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Reflections on AAS 2010 and Downtown Philadelphia

By Samuel Y. Liang

On my way from England to AAS 2010, I stopped in New York for two nights and visited the Chinatown in Manhattan. This prosperous area sprawls beyond the boundary shown in the tourist map towards the shoreline of the East River; it also encroaches on neighboring Little Italy, which is increasingly like an island in a sea of Chinese shops and restaurants. The density of the shops and their gaudy commercialism, it seems to me, exceed those in Chinese cities and are quite similar to those in Won Kok, Hong Kong.

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1* This little square in the dense urban fabric of Chinatown, Manhattan provides a precious resting space for tourists (and pigeons). On the right is a pailou (Chinese arch) style memorial dedicated to Chinese American soldiers who have died in war; on the left is a statue of Lin Zexu — in China he is a national hero who fought Western imperialists in the First Opium War, but here he declares Chinatown’s “war” against drug dealers. (2010 © Samuel Y. Liang)

In a buffet-style restaurant, I got to know two Chinese immigrants sitting next to me. Both were in their late forties and had left their wives and children in China. One, from Jiangsu Province, graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai in the early 1980s. He told me the hardship of working in America. He was a respected intellectual at home, but here he is a lower-class worker for restaurants and other merchants. He showed me his pale, thin forearm dotted with many oil-burn scars from working in restaurants. He changed jobs many times and moved between the major cities of the East Coast during the last few years. But such changes, he lamented, would never improve his situation or get him into the “mainstream American society,” as he is always within the enclosed community of Chinese immigrants.

He was visiting Manhattan from Flushing, Queens on that day. There are express minibuses run by the Chinese that connect this Chinatown with the thriving Chinatowns in Queens and Brooklyn. Main
Street in Flushing, Queens is now dominated by a dense array of Chinese shops and eateries that even surpass those in Manhattan.

As a Chinese native trained in the US academy and now living in the UK, I felt at home yet also isolated walking the streets of American Chinatowns, thinking that I could have been one of the hard-working new immigrants I saw. But unlike most of them, I take an ambivalent stand toward my native culture: on the one hand, it is in part my distance from China that allows me to critically investigate Chinese culture and society; on the other hand, my scholarly investigation is greatly informed by my intimacy with that culture.

When I told my new friends from Flushing that I was on my way to visit Philadelphia, they advised me to take the inexpensive Chinese bus service that runs between the Chinatowns of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. I took their advice, as I knew that the AAS 2010 venue was very close to Chinatown, Philadelphia. In fact, the conference hotel was only one block away from the bus terminal or, rather, stop on Eleventh Street.

**Figure 2** Chinese shops on Main Street, Flushing, Queens. This inexpensive neighborhood attracts more and more new Chinese immigrants. (2010 © Samuel Y. Liang)
Figure 3 The arch of Chinatown, Philadelphia. The Chinese term Huabu on the arch was used by the earliest generations of immigrants. Newer arches, such as that in Washington DC, use the term Zhongguocheng, which is preferred by new immigrants from PRC. Both terms are translated as “Chinatown.” (2008 © Samuel Y. Liang)

I was mainly in the hotel during the conference, except for three quick visits to Chinatown for meals. I had also visited the area two years earlier. It is a relatively quiet neighborhood. According to Jeff Gammage, a staff writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer, it is a local neighborhood of 140 years history, rather than merely a tourist destination. In contrast to the thriving Chinese enclaves in New York, this one is shrinking. In a book about his experience of transnational parenthood, Gammage writes:

The Center City housing boom is sweeping east, into places never before considered as sites for luxury housing. Chinatown activists fear the new development will raise housing prices, rents, and taxes so high that the neighborhood’s traditional working-class families will no longer be able to afford to live there. Chinatown, they worry, will be reduced from a living, breathing neighborhood to a touristy collection of restaurants (228).

Chinatown in Washington, DC (which I visited after the conference) is also shrinking, as some “white people,” a restaurant manager told me, have just bought a neighboring block and opened shops to sell Chinese products. I noticed that a Spanish restaurant and a Subway next to Chinatown posted signs in English and Chinese, probably to attract an increasing number of visitors and tourists from China. A Chinese informant told me that more and more Chinese immigrants are moving from DC and Philadelphia to New York because of the ethnic tension with the African-American communities in the two cities.
These changing urban communities share one common feature: through the long history of Chinese immigration in America, they have served as gateways for new immigrants. Gammage reflects on the Chinese neighborhood in Philadelphia:

Yet there is little in the way of recorded Chinatown histories to explain the way people lived here or how he felt about it. The residents were too busy trying to survive to worry about documenting their activities of their day-to-day routines. So the job of describing and defining Chinatown fell largely to local journalists, who saw the neighborhood as a foreign place, full of foreign people, worth noting only for some bit of entertaining exotica, or a Tong war, or perhaps at Chinese New Year, when the noise and smoke of firecrackers filled the street. Or when the city fathers needed part of Chinatown’s land (226).

This conscientious reflection provokes me to ask whether we scholars of Asia and China have paid adequate or any attention to the communities who are far away from Asia but are not yet Asian American. Chinatowns are not normally examined in Asian studies, and I am not familiar with research about them by scholars in Asian American studies. Such work, I think, would certainly call into question the dividing line between the two disciplines.

During AAS 2010, the conference hotel — the lobby, exhibition hall, corridors, and meeting rooms — accommodated a lively community of Asian specialists, who deliberated on issues in their well-defined fields. But it seemed to me that they were too busy to pay much scholarly attention to the Chinatown nearby (though many of them visited it for food). The dynamism of this scholarly community is of course very different from that of the Chinatown. But both are distinct spaces contained in well-defined boundaries: they show that Asia is being drawn closer to America while remaining separate from it.

Western-based Asianists sometimes think they have one advantage over their Asia-based colleagues: the vast distance that separates Asia from the West allows them to examine Asian topics critically and impartially. But this real-turning-imaginary distance also entails a persistent danger that we tend to...
treat Asia as the Other, as socially and culturally distinct from the West. I don’t mean to say that we Asianists are still somewhat like the Orientalists (as Edward Said had suggested) or that we should relinquish the critical distance. Rather, I think we should direct our critical gaze not only at faraway Asia but also at some related or comparable areas that are close by or within the West.

The discussion of Session 184 on “Chairman Mao’s Invisible Hand” convincingly showed the enduring (as well as changing) authoritarian practices in contemporary China. The implication of this long-lasting image of authoritarian China is that the Chinese polity remains distinct from Western democracy. Coupled with the rise of China as an economic giant, this image evokes fear and worry among observers within as well as beyond academia. (For example, the incident of a Beijing scholar being prevented by the Chinese authority from attending the AAS meeting spawned broad concerns among the scholars, as seen in an earlier posting by Timothy Cheek at The China Beat.)

How different is this image of China under the long shadow of Maoism from that of Western democracy? This question was raised by Professor Mark Selden, one of the session’s discussants. Selden reminded us that in speaking of the Chinese undemocratic polity, we imply an idealized Western democratic polity. We rarely keep in mind that there are also some undemocratic or dictatorial practices of governance in the United States and other developed countries.

Selden reflected on the Continuity of Government (COG) program that the Bush administration established, creating martial law powers for the federal government. That program remains in effect under the Obama administration, while the requirement that Congress review the program every six months has been ignored. He also pointed to the US state of permanent warfare and seemed to suggest that we reflect on the analogy to the Cultural Revolution image of permanent revolution.

Unfortunately, Selden’s provocative comment got sidetracked by a host of stimulating questions and comments from the enthusiastic audience about issues in Chinese politics and history, rather than lead to a border-crossing discussion on the comparability between Chinese and American politics — a relatively unknown territory to many Asianists but highly relevant to their everyday lives.

Indeed, the political landscapes of the East and the West become more interrelated and comparable, as the explicit and hidden connections between transnational corporate and bureaucratic powers increasingly dominate the global economy. Such connections between the East and the West would not be fully visible to scholars for a long time, while the Chinatowns are still viewed as separate from both Asia and the West.

Some of Mao’s “children” have certainly made their way into the thriving communities of Chinatowns in New York and other world cities and left their imprints on the postmodern cityscapes of the West. Others, like many of the conference participants, have made their way into Western academia. As Asia is being drawn closer to the West, the challenge for Asianists is how to see with discerning eyes not only the familiar territory of the far away but also the unknown territory of the close by.

Samuel Y. Liang teaches Chinese Cultural Studies at the University of Manchester, and has previously written for The China Beat about “The Past and Present of the CCP First Congress Memorial, Shanghai.” His book, Mapping Modernity in Shanghai: Space, Gender and Visual Culture in the Sojourners’ City, 1853-98, will be published by Routledge in June.

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