

It's a sunny Saturday afternoon in Chinatown.

The Central Plaza is bustling. People of all ages and ethnicities stroll the streets. Outdoor gift shops display their wares.

It may not look like it, but Chinatown is experiencing a major change. A Saturday afternoon says that Chinatown is thriving. However, that's not necessarily true of Chinatown as a whole. While some businesses boom, others fall. The cause might be a change in culture—a reflection of a change in demographics.



Chinatown on a Saturday Afternoon
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

“We’re busy every second. We count seconds, not minutes,” says Philip Nguyen, employee at The Framing House Design. Nguyen’s brother opened up a framing store in Chinatown more than 25 years ago. He says that business has only been getting, “better, better, and better.”



Philip Nguyen, Hard at Work with His Customers
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

everybody.” Harmon has used Nguyen’s services for about seven years. Compared to other framing stores in the area, he appreciates their affordable prices and specialty work. “I’ve had them do things where it’s multiple pieces in a frame where it’s floating in a glass box kind of thing,” he says.

This is what Nguyen prides himself in: the creative process. His work requires a lot of thought. This is what makes Nguyen’s business stand out from the ones that surround him. “It’s not about money,” he says, “We create artwork. We make from the heart. Big difference.”

Nguyen’s store attracts customers of all ages and races from within and outside of Chinatown. His primary customer base is the artist. “This place was recommended to me by a friend who’s also a cartoonist,” says [Chris Harmon](#), storyboard artist for Comedy Central’s Futurama, “I’ve recommended this place to



Chris Harmon, Customer at The Framing House Design
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

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Chinatown on a Friday Night
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

quiet. There's not too many people walking around."

Fungi sees a change in Chinatown's culture. Instead of local Chinese residents, he says his customers are mostly non-Asians, including many Latinos and Whites. In addition to a change of customers, he sees a change in the surrounding businesses. "You look around. There's a lot of different businesses that are opening up that are not owned by Chinese people," he says. Ng believes that Chinatown is shrinking and a new class is supplanting the Chinese residents.

The cause of these changes is affordable housing, according to Eugene Moy, President of the [Chinese American Citizens Alliance \(C.A.C.A.\)](#). He says, when housing is unaffordable, "it pushes out the existing residents and brings in a different class of people, which will change the culture."



Hui Guan, Chinatown Resident
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

terey Park and San Gabriel, the food choices are lacking, she says. But one place in Chinatown she thinks attracts the younger crowds is the nearby boba tea shop.

In contrast to Nguyen, many of Chinatown's gift shops and restaurants claim that their businesses are on the decline. On an early Friday night in Chinatown, gift shops close around 6 p.m. Restaurants slow down and not many people walk around.

"There's not really a nightlife in Chinatown at the moment," says Fungi Ng, business owner of Master Chef Restaurant, "So it's basically your business is what you make from the morning hour to maybe about 5 o'clock evening. Then after that it's pretty



Fungi Ng, Owner of
Master Chef Restaurant
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

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Jeff Vu, Employee at Lollicup Coffee & Tea
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

says. The owner is very distraught over the way her people have been treated. She compared L.A. Chinatown to San Francisco Chinatown where she says the Chinese are treated drastically different. She says in San Francisco, they get more attention and the government helps them, while in L.A. she feels her and her people are neglected. With few customers, she still owes merchants money. “How can I survive?” she asks.

Her and restaurant owners feel that government plays a large role in their business struggles. Chinatown is a part of L.A. City Council District 1, which consists of over a quarter of a million residents. According to US Census data from 2010, Asian Americans make up approximately 17.7% of the district. Of that percentage, only 34.7% are Chinese American. So of the district’s quarter of a million residents, Chinese Americans only make up about 6% of it. The population is actually dominated by the Latino population who make up 70.1% of the total population. Click [here](#) for a visual slideshow of the district’s population breakdown.

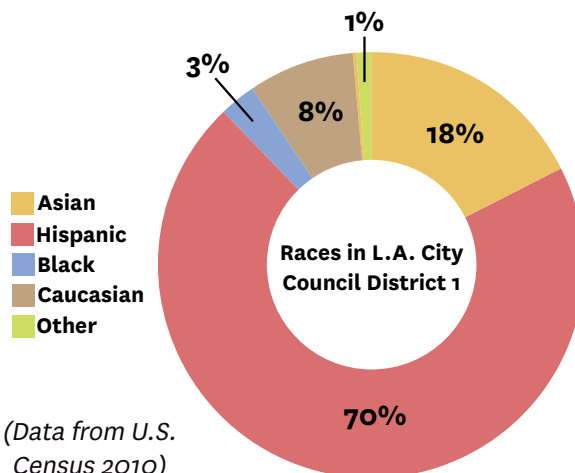
Lollicup Coffee & Tea adds some contemporary spice to Chinatown according to Jeff Vu, an employee. Vu has been working at Lollicup for about six years. It started off as a small store with few places to sit. Last year, in an effort to make the store more contemporary, they expanded it to include a large lounge area with couches, free WiFi and a big TV. “Now people can hang out here,” he says, “[we] definitely get more business. People walk around Chinatown, they get tired, so they come here and relax.” He says that Lollicup has been doing well among the younger crowds, especially with the boba fad.

Although the business does well, Vu emphasizes that most of his customers are regulars. “We don’t really see new people,” he says, “with new restaurants popping in K-Town, Little Tokyo, etc., people are going there.” Vu says the business primarily thrives on these regulars. “Everyone in L.A. and SoCal—they know Chinatown. It’s pretty boring,” he says, so nearby visitors would rather go elsewhere, and new customers are rare since tourist traffic is lower.

This drop in tourist traffic has greatly affected an anonymous gift shop owner in Chinatown’s Central Plaza. Her business has taken a hard fall ever since tour buses stopped coming through Chinatown due to a shortage of parking. “I wish the city was more attentive to us,” she



Newly built Lounge at Lollicup Coffee & Tea
(Photo by Cameron Quon)



(Data from U.S. Census 2010)

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Because the Chinese American population is so low, these businesses wonder how much attention the city can devote to them. But for Tony Quon of the Grand Star Jazz Club, that's just fine. "In the 12 years I've been here, just like anything else, you work hard, you achieve your goals. I think we're very successful."

Quon believes in helping yourself if your business is slow. He says, "You can't just sit there and think it's gonna come to you." He says that although Gilbert Cedillo, councilman for Council District 1, does his best, Chinese Americans represent a small portion of his district, so his main concerns may not necessarily be there.



Wallace (left) and Tony (right) Quon, Owners of Grand Star Jazz Club
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

But whether the government is active or not in the Chinese American community, some businesses are clearly thriving. These are the businesses that mesh well with contemporary cultural currents. Quon's jazz club attracts hundreds of young people for night parties. Nguyen's framing shop caters to a diverse group of customers ranging from artists to LAPD officers who want to frame their certificates. Lollicup serves as a convenient and fun place to hang out and have a snack.

"I think [Chinatown] will disappear soon," says Nguyen. He predicts that Chinatown will be gone in the next five or ten years. But in its place, he believes there will be many Westernized developments—not Chinese or Asian style. Quon, Nguyen, and Vu cater to a wide range of customers; whereas, Fungi caters to Chinese locals and gift shops cater to tourists—two customer types that appear to be fading.



Construction of Blossom Plaza at Chinatown's Entrance
(Photo by Cameron Quon)

New developments are already on their way.

Cedillo is helping developers move forward with [Blossom Plaza](#), a large-scale apartment complex with ground-level shops and lots of new parking, according to Daisy Ma, a board member of Chinatown's [Business Improvement District \(BID\)](#).

Louis Reyes, Communications Director for Cedillo says, "Blossom Plaza is a mixed-used development that should enhance local businesses and bring more economic opportunities." He says that it will offer local residents more housing and serve as a cultural plaza for the community.

Blossom Plaza and its stores will be a major factor in determining the direction of Chinatown's culture.

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