alive in the city. Although it seems that NYCCC’s work has nothing directly to do with physical structures, if we look at Chinese American heritage broadly, cultural heritage is an indispensable part of it. Most importantly, the community identity that is defined and strengthened by the same culture roots can be the underlying motivator that encourages people to save the tangible part of their heritage.

Other players in preserving the historic fabric of Chinatown that might be easily overlooked are the local community groups that are based in historic buildings in Chinatown. These groups, started by residents who care about their neighborhood, usually use existing spaces in Chinatown to boost conversations among community members. The W.O.W Project is a great example of those grass-root efforts. Based in a historic porcelain store, Wing On Wo & Co., in Chinatown, this project was initiated in 2016 by its current owner, Mei Lum, to face the challenging future of Chinatown through arts, culture and activism. \(^{114}\) The main issue that the project is dealing with is

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Chinatown’s fast transformation brought by gentrification. A sign is that new businesses are opening up in Chinatown. “While they are very trendy, they don’t help sustain the Chinatown community,” says Evan Louis, a member of W.O.W family team.\(^{115}\) To tackle neighborhood changes, the W.O.W Project has been hosting panels in the store to bring in Chinese American business owners, artists, and other people from the community. The historical space offers a supportive environment for people to share issues, concerns, and potential solutions in order to “reclaim ownership over Chinatown’s future”.\(^{116}\) Here, the historic building not only functions as a store, but also provides a space where people feel connected to each other and to a larger context. Although the team members do not explicitly connect their work to preservation, the building has generated new social value in this process, and this is another way by which a historic building is preserved and used.

In the case of W.O.W Project, the grassroot efforts are even more meaningful since the Wing On Wo & Co. is now the oldest store in Chinatown, which adds a lot historic value to this building (Figure 5). Opened in 1890 by Walter Eng at 13 Mott Street, the shop later moved into the current building in 1925, which Mr. Eng bought from Irish owners.\(^{117}\) The new location at 26 Mott Street is two buildings away from 32 Mott Street, which once housed the oldest Chinatown store, Quong Yuen Shing & Co. As discussed above, there was an attempt to designate the Quong Yuen Shing & Co.

\(^{116}\) “About.”
building as Individual and Interior Landmarks, but it failed. The Quong Yuen Shing & Co. closed in 2003 due to the aftermath of 9/11. Different from Quong Yuen Shing & Co., Wing On Wo & Co. survives, and it has been in the family for five generations. However, as other small businesses in Chinatown, it also encountered crisis brought by gentrification. In 2015, the family was considering selling the building and giving up the business. Luckily, Mei Lum took over the family business and saved the historic space. More than that, the W.O.W Project she initiated connects the historic store to the larger Chinatown community. By bonding community members together in a historic space, the W.O.W Project, along with other community groups, not only preserves the historic building it occupies, but also raises the awareness of neighborhood preservation among community members. This sets a foundation for conservation of the neighborhood.

What has been discussed in this section are actors who play minor but indispensable roles in preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City. While other organizations work either on identification and designation of Chinese American historic sites or interpretation of historic objects and historic buildings related to Chinese people, these groups do not have an explicit connection with preservation of physical structures in Chinatown. Instead, they focus on intangible aspects of Chinese American heritage. City-wide cultural institutions such as the N-YHS and the NYPL are involved in the conversation about Chinese American heritage by telling the history and stories of Chinese immigrants, which sets a context to appreciate the contribution Chinese community makes to the city and even the country. Cultural institutions
organized by the Chinese community, like the NYCCC, aim at preserving and promoting
the intangible cultural heritage of Chinese people, which is part of historic preservation
by larger definition. In addition, by increasing the understanding of Chinese culture
around the city, such activity also brings attention to this ethnic group and its heritage.
Finally, all kinds of community groups in Chinatown, whether they focus on culture,
economic development or civil engagement, all contribute to preservation of historic
buildings by revitalizing those historic spaces and adding new values to them. Most
importantly, these groups are critical in shaping community identity and increasing
community pride. Collectively, these organizations and groups, although they may pay
little explicit attention to the tangible heritage of Chinese immigrants, actually
participate in physical preservation unintentionally. Their work could lead to stronger
appreciation and recognition, and thus better preservation of Chinese American
heritage sites in New York City.
Figure 5. Wing On Wo & Co. (Photo credit to Wing On Wo & Co.)
V. Analysis and Recommendations

As described in the last chapter, various organizations and community groups have been involved in the preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in both explicit and implicit ways. Although to date there is no apparent relationship between a locally designated landmark or historic district and the Chinese community in New York City, there are actually many grassroots preservation efforts going on in the city. However, considering that New York City is a leading power in the preservation field, and that it has one of the oldest Chinatowns and one of the largest Chinese populations in the country, current preservation work seems insufficient. To explore ways to improve the preservation work there, it is more than necessary to speculate about the reasons why the city has not been active in preserving Chinese American heritage sites.

5.1 History of Chinese Americans Has Been Overlooked in The National, State, And Local Context

The lack of recognition and protection of Chinese American heritage sites is not specific to New York City. It is a national phenomenon, which has been deeply rooted in the discrimination against Chinese people in the history. Since the first wave of Chinese immigration in the west coast, Chinese people used to be excluded from the main society. The hostility to Chinese immigrants even resulted in the notorious Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned the entry of almost all ethnic Chinese to the country. Although the situation was mitigated by some subsequent laws, such as the
Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 and the Chinese Exclusion Repeal Act of 1943, the racial bias towards Chinese immigrants, and other immigrants as well, was maintained by a series of restrictions written in laws. Before the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which abolished the immigration quota system based on national origin, the life of Chinese immigrants was limited in diverse ways. In addition to limited entry and little chance to get naturalized, they were even not allowed to own businesses and properties. Although it has been more than 50 years since discrimination laws against Chinese immigrants were abolished, the nation-wide prejudice still exists to varying degrees in the society, and is not likely to vanish in the near future.

Since the Chinese ethnic group has been historically looked down upon in the country, their heritages have thus been overlooked for a long time. It was not until recent years that the mainstream society started to pay attention to this group and their stories. This is the same situation as it is about African American heritage. However, although African American heritage has been gaining increasing attention, there is still more work needed to make Chinese American’s history visible and recognized by the public. To preserve Chinese American heritage, a critical premise is that people appreciate the history of Chinese immigrants. The lack of appreciation not only exists in New York City, but also in other urban and rural areas. Thus, the first step to improve the preservation work would be to educate the public, in federal, state, and local levels, about the important contribution that Chinese immigrants made to the history of the U.S. This needs inputs from not only preservation organizations and agencies, but also
other agencies, organizations, and institutions whose work is not preservation-related. Examples at the national level include Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month and Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Theme Studies. These programs help set a national context to better understand Chinese American heritage and why it matters. At the local level, such educational projects as the exhibition *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion* in the N-YHS and the Chinatown Legacy Project initiated by the NYPL could set an example for other organizations.

However, efforts at the state level are missing right now, especially from the SHPO. Currently, it participates in the preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in a passive way. This is exemplified by the designation of Chinatown and Little Italy National Register Historic District. Here, the SHPO did its job as a reviewer and supervisor of the nomination report, but is only involved in certain situations after the designation, such as when Section 106 is triggered. What it can do more is to actively identify sites related to Chinese Americans, corresponding with the idea of the Statewide Historic Resources Survey it has been working on. Although it has started focusing on the diversity of cultural resources in New York State, Chinese American heritage, even Asian American heritage in a larger scale, has not gained enough attention.
As a model to learn from, in California, cultural diversity has been identified as a significant subject in cultural resources surveys since 1979. In 2017, the California Office of Historic Preservation was awarded an Underrepresented Community Grant from the National Park Service to develop a historic context statement identifying resources related to AAPI communities. The AAPI historic context is intended to work as a framework for future nominations of AAPI heritage to the National Register. The reason why the California Office of Historic Preservation has been so proactive in preserving AAPI heritage is that it has more cultural diversity and a larger AAPI population there. Also, the AAPI community there is more interested and active in preserving their heritage, as exemplified by the founding of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Historic Preservation (APIAHiP) in 2007, a national preservation organization focusing on AAPI heritage founded in Los Angeles. To learn from California, the New York State Historic Preservation Office could initiate an AAPI context survey, similar to the Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Theme Studies. As a systematic effort to document the history of the community, it would make it easier to nominate sites associated with Asian Americans, including Chinese Americans, to the State and National Registers.

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Therefore, the first step to improve the preservation work in New York City about Chinese American heritage sites is to set a historic context within which to better understand and appreciate the history of Chinese Americans, and through that to identify appropriate designation opportunities. It needs continuous work from various organizations at the federal, state, and local levels. Among them, preservation agencies are essential in a way that they have the power and resources to influence people’s attitudes towards both Chinese people and their tangible heritage.

5.2 Current Policies of The Preservation Agency Are Not Efficient Enough

At the local level, as the municipal preservation agency responsible for identification, preservation and regulation of New York City landmarks and historic districts, the LPC has more work to do to support preservation of Chinese American heritage sites. Compared with the National and New York State Registers of Historic Places, local designation has far more powerful jurisdiction over historic buildings and historic districts. It helps prevent them from demolition and regulates alterations of historic buildings to preserve their integrity. Thus, it is the most powerful way to preserve the physical structures of Chinese American heritage. However, there is so far no historic site or district related to the Chinese community under LPC’s protection. If this can change, it would be an effective tool to preserve Chinese American heritage.

The main reason why LPC has been inefficient in designating Chinese American heritage sites is that its designation criteria are vague to some degree and its
interpretations on those criteria have tended to favor architectural significance. As a result, most designated landmarks either are distinguishable examples of some architectural style or have distinctive architectural characteristics. Historic buildings associated with Chinese immigrants, however, usually have featureless exteriors and interiors. This could be explained by the historical experience of Chinese immigrants. When they first came to the U.S., they worked as laborers and did not have the financial ability to buy houses. Later it was even prohibited by law to own their properties and businesses. When they were finally able to purchase or build their homes, as Michelle Magalong, the Executive Director of APIAHiP, puts it, they did not have “the resources in terms of people or the materials to build that same kind of architectural style in the homeland here in the U.S.”. Even if they did, people more than likely chose not to do so for fear of being easily “targeted for discrimination or violent” and being “forced to destroy [their] buildings”. Moreover, in New York City, most Chinese immigrants arrived at the Lower East Side later than early European immigrants, so in many cases they bought buildings from earlier immigrants.

Such historic reasons contribute to the fact that historic sites related to Chinese immigrants are usually not architecturally distinctive. Instead, their values lie in cultural and social aspects. To get their values recognized, it requires a broader use of the existing designation criteria. In fact, if we examine the second criterion of Individual

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120 Interview with Michelle Magalong, interview by Yuexian Huang, February 2, 2018.
121 Interview with Michelle Magalong.
Landmark carefully, which says “a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, state, or nation”, we would find that it does mention “cultural characteristics”\(^\text{122}\). Compared with historical and aesthetic values, however, cultural value is more often overlooked in local designations. If this criterion can be given more attention and be interpreted more broadly, there will be much more chance for Chinese American heritage sites to be represented in local register and thus be protected.

In addition, the LPC could also be more proactive in terms of identification of significant Chinese American heritage sites, including conducting surveys to determine potential landmarks and to find out unknown stories of existing landmarks. Like the New York SHPO, the LPC is not actively involved in designation of Chinese American heritages sites. A solution to this is to initiate a city-wide survey to identify and document Chinese American’s historic resources. As an example, Los Angeles has been working on a project called SurveyLA since 2010. Following the lead of the National Park Service’s theme studies, the City of LA is practicing it on a city level. As part of the SurveyLA, an Asian American Context Statement is under development currently, which will “identify themes and related historic resources associated with the city’s Japanese, Filipino, Thai, Korean, and Chinese American communities”.\(^\text{123}\) This survey is significant in that, instead


of asking a small stack of preservationists to do the field work, it reaches out to the five communities and ask them to contribute. This approach is applicable in other cities and New York can definitely learn from it.

What’s more, the LPC can also work on new interpretations of designated landmarks. In fact, this is not a new approach in LPC since it has worked for projects like *NYC Landmarks and The Vote at 100: An Interactive Story*. The idea of that project was to look for associations between suffragists and already-designated historic buildings and relate social history to actual places. Since early designation reports typically only tell the architectural history of those buildings, such projects help complete their full stories. If the LPC could initiate a similar project targeting Chinese immigrants, it would certainly find some unknown stories of existing landmarks about Chinese immigrants. To work more efficiently, it can collaborate with people from the community. In this way, stories that were overlooked in the past will become visible. Since those buildings are already considered significant, it is easier for the public to recognize their other values. If the agency could practice and prioritize these two suggestions, it would increase not only the visibility of Chinese community but also the recognition of their heritages.

Another reason why LPC has been less than proactive in such work is that its work largely relies on its limited staff. They are responsible for conducting surveys, answering RFEs, writing nominations, and reviewing building permits. Given that the city has already had 36,000 historic properties, it is hard to balance its energy between managing current historical resources and identifying new ones. Engaging local
communities, as mentioned above, would increase the agency’s efficiency in potential new designations. Besides, in terms of nomination reports and related research, the LPC could consider changing the policy that only staff members can write nomination. An example is that in Philadelphia, anyone can nominate a historic building and compile nomination reports. This could potentially reduce pressures on staff members.

5.3 Stories Are Not Fully Explored in Currently Recognized Heritage Sites

The idea of Chinese American heritage sites has a broader meaning than sites built by or completely owned by Chinese people. Since the connection between a site and the Chinese community is hard to tell by the appearance of the building, it is easy to ignore stories of Chinese in the building if no careful research is conducted. To explore the full stories of historic buildings, inputs from all kinds of stakeholders are needed.

First of all, as suggested above, the LPC could initiate a project to find out the unknown stories of Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans associated with already-designated landmarks. Since early nominations for designations tend to value buildings with distinctive architectural features and association with heroes and other great people, they usually tell only part of the story. In the case of Chinese immigrants, we should also notice that LPC was founded in 1965, the same year as the enactment of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. This means that early landmarks were designated when the history of Chinese immigrants started to get recognition, or even before many stories happened because a large wave of Chinese immigrants arrived at
New York City after 1965. Therefore, there are some rich and complex stories that remain unwritten in designation reports. For instance, the First Chinese Presbyterian Church at 61 Henry Street was designated as an Individual Landmark in 1966. However, the building was then named Sea and Land Church, and the designation was based on its attractive Georgian-Gothic style and its association with Colonel Henry Rutgers, the Revolutionary War patriot.\(^\text{124}\) It was not until 1972 that the church building was presented to the Chinese community, who renovated it as the First Chinese Presbyterian Church.\(^\text{125}\) Undoubtedly, this building is historically and culturally significant to Chinese people, but the designation report was written long before the significant transition happened. Thus, it was not able to record this history even if the nominators wanted to. Even today, the building is shown on LPC’s NYC Landmarks Interactive Map under the name of Northern Reformed Church, which can totally have been avoided. In order to represent the Chinese community more in the local register, in addition to designating new buildings, the LPC can make some efforts to look at designated landmarks in Chinatown, especially those from early days, to fill such gaps of missing history.

Secondly, non-profit organizations that are managing historic sites need to explore the full story of their buildings. This advice is suitable for all heritages, especially those related to minority groups. In the case of Chinese American heritage sites, these mostly concentrate around the Chinatown neighborhood. Geographically, managers and


\(^\text{125}\) Li, “Commercialism and Identity Politics in New York’s Chinatown.”
owners of historic sites located around this area could take more responsibility to find out whether there are stories of Chinese immigrants in their buildings. The Tenement Museum located at the edge of Chinatown is taking a lead on this. As a highly regarded historic site listed in the National Register, it keeps researching the history of its two tenement buildings to tell more stories of immigrants. What should be noticed is that even for the Tenement Museum, on-site interpretations on history of Chinese immigrants is new. However, it could still act as an example for other historic sites to learn from.

Exploring stories of Chinese immigrants in recognized heritage sites would be an efficient tool to make the history of Chinese immigrants visible. Since existing sites have had a group of audiences who already recognize their heritage value and have interests on their history, it may be easier for those people to receive new information about unknown stories happened in the buildings. In this way, the notion of Chinese American heritage sites is broadened in a way that it incorporates sites where Chinese people once lived or worked, although they might not be the dominant group in the building.

5.4 The Local Community Is Lack of Recognition on Historic Places and Historic Preservation

If we look at the main players in preservation of Chinese American heritage sites in New York City, it is surprising that most preservation efforts to date have been from people outside the Chinese community. As for Chinese Americans, they pay much more attention to intangible heritage, such as history, cultural, and tradition. And when they
talk about these, they do not usually make connections to actual places. Although intangible heritage is critical to Chinese American heritage, physical places are also crucial since they help us remember the history, embody our identity, and create a sense of continuity that is tangible and stable. Better preservation of Chinese American heritage sites requires direct and sustained contributions from the Chinese American community. Thus, more education in the Chinese American community is desired to help them understand and advocate for the importance of physical places and preservation work.

The disconnection between Chinese American’s intangible heritage and historic spaces has various reasons. Firstly, it is rooted in the history of Chinese immigration. For a long time, early Chinese immigrants were moving around and were not attached to specific buildings. Also, the prohibition on property ownership, fear of discrimination and lack of resources all have made it nearly impossible for Chinese immigrants to mark their identity on buildings. Consequently, the history of Chinese immigrants is not necessarily told by buildings, at least the early history, which helps to explain why Chinese immigrants feel less connected to physical structures. In terms of culture and tradition, as described above, there are several cultural institutions organized by Chinese Americans around the city with a goal to preserve and promote the understanding of Chinese culture. Thus, people from the Chinese community do care about their culture. However, maintaining these culture and traditions does not necessarily rely on a particular space. Instead, they pass through people to people,
generations to generations. In fact, they were not even generated in the American context, but were carried to the country by immigrants from different periods. Therefore, in terms of cultural activities, Chinese people are not tied to places either.

However, places do matter, because they are where history happened and where stories are told. Since Chinese immigrants started to congregate in Chinatown, its buildings have been meaningful to local residents since they carry community memories and stabilize their sense of belonging. Community members, whether they realize it or not, have been doing work directly or indirectly related to preservation of the historic fabric in the neighborhood. Some sent RFEs to the LPC hoping to preserve historic buildings through local designation. Others keep historic spaces functioning and attach new values to them by creative and active utilization, such as Wing On Wo & Co. building and the W.O.W Project. All these efforts are helping to keep physical structures of Chinatown intact.

There have been commonly shared misunderstandings towards historic preservation and preservation agencies within the Chinese community. Business owners, property owners, and developers especially, due to the fear of the regulations brought by landmark status, are usually against landmark designation, and this perspective is not unique to the Chinese community. It is identified as one of the challenges by LESPI in designation of a local historic district in Chinatown. To deal with this, it is necessary to let community members know of the benefits of designation. Particularly, education about financial benefits, such as tax credits and other incentives,
would be a good way to approach this. As stated by Michelle Magalong, “we have to also demystify the myth of historic preservation in our community, particularly with property owners...the best step is to just have better awareness of what it is and what the benefits are for everybody”.\(^{126}\)

In all, as those who actually live in Chinatown and use the historic buildings there, the Chinese community must be the key player in preservation of Chinese American heritage sites. Currently, community members are not active enough in preservation work. To improve the situation, education is needed about the importance of both historic places and historic preservation. If the Chinese community can offer more support, it would be easier to identify, designate, and preserve sites related to Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans.

5.5 Collaborations Among Different Players Are Insufficient

Lastly, preservation of Chinese American heritage sites should be a collective effort. Different preservation agencies, organizations, cultural institutes, and community groups are now participating in this preservation work in various ways. Some of them are doing similar projects; for example, the NYPL, the Tenement Museum, and Chinese-American Planning Council are all collecting oral stories from Chinese Americans. Some have had cooperation for certain programs over the years; for instance, MOMA shared its archival materials with the Tenement Museum to recreate a garment shop space for

\(^{126}\) Interview with Michelle Magalong.
its new exhibit *Under One Roof*, and it also lent some of its collection to the N-YHS for its exhibition on *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion*. However, in most cases, these players do not communicate with each other and collaborate as much as they might. Since each organization has limited energy, people, and resources, the lack of communication has made the preservation work inefficient.

Collaborations are needed in three aspects to improve preservation work. First, preservation agencies and other cultural institutions should work together in setting a national, state, and local context to understand the history of Chinese immigration and increase the visibility and appreciation of related heritage sites. This is the front stage of the preservation work. Secondly, in terms of identification of significant sites, although preservation agencies should take the lead, discussions among staff members, preservationists, community members, and other professionals are more important for effective determination of historic resources of Chinese immigrants. This would lead to potential designation of historic sites in all levels. Here, everyone plays its distinctive role. The engagement of the Chinese community is the key since they are the only people who know the best about social histories behind those ordinary façades of historic buildings. Grassroot preservation organizations are also essential since they help boost communication between the preservation agency and community members. The preservation agency, which actually designates landmarks, would help guide the process and conduct documentation work later to make it easier for future designation. Finally,
in terms of interpretation of historic sites, cultural institutions should share their information and resources to help each other work more efficiently.
VI. Conclusion

*We have been here since the Civil War and we have been contributing to the American society for a really long time.*\(^{127}\)

Although the Chinese community in New York City is underrepresented in the city’s designated historic landmarks and historic districts, based on the examination of current efforts related to preservation of Chinese American heritage sites, there are actually various groups who have played their roles in the preservation work that lay the seeds for designations in the future while going beyond it. Some of them participate directly in the preservation of physical structures in Chinatown, including State and municipal preservation agencies, MOCA, the Tenement Museum, the TBNC, and the LESPI, and each continues to make its distinctive contribution. The SHPO was involved in the designation process of Chinatown and Little Italy National Register Historic District, but it does not monitor any physical changes after the designation except for certain situations. The LPC, although it has the most power in regulating historic buildings and historic districts, is inefficient in designating Chinese American heritage sites, or informing stories of the Chinese community in existing landmarks. MOCA, as a museum specializing on history of Chinese immigrants, focuses more on interpretation of historical objects than historic spaces. The Tenement Museum exemplifies how to tell the full history of a historic site and is exploring more interpretation about the Chinese community in New York City. Regarding the Chinese immigrants as an essential part of

\(^{127}\) Interview with Michelle Magalong.
the city’s history, the TBNC has successfully supported the designation of Chinatown and Little Italy National Register Historic District. Similarly, the LESPI is working on a local historic district designation on Chinatown. All these agencies and organizations are essential and distinctive actors in identifying, designating, and interpreting Chinese American heritage sites. In addition, other organizations, such as the N-YHS and NYPL, and local community groups, although they focus on the intangible part of Chinese American heritage, also indirectly contribute to the preservation of tangible heritage. Their work either contributes to setting a city-wide context to understand the significance of Chinese American heritage or adaptively reuses historic spaces in Chinatown to keep those buildings alive.

Even though various agencies, organizations and groups have been engaged in all kinds of preservation work to protect the historic Chinatown, given the low awareness of Chinese American heritage in New York City, more needs to be done to make improvements. Collaboration among all those groups is the most essential, since each of them has limited resources in terms of people, money, and knowledge. By getting them together and boosting their communications, they would be able to work more efficiently towards the same goal. Beyond that, each group has to improve its own work. For example, preservation agencies have to be more active in identification of historic resources related to Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans. Also, recognized historic sites that include the history of Chinese immigrants could do more interpretation to tell those stories that used to be invisible to the public. Moreover, the
Chinese community has to realize the importance of historic buildings in Chinatown and the meaning of historic preservation. In all, the essential first step, according to Franklin Odo, is education.\(^{128}\) This not only includes education to people from outside the Chinese community to increase appreciation of Chinese immigrants, their contribution to the society, and their valuable physical imprints, but also education to people within the community about benefits of preserving their heritage in social, historical, and financial aspects. Thus, beyond all groups discussed in this paper, preservation of Chinese American heritage in New York City, and in other places as well, needs nationwide efforts from preservation and its related fields.

Although Chinese immigrants and their descendants have been here in the U.S. for a long time, their history and heritage started to get recognized not long ago. Preserving their heritage is not merely about preserving their stories and passing them to the future generation for this specific ethnic group, but also is for the whole society to understand how diverse the society is and how Chinese people have been contributing to the built environment. Moreover, it is about increasing the visibility of this minority group and bringing them more social justice. In this way, historic preservation is not an end itself, but a means to a larger social end.

\(^{128}\) Interview with Franklin Odo.
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