

Between Social, Political, and Economic Factors, Which is Most Essential for the Establishment and Development of Chinatowns in Western Countries?

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Abstract

Minority coalitions have ubiquitous presence across the globe, from the United States to regions in Africa. These ethnic enclaves serve a purpose beyond merely preserving their own culture; they also function as protective shields, almost a sanctuary, against local and regional pressures. As minorities in their respective regions, minority coalition communities have faced significant discrimination, sometimes even targeted by state policies focusing on weakening their influence. Despite these government efforts, minority coalitions have adeptly resisted amalgamation, eventually compelling their host countries to recognise and celebrate their cultural distinctiveness, often transforming these areas into popular tourist destinations. This paper aimed to delve deeper into the underlying reasons among social, political, and economic factors for the formation and development of such ethnic coalitions, arguing that the economic factor is the most important factor out of all. In doing so, out of many minority coalitions, the paper argues that Chinatown serves as an example and a representative that will be mainly discussed when pertaining to minority groups. It explored the intrinsic need for these communities to establish their own communities in response to the challenging social, political, and economic reasons, resulting in the creation of minority coalitions. Especially among these factors, economic reasons were identified to be the driving factor for such dynamics within the minorities. By shifting the discourse away from conventional political and social analyses toward economical factors, the results of the study are anticipated to further enhance our comprehension of social cohesion and identity formation within chinatowns. Furthermore, the results can be further utilised for a better understanding of how those economic factors interact with different social and political factors to shape the dynamics of ethnic enclaves, aiding in policy decisions for immigrating populations.

Keywords: Social sciences, Ethnic coalitions, Minority, Cultural diversity, Gentrification, Discrimination, Politics, Communities

1. Introduction

In an era marked by profound globalisation and individualisation, an increasing number of workers are actively seeking new environments to foster their personal growth and enhance their career prospects. Consequently, a noticeable upward trend in immigration has been observed. Every year, the US reports that 1 million immigrants consisting of minority groups arrive in the US and the number is increasing each year (Budiman, 2020). For example, the number of immigrants peaked at almost 2.5 million, being the third big group of immigrants, having 5 percent of the total immigrating population, following Mexico and India in January, 2023 (Rosenbloom and Batalova, 2023). However, owing to the diversity of factors that diverge from their origin, these smaller migrant communities have coalesced, giving rise to minority coalitions, often presented as Chinatowns, the black society, and Italian ghettos, and many more. Although these ethnic enclaves have traditionally been understood as an attribution to racial tensions

within the host nations, this paper aims to delve into the intricate ways in which economic factors have played the most important part in the rise of minority coalitions. Specifically, in the context of rapid urbanisation, gentrification, and various segregating legislations, individuals have coalesced into such groups due to economic motives, thereby arguing that social and political factors fall short and are weak compared to the economic factors. This research primarily focuses on Western countries, with particular attention to the rise of ethnic minorities. This paper defines the concept of minority coalitions as a vibrant immigrant enclave accommodating various other minority ethnic groups, including Jewish and Mexican populations.

Over the course of time, ethnic minorities have functioned as sanctuaries and secondary residences. These enclaves serve as places to procure familiar foods, engage in traditional worship at temples, and stay connected with news from one's country of origin. Additionally, they have served as thriving business hubs, with a significant portion of the shops and factories all to argue that economic factors played more role than social and political factors. From many minority ethnic groups, the paper especially focuses on Chinatown due to its long history and its political influence. Although Chinatown cannot represent all the minority coalitions, it can serve as a good example to represent minority groups and show how economic factors have played a more important role in developing Chinatown.

2. Discussion

Chinatown's accelerated growth was during the 1849 Gold Rush, a period when a substantial influx of immigrant labourers arrived in the United States and Canada in pursuit of a new life, aligned with the aspirations of the American Dream. Furthermore, an increased number of Chinese labourers came to these lands at the behest of the Central Pacific Railroad, which was in need of a workforce to facilitate the construction of the western segments of the transcontinental railroad. These immigrant labourers primarily accessed America and Canada through their western coasts, settling in California and Vancouver. The end of the gold rush and the onset of the Great Depression resulted in a sudden loss of jobs for a significant number of immigrant labourers, leading to high levels of unemployment. This also led to social discrimination to the people in Chinatown. The paper identifies that social factor refers to social discrimination race, religion, and etc. In the lower-tier, blue-collar labour market, where many immigrant workers were employed, unemployment rates were especially pronounced. Leveraging the perception of physical vulnerability attributed to Chinese and other Asian individuals, which made them easy targets, other labourers began to blame them for their own economic hardships. These negative understandings towards Chinese workers are also linked with their willingness to work for less pay, seen as the driving factor that decreases wages (Baxter, 2008). Employers, in turn, were often described as seeking to extract as much as they could from their employees while giving very little in return. They were seen as "the keenest cheat in the world" and were viewed as cunning in making deals and obtaining advantages (Pattison, 2012). This growing hostility eventually led to the formation of national anti-Chinese legislations, implying government consent for discriminating against Chinese people. The struggle for the Chinese immigrants continued. Rising housing prices, coupled with the relatively lower housing costs in Chinatowns compared to citywide averages, placed low-income residents at risk of losing their homes due to escalating rents and mortgages. This predicament made securing affordable housing elsewhere increasingly difficult, potentially leading to their displacement from the city as a whole. In the case of San Francisco, the Chinese population united to establish the Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), a community-based organisation dedicated to improving the quality of life for Chinatown residents.

In California, following the Civil War, specifically in 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment granted Native American and African American students the right to attend white schools in communities where there were no separate schools. However, Chinese students were excluded from this policy change. It wasn't until 1885, after Chinese parents brought the issue to court, that the State Assembly finally admitted Chinese students to the "Chinese school." In 1906, the city government renamed it the Oriental Public School to segregate other Asian students alongside the Chinese. Even after the overturning of de jure segregation in U.S. public schools in the 1954 Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, almost all Chinese students attended de facto segregated schools during the 1960s (Greek and Jacobsen, 2017). In terms of where they could live, in 1913, the California State Assembly passed a bill that prohibited "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from owning land and limited their lease term to three years (Immigration and Ethnic History

Society, 2019). Furthermore, in the case of De la Torre, a former state lawmaker in California whose parents moved to the U.S. from Mexico, his deeds included a sentence clearly restricting non-Western races: "If persons not of the Caucasian race be kept thereon by a Caucasian occupant strictly in the capacity of servants or employees of such occupant such circumstances shall not constitute a violation" (Watt and Hannah, 2020). This stipulated that non-Western people could only be servants and kept in these houses, and they could neither own them nor live in them. In the case of Vancouver, total segregation was never imposed, and indeed, Chinese students attended school with students from various backgrounds. The legislation did not specify Asian demographics but rather encompassed non-Western populations, resulting in children growing up in mixed neighbourhoods and ultimately forming multicultural ethnic enclaves in the future. By restricting their educational environments and even their places of residence, the gap between Chinese immigrants and Western culture widened, making it even more challenging for Chinese people to assimilate into the local cultures. This forced them to establish their own cultural cores, ultimately leading to the formation of Chinatowns.

After the great depression, social and political factors weakened, and the economic factor receive more emphasis in the development of the minority coalitions. Early Chinese immigrants faced legal barriers, notably the Chinese Exclusion Act, representing the first racial exclusions in US and Canadian immigration policies. This specific act imposed a 10-year ban on Chinese labourers immigrating to the US, with exceptions for categories such as merchants, teachers, students, and travellers in the US, as well as merchants, diplomats, and students in Canada. Until the 1960s, the US and Canadian governments had limited involvement in Chinatowns. Instead, the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA), a mutual aid society, served as an unofficial government. The CBA provided financial aid, social services like pensions and healthcare, and acted as a judiciary and trade guild overseer. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinatowns were perceived as exotic, unsanitary, and crime-ridden places. In response, rather than resisting, the CBA turned Chinatown into a tourist-friendly locale, beginning in the 1880s in San Francisco. It benefited Chinese merchants, boosted city tax revenue, and forged political connections with local officials, gaining more and more power to protect themselves (Kim, 2021). These movements within the Chinese community expanded their sphere of influence and granted them a voice in local societies, exemplifying the effectiveness of minority coalitions in achieving their goals. Through a political approach, Chinese immigrants were discriminated against and social discrimination against them was common.

As gentrification and urban reforms encouraged Chinese and other ethnic minorities to come together and collaborate, they were simultaneously confronted with native hostility from the Western population. Segregatory and immigration-related policies forced these communities to remain outside of the mainstream culture, leaving them with no choice but to establish their own distinct cultural identities in their new countries. A pervasive stereotype portrayed Chinese individuals as passive and cowardly, creating an environment where even children found it acceptable, and at times were even encouraged, to harass Chinese people without anticipating any repercussions. This perception was based on broader stereotypes attributed to Asian people, depicting them as physically weak and untrustworthy (Pattison, 2012). The effect of political influences on ethnic minorities is minimal and oftentimes does not work in proper ways. Political factors take time to be implemented and do not mostly reflect the needs of the minority groups. In promoting racial minorities such as Hispanic and Pacific Islanders, the central government's policies are too effective in addressing their current situations. Diversity programs that many companies use also have been shown to be ineffective (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). Although the policies attempt to address minority coalitions, the effect is minimal and does not create an outstanding effect where the minority people feel policies are effective. Though the government seeks to help ethnic minorities, the effect isn't so strong.

Similar to the Chinese communities in San Francisco, the Chinese population in Vancouver also moved, forming the Chinese Property Owner's Association to implore the city government to cease urban renewal projects and permit Chinese residents to independently rejuvenate the area while preserving their cultural heritage. Unfortunately, these proposals failed to yield influence or impact. After, the Chinese population collaborated with non-Chinese ethnic groups, including Italians, Ukrainians, and native Indians as well as shouting assistance from a neighbouring city and established the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA) to bolster their cause and halt urban reforms (Kim, 2021). This coalition of diverse ethnic groups bolstered their electoral influence, emerging as the largest non-Anglo population, constituting 14% of the vote in the 1972 Canadian federal election (Kim, 2021). Subsequently,

federal politicians officially aligned themselves with the movement against prevailing housing policies. Ultimately, in July of 1971, an agreement was reached for a rehabilitation project, involving federal, provincial, and local governments (Itter and Marlatt, 2011). As evident in these cases, ethnic minorities have collectively resisted local government actions by establishing their own communities, such as Chinatowns, successfully protecting themselves from external pressures. The influences exerted by the Chinatowns coincided with the relaxation of immigration restrictions under the 'Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965,' precipitating a significant influx of immigrants and triggering exponential growth within these communities (History, 2018). This demographic surge has resulted in a housing shortage crisis. In the 1960s, over 90% of residential units in New York's Chinatown suffered from persistent issues such as pest infestations, plumbing problems, and faulty wiring. Similar challenges confronted residents in California and Vancouver. In the case of California, it has been grappling with a rapidly increasing housing shortage since around 1970, estimated at 3-4 million housing units, which accounts for approximately 20 -30 % of California's housing stock (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

In response to significant changes in housing policies in California, particularly in San Francisco, known as the Chinatown Rezoning Plan, Chinatowns began to evolve into mixed-use areas, losing their status as exclusive cultural and ethnic enclaves. The objective of the new policy was to implement downzoning measures across significant portions of the community area and to establish specific functional criteria for the area thus erasing their cultural traces. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, approximately 1,700 residential units in Chinatown were changed to business areas (Li, 2011). Recognising the growing threat of displacement, the CCDC actively advocated for structural changes to urban reform policies to protect Chinatowns. As a result, when the San Francisco Planning Department proposed a new Downtown Plan for further urban reform, residents, community-based organisations, and even city officials displayed political will for policy change, arguing that actions were necessary to preserve Chinatown's character and culture (Li, 2011; Chinn, 2014). In 1986, the housing policy underwent a successful revision that effectively banned demolitions and the repurposing of residential structures for alternative uses (Center for Community Innovation [CCI], 2015). The highly developed and concentrated social network also was a key part of stopping and preventing gentrification from becoming more severe. Vacancies in housing and property sales were often shared in local Chinese-language newspapers furtively, preventing this information from reaching the general public and deterring wealthy Americans from entering Chinatowns (CCI, 2015). This collaborative communal effort in dealing with local governments proved to be successful in preserving the cultural identity and resilience of minorities in both California and Vancouver.

This evolving pattern in Chinatowns was similarly evident in Vancouver, Canada. Initially, mirroring the approach of the United States, the Canadian government introduced the concept of urban renewal within the National Housing Act (NHA) in 1944 and subsequently established its dedicated housing agency, the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in 1946 (Kim, 2021). The NHA's scope extended to redevelopment areas in 1954, and in 1956, policy amendments eliminated restrictions on the reutilisation of cleared land, granting the government authority to eradicate substandard housing and alter land usage as desired (Pickett, 1968). Attention towards economic motives became more prevalent among Chinese immigrants, putting less emphasis on social and political factors in the development of Chinatown.

The paper argues that the economic factor is the most important of all that contributes to the rise of Chinatowns as seen from the historical timeline since the Gold Rush. Without a clear economic incentive, the intensity of minorities to form enclaves is weak. These economic reasons could be in many forms such as job seeking and housing. For example, a great number of immigrants come to Chinatown in search of jobs as the town provides a welcoming environment, especially for Chinese immigrants (Dolnick, 2011). Chinatowns often offer Chinese immigrants a part-time job at the town, usually in restaurants and small labour before they settle down and are able to afford a sustainable living. Furthermore, various economic incentives are realised in the minority coalitions. Economic services that require specific legal status or knowledge are fulfilled by these groups. Another example from Chinatown is the service that it provides to the early immigrants. It offers accounting, real-estate agent services, and health care professionals that all tie into the economic factors of the development in Chinatown (Muhammad and Sim, 2021).

3. Conclusion

Minority coalitions stand as resilient ethnic enclaves, preserving the rich tapestry of their foreign populations' cultural identities. Their significance extends far beyond mere clustered residential areas; they serve as sanctuaries against discrimination, isolation, and the erasure of their unique cultural traits. Despite facing the challenges of gentrification and segregatory legislation, they have managed to establish a powerful political presence, drawing in tourists and local residents who understand the importance of preserving their heritage. The paper provided an analysis as to why economic factors over social and political factors have a stronger influence on the development of Chinatown. In a world increasingly driven by individualism, where many cultures and traditions are at risk of being lost, minority coalitions and similar communities worldwide offer a beacon of hope. They possess the potential to unite diverse cultures and nationalities, safeguarding the legacies of the past and present for the benefit of future generations. These ethnic coalitions serve as a potent means to protect our cultural heritages from fading into oblivion, reinforcing the vital importance of unity.

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