

Sadie Sadler
Urban Geography Final Research Paper
May 13, 2026

Marketing Chinatown

Introduction

For the last few centuries, urban place promotion has affected urban environments around the globe (Hall, 1998). “More cities are recognizing the need to promote positive images of themselves” and tourism has become a vital component of the local economy (Hall, 1998, 112; Santos et al, 2008). In addition, the “images produced by cities are more diverse than in previous years” (Hall, 1998, 112). Chinatown is one of the places that cities have now promoted. Cities have not only focused on selling Chinatown, but marketing Chinatown in a way that is shaped by the wants of the consumer (Hall, 1998). Historically, Chinatown has been an ethnic enclave for survival among Chinese immigrants who faced brutal persecution. Chinatowns were perceived as filthy, immoral, and dangerous. But in the past few decades, Chinatowns have undergone drastic transformations and have become a valuable asset for cities across the country. In this paper, I examine how official tourism websites for nine American cities present Chinatown. I seek to answer the questions: how do these cities present Chinatown as an attractive tourist destination and how do they construct meanings of Chinatown and Chineseness? First, I provide an overview of if and how Chinatown is mentioned on the homepage of these websites, as well as the location and contents of the specific “Chinatown” webpage. Second, I provide a synthesis and discussion of my observations.

San Francisco, California

San Francisco’s Chinatown is the oldest in America. It is first seen on San Francisco’s official tourism website homepage under the section “Explore San Francisco's Neighborhoods.” The “Chinatown” webpage features a large photo of a street in Chinatown and an alluring blurb (Image 1). The webpage also includes “Trip Inspiration,” a podcast episode about exploring Chinatown by cable car, instructions about how to get to Chinatown, a video tour hosted by a local guide, a photo gallery, and a few articles highlighting residents, shops, and restaurants.



Image 1.

Los Angeles, California

Los Angeles’s Chinatown is first mentioned on the official tourism website in the section highlighting different neighborhoods. After clicking numerous times through a list, Chinatown finally pops up. When clicking the arrow to access a supposed “Chinatown” webpage, a 404 Error appears. However, there is a video that features an overview of top attractions in Chinatown (Image 2).

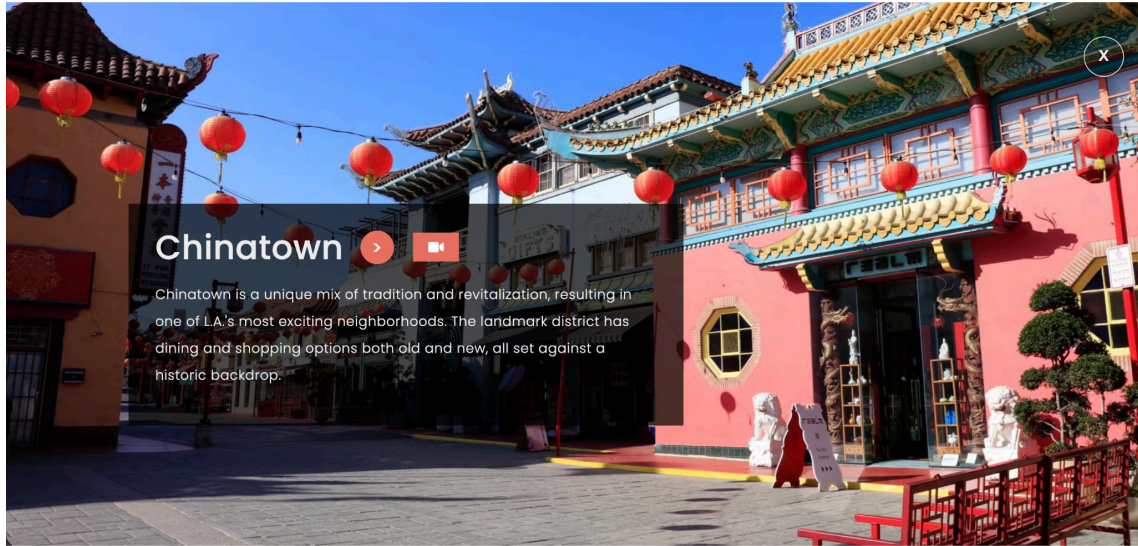


Image 2.

Chinatown also appears in a few articles posted in the last few months on subpages of the website. For example, under “Things to Do” and then “Arts and Culture,” there is an article titled “Chinatown: The Story of an LA Icon” (Image 3). The webpage has many photos and sections titled “A Mecca for Food,” “Chinese American Museum,” “Chinatown Gateway Monument,” “Central Plaza,” “Art Galleries,” “Nightlife,” “Festivals,” and “Getting There.”



Image 3.

New York City, New York

New York City is said to have numerous Chinatowns. The most well-known is in downtown Manhattan. Another is in Flushing, Queens. The official tourism website highlights both Manhattan’s and Queens’ Chinatowns. On the homepage, both Chinatowns are first seen in

an article in the section “Savor NYC” titled “Enjoy Chinese Cuisine in These 3 Neighborhoods.” Going deeper into the website, Manhattan’s Chinatown can then be seen on the “Manhattan” webpage. The cover photo representing the entire borough of Manhattan is of a street in Chinatown (Image 4). This suggests that the city greatly values Chinatown. Rather than Times Square or Central Park, places that are arguably more well-known to non-New Yorkers, the city chose a photo of Chinatown.



Manhattan

The lights of Broadway, the soaring elms of Central Park, the world's most famous skyline—Manhattan is an icon. The borough at the center of it all is made for every kind of adventurer.

Image 4.

Manhattan’s Chinatown is then featured on the same webpage under the section “What’s Happening In Manhattan.” An article titled “Chinatown’s Multigenerational Family Businesses” highlights the family history of a few restaurants that have been around for decades. Scrolling further down the “Manhattan” webpage, Chinatown is featured under “Browse Manhattan Neighborhoods” (Image 5). The “Chinatown” webpage features another photo of a street in Chinatown and has sections titled “Guides & Essentials,” “Things To Do In Chinatown,” “Where To Eat In Chinatown,” and “Shopping In Chinatown.” There is also a photo gallery.



Chinatown
A center of culture and cuisine

Image 5.

Queens’ Chinatown is highlighted on the “Queens” webpage under “Browse Queens Neighborhoods” and then “Flushing.” The “Flushing” webpage heavily features Queens’ Chinatown, but also includes other areas and aspects of Flushing (Image 6). The cover photo for the webpage is of a busy street in Chinatown. The webpage also includes recommendations for activities, restaurants, and hotels, and a gallery in which four out of 15 photos feature Chinatown.



Flushing
Asian food, outdoor activities, family fun

Image 6.

Chicago, Illinois

Chicago’s Chinatown is featured in a few places on the homepage of the tourism website. The section titled “A City of Neighborhoods” features an image of Chinatown (Image 7). There

is also a section titled “Experiences” that includes “Neighborhoods.” On the “Neighborhoods” webpage, Chinatown is featured with a photo and the blurb, “Experience old and new Chinese culture and cuisine in this century-old neighborhood” (Image 8). The section “Experiences” on the homepage also includes “Asian Culture in Chicago” using the same photo as Image 8. The “Asian Culture in Chicago” webpage provides more information about Chicago’s three Asian neighborhoods. There is also a link to an article that highlights particular destinations in Chinatown, as well as another link to the “Chinatown” webpage (Image 9).



Image 7.



Image 8.



Image 9.

The “Chinatown” webpage features the same photo as Image 8. It highlights various activities, restaurants, shops, museums, parks, and other places in Chinatown. There is also a downloadable Chinatown brochure and map.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Philadelphia’s Chinatown is first seen on the homepage in an interactive map that highlights the Chinatown Friendship Gate (Image 10).

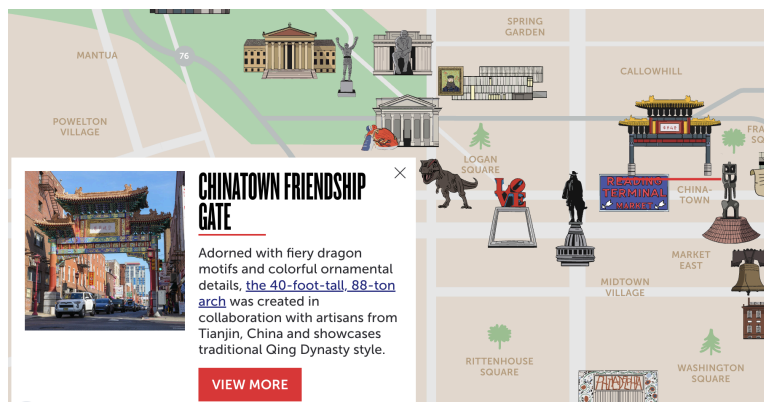


Image 10.

The “Chinatown” webpage is found by going to the “Explore Philadelphia’s Neighborhoods” webpage and then clicking on Chinatown in another interactive map. The “Chinatown: Philly’s Vibrant Asian Cultural Hub” webpage features a short, silent video of a few places in Chinatown, including the Gate. Sections of the webpage include “Five Can’t-Miss Experiences in Chinatown,” “Where to Stay,” and “Local Tips.” There is also a large image of an Instagram post about Chinatown (Image 11).



Image 11.

Houston, Texas

Houston’s Chinatown is now often referred to as “Asiatown” (Alarcon, 2026). This is highlighted in a “What’s Trending” article on the homepage of Houston’s official tourism website. However, there is still a “Chinatown” webpage, though it is not easy to find without looking it up in the search tool. Under “About Us” and then “Neighborhoods” is the

“Chinatown” webpage (Image 12). The webpage is very brief, with only three pictures and two short paragraphs.

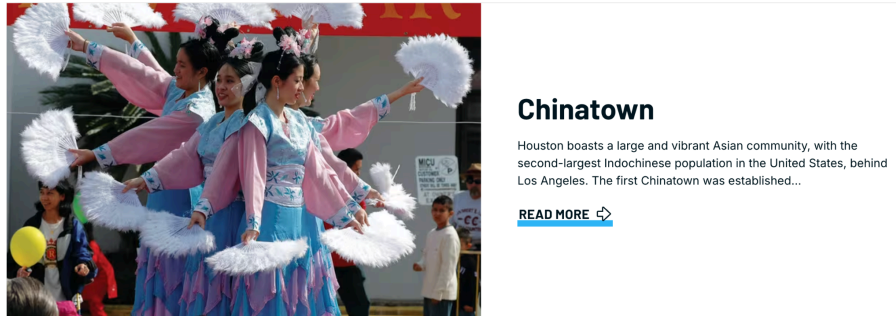


Image 12.

Boston, Massachusetts

Boston’s Chinatown is first seen on the homepage in a short video montage of various places in Boston. It is then seen in a photo under the section titled “Our Neighborhoods,” although the photo does not have a caption stating it is Chinatown (Image 13). More information about Chinatown can be found under the “Neighborhoods” webpage, which uses the same photo and lumps together the Theater District and Chinatown. The “Theater District & Chinatown” webpage focuses more on the theater district but does feature tours, a podcast about Chinatown, restaurants, and a video highlighting the Boston Chinatown food scene.

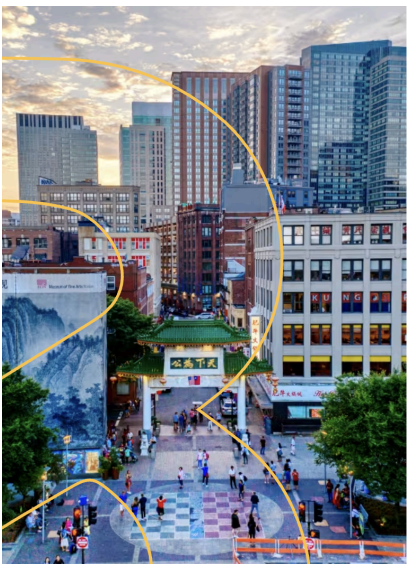
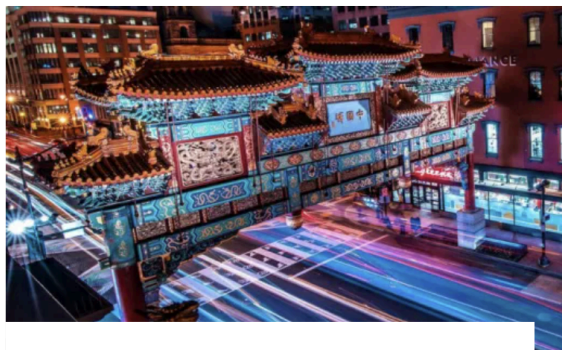


Image 13.

District of Columbia

D.C.'s Chinatown is first seen on the homepage above “Receive the DC Insider eNewsletter” (Image 14).



Receive the DC Insider
eNewsletter

Image 14.

After clicking numerous times through a list in the section titled “Explore Our Neighborhoods,” “Chinatown” appears. When clicking the button to access a supposed “Penn Quarter & Chinatown” webpage, a 404 Error appears. However, the “Penn Quarter & Chinatown” webpage can instead be accessed by first going to the “DC Neighborhoods” webpage. The “Penn Quarter

& Chinatown” webpage features a photo of the Friendship Archway (Image 15). The webpage does not highlight any specific attractions or businesses in Chinatown besides the archway.

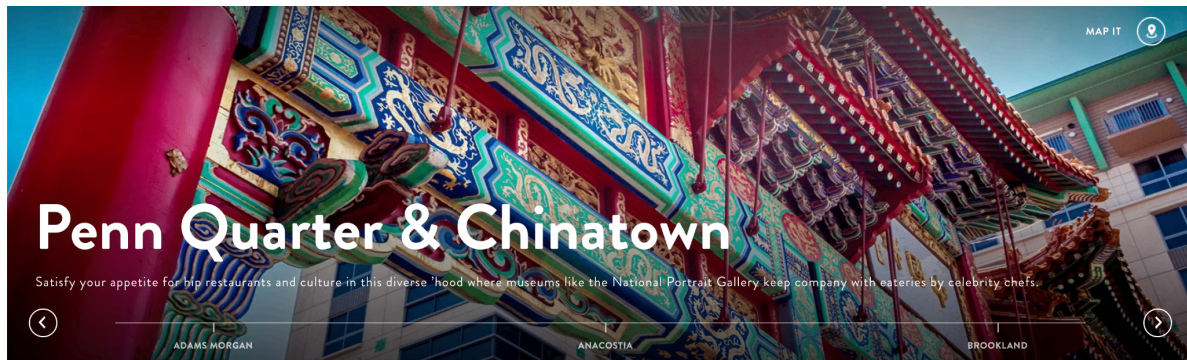


Image 15.

Honolulu, Hawai'i

Honolulu's Chinatown is first mentioned on Honolulu's official tourism website on the homepage under the section "Food & Dining in Honolulu." The blurb states, "From barefoot fish tacos at Duke's Beach House in Waikīkī to the eclectic food scene in trendy Chinatown, Honolulu has something for every taste." Chinatown is then found under "Landmarks & Attractions" and "Downtown Honolulu." The blurb says, "Downtown Honolulu and Chinatown are O'ahu's centers for government, business and arts, with dining and nightlife around every corner." However, there is no dedicated webpage for Chinatown, nor is Chinatown mentioned any further on the "Downtown Honolulu" webpage.

Synthesis and Discussion

In some cities, the local government makes Chinatown an important part of the city's attraction and identity. Chinatown is very prominent on their tourism website. For example, Chinatowns in New York City and Chicago are featured in numerous webpages and articles throughout the website. The "Chinatown" webpage is thorough and comprehensive. Los Angeles

calls Chinatown “an LA Icon” and “one of LA’s most popular tourist destinations.” On some websites, like San Francisco’s, there are clear instructions about how to get to Chinatown from other areas of the city. Other websites, such as Philadelphia’s, include a list of hotels, encouraging people to stay in Chinatown during their trip. In other cities, Chinatown is not as important. In Boston and D.C., Chinatown is lumped together with other neighborhoods. Not many businesses or attractions in those Chinatowns are highlighted on the website. Houston’s Chinatown webpage has only two short paragraphs. Honolulu does not have a dedicated “Chinatown” webpage.

All of these cities present Chinatown as an attractive tourist destination because of its history and culture. Every webpage includes the words “history” or “historic.” Some describe Chinatown as a “historic neighborhood” or a neighborhood with “historic landmarks.” A few webpages also highlight the local museum in which visitors can learn more history. In addition, all webpages highlight traditional Chinese architecture and symbolism in photos and text. Many photos and descriptions include pagodas or imperial architecture. San Francisco’s webpage states, “with its pagoda-style architecture” and Manhattan’s says, “from pagoda-style roofs.” Six of the nine “Chinatown” webpages feature photos with lanterns. For example, the cover photo on Los Angeles’ “Chinatown” webpage is of a street lined with pagoda style buildings and rows of red lanterns. Four webpages include photos of the traditional Chinese gate or archway. Philadelphia and Los Angeles’ webpages highlight the Qing Dynasty features and dragon motifs on the gates. This emphasis on history reveals that Chinatowns are a product of the “expansion of historical tourism, the desire to ‘just look’ at the replicated and revalued artifacts and architecture of another time” (Boyer, 1992, 199). The way these websites portray Chinatown also reveals the limited stock of symbols spectators are meant to use to understand Chinese history

and Chineseness and how “traditional imagery is reinforced and revised” to make Chinatown exotic yet desirable (Boyer, 1992; Santos et al, 2008).

A few webpages also use the words “tradition” and “culture” to describe aspects of Chinatown. Chicago’s webpage highlights “traditional specialty shops” and Boston’s and Los Angeles’ spotlight “traditional and modern treats” and “traditional [food] favorites” respectively. New York City describes Manhattan’s Chinatown as a “center of culture.” D.C.’s webpage states, “satisfy your appetite for [...] culture” and “Penn Quarter & Chinatown draws [...] culture vultures.” Philadelphia’s claims Chinatown is a “vibrant Asian cultural hub,” “key cultural attraction,” and “cultural treasure.” Numerous webpages also highlight Chinese holiday celebrations and festivals, such as Lunar New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, and the Moon Festival. Boston’s webpage states, “during the Chinese New Year and August Moon Festivals, the streets of Chinatown are filled with dancing dragons, traditional music, and martial arts demonstrations.” In addition, a few “Chinatown” webpages include an “events” section that highlights special upcoming events, which further encourages outsiders to engage with Chinese and Asian culture.

A few of the “Chinatown” webpages state that visiting Chinatown feels like visiting China. San Francisco claims, “a stop here can feel more like a trip abroad than a neighborhood stroll.” Chicago explains, “Chicago’s century-old Chinatown transports you straight to eastern Asia.” Philadelphia says, “Get transported to the heart of Asian history and culture.” The webpages portray Chinatown as a place in which the history of China or the history of that particular American Chinatown can not only be learned, but authentically experienced. These cities promote the idea that Chinatown is stuck in time. The emphasis on Chinese culture

underscores the commodification of ethnicity for tourism and leisure and the desire to gaze at the Other (Santos et al, 2008).

Chinatown is also presented as an attractive destination because of its abundance of delicious and authentic food. All webpages at least mention food, if not have an entire section dedicated to “where to eat in Chinatown.” San Francisco’s webpage states Chinatown is full of “exotic menus.” New York City’s says Manhattan’s Chinatown is a “center of [...] cuisine” and that “Flushing may be best known for its array of delicious Asian cuisines and restaurants.” Similarly, Boston’s claims, “Boston Chinatown is renowned for its large selection of Asian restaurants and bakeries.” Chicago’s webpage encourages visitors to visit all the “family-owned restaurants with dishes you’ll be craving long after you’re home.” D.C.’s claims Chinatown “draws foodies” and Philadelphia’s calls Chinatown “a foodie paradise.” Los Angeles’ highlights that Chinatown is undergoing a “dining [...] renaissance” and is “a mecca for food.” These websites emphasize food in order to make Chinatown “an exoticized cultural product [...] despite the obviousness, pervasiveness and banality of Chinese food in mainstream US society today” (Santos et al, 2008, 1008).

Moreover, most webpages also highlight shopping and promote Chinatown as a place in which to purchase uniquely Chinese goods. Manhattan’s Chinatown webpage states, “local stores specialize in books, chopsticks and ceramics.” Philadelphia’s encourages tourists to “pick up whimsical gifts at specialty boutiques [...] shop for hot pot ingredients and moon cakes [...] snag imported treats at snack shops.” Chicago’s highlights, “traditional specialty shops,” “hard-to-find beauty products,” “unique jewelry,” “exotic teas,” and “storefronts packed with colorful wares and souvenirs.” These websites exoticize and distinguish certain aspects of Chinese history and culture to make Chinatown alluring.

Many of these websites also portray Chinatown as vibrant and lively through photos and text. Images of Chinatown are full of color. Manhattan's "Chinatown" webpage states, "Manhattan's Chinatown is a busy, evocative neighborhood" with "lively streets" and that "few districts in NYC offer as much sensory stimulation." The "Flushing" webpage calls Flushing "dynamic" with "bustling main blocks." Chicago's "Chinatown" webpage explains, "you're in for the best kind of sensory overload." Philadelphia's describes Chinatown as a "vibrant Asian cultural hub" with "eclectic shops," "exciting street festivals," and electric energy. The webpage also states, "nowhere in Philadelphia is quite like Chinatown" and "the neighborhood is in a league of its own." The four words used to describe the D.C.'s Chinatown are "bright, trendy, lively, nightlife." Los Angeles' and Honolulu's websites also claim nightlife is a part of Chinatown. In addition, a few webpages describe Chinatown as ornate: "ornate lamp posts," "elaborately adorned streets," "ornate architecture," "ornately designed buildings," and "elaborately decorated gate." A few webpages also portray Chinatown as a destination for those who enjoy art. Chicago and Los Angeles's webpages spotlight certain artwork and art galleries in Chinatown. Philadelphia's has a section titled "Discover murals and local artwork." These websites replace the historic conceptions of Chinatowns as dangerous, secretive, and immoral and instead portray Chinatowns as stimulating and bustling areas filled with nightlife and art. Chinatown is advertised as a cultural theme park.

Only a few webpages state that Chinatown was or is a residential and cultural space *for Chinese and Asians*. Houston's "Chinatown" webpage states "Houston boasts a large and vibrant Asian community." Manhattan's says that Chinatown is "home to a dense population of Asian immigrants." Los Angeles' explains that Chinatown is "the first such neighborhood in the U.S. that was actually owned by Chinese residents." While these webpages promote Chinatown as a

place filled with history, most do not state any actual history of that Chinatown on the webpage. The idea of Chinatown as an ethnic enclave for Chinese immigrants and their descendants or as a neighborhood formed out of survival during a time when Chinese faced discrimination is now overshadowed by the idea of Chinatown as a tourist destination.

As Boyer states, sometimes the aim of the way cities are constructed is “theatrical” and there is “always a distinction between the represented image of the city and its reality” (Boyer, 1992, 184). “Because each fragment is well composed, it absorbs the spectators’ attention, upstaging the neglected in-between spaces” (Boyer, 1992, 184). Similarly, Hall states, “the process is not innocent [...] the positive images of the city created in promotional campaigns and in urban regeneration have acted as masks hiding the reality of urban problems” (Hall, 1998, 131). Thinking about Boyer and Hall’s words in the context of American Chinatowns, these websites present Chinatown as like a spectacle or a “simulation” of China (Boyer, 1992, 187). Chinatown and Chineseness is commodified and marketized. Chinatown is promoted as a place of “commercial entertainment and imaginary travel” (Boyer, 1992, 187). But these portrayals often mask past and present realities of poverty, discrimination, displacement, and gentrification surrounding Chinatowns. These carefully constructed Chinatowns become “culinary and ornamental landscapes through which the tourists [...] graze, celebrating the consumption of place and architecture, and the taste of history and food” (Boyer, 1992, 189). In the process of marketizing Chinatown, outsiders create and perpetuate certain ideas of what it means to be Chinese. Chineseness is promoted as something that tourists get to consume by passing through and eating in Chinatown.

These websites also underscore that the Chineseness that tourists consume is highly curated. It is distilled and made more accessible. As Santos et al argue in their paper about

Chinatown tourism discourse, “tourism officials have ‘repackaged’ this ethnic enclave to make it appear desirable to visitors” (Santos et al, 2008, 1010). Officials and locals have put in a lot of effort to “overturn earlier discursive patterns by emphasizing the neighborhood as the exact opposite of what its historical reputation would suggest” (Santos et al, 2008, 1010). Most websites offer an itinerary, recommendations from a local guide, or specific tours. Particular business or attractions are also highlighted. As it states on Boston’s “Chinatown” webpage, “Chinatown can be intimidating for outsiders.” But there are curated ways to consume Chinatown that make it welcoming to anyone. Therefore, Chinatown is promoted as “an exotic, yet comfortable place to visit” (Santos et al, 2008, 1007). Chinatown is marketed as the Other, but in a way that Otherness is still friendly to tourists (Santos et al, 2008). “The idea of difference is now spun in a much more positive way” (Santos et al, 2008, 1011). As Santos et al summarizes, “Chinatown continues to be seen as a place with ethnic and religious traditions that differ from mainstream White America, but rather than being feared as in the past, this difference is now lauded as a valuable part of” the cities’ urban cultural landscapes (Santos et al, 2008, 1009). The place of Chinatowns in American cities is just like the place of Chinese people in American society today. Chinese are perpetual foreigners but also the model minority. The Otherness of Chineseness is exotic enough to be interesting, particularly to the white gaze, but not too exotic that it is dangerous or undesirable.

Bibliography

- Alarcon, C. (2026) "An Outsider's Guide to Houston's Asiatown." Houston First Corporation. <https://www.visithoustontexas.com/blog/post/an-outsiders-guide-to-houstons-chinatown>.
- Boyer, C. (1992) "Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport" in *Variations on a Theme Park*, Michael Sorkin, ed. (New York: Hill and Wang).
- "Chicago." Choose Chicago. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.choosechicago.com/>.
- (2025) "Chinatown: Philly's Vibrant Asian Cultural Hub." Visit Philadelphia. <https://www.visitphilly.com/areas/philadelphia-neighborhoods/chinatown>.
- "Chinatown." Choose Chicago. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.choosechicago.com/neighborhoods/chinatown>.
- "Chinatown." Houston First Corporation. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.visithoustontexas.com/about-houston/neighborhoods/chinatown>.
- "Chinatown." New York City Tourism + Conventions. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.nyctourism.com/new-york/manhattan/chinatown>.
- "Chinatown." San Francisco Travel Association. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.sftravel.com/neighborhoods/chinatown>.
- Discover Los Angeles (2026) "Chinatown: The Story of an LA Icon." Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board. <https://www.discoverlosangeles.com/things-to-do/chinatown-the-story-of-an-la-icon>.
- "Flushing." New York City Tourism + Conventions. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.nyctourism.com/new-york/manhattan/chinatown>.
- Hall, T. (1998) "Transforming the Image of the City." *Urban Geography*. New York: Rutledge.
- "Honolulu." Hawai'i Tourism Authority. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/oahu/regions/honolulu>.
- "Manhattan." New York City Tourism + Conventions. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.nyctourism.com/new-york/manhattan>.
- "Meet Boston." Meet Boston. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.meetboston.com>.
- "Penn Quarter & Chinatown." Destination DC. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://washington.org/dc-neighborhoods/penn-quarter-chinatown>.
- Santos, C. Belhassen, Y. & Caton, K (2008). Reimagining Chinatown: An analysis of tourism discourse. *Tourism Management* 29. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261517708000137>.
- "There's Only One DC." Destination DC. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://washington.org/>.
- "Things To Do in the Theater District & Chinatown." Meet Boston. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.meetboston.com/explore/neighborhoods/theater-district-chinatown>.
- "Welcome to Houston." Houston First Corporation. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.visithoustontexas.com>.
- "Welcome to New York City." New York City Tourism + Conventions. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.nyctourism.com/>.
- "Welcome to Philadelphia." Visit Philadelphia. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.visitphilly.com>.
- "Welcome to San Francisco." San Francisco Travel Association. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.sftravel.com>.
- "We Love LA." Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board. Accessed May 13, 2026. <https://www.discoverlosangeles.com>.