

Gregory Yee Mark

Honolulu's Chinatown

San Francisco's Chinatown has its parallels in many U.S. cities. Honolulu's Chinatown, which was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and is now governed by Special District ordinance, with in-place design controls, has many points in common.

Currently, Honolulu's Chinatown is defined as a 15-block area bordered by business, historic, and industrial areas in downtown Honolulu. Chinatown was originally occupied by Native Hawaiian housesites, and later served as a docking and reception area for trading and whaling ships. By 1848, Chinatown was a Hawaiian-Chinese business district, which included fenced house lots, boarding houses, sailmaking shops, jewelry stores, bakeries, barber shops, drug and herb stores, restaurants, and metal shops.

In 1852, Chinese contract workers began to migrate to Hawai'i and worked and lived on the sugar plantations. However, as a result of the islands' growing Chinese population, Honolulu's Chinatown grew into a thriving center of Chinese activity. Many Chinese established stores and other private businesses in which the owners and their families would live above the shop or nearby. In 1882, the United Chinese Society was formed, the first of approximately 100 societies that were to be located primarily in the Chinatown area.

In 1886, the first of two Chinatown fires began on Hotel Street. The first fire was unintentional, but destroyed 30 acres of the Chinatown area. Some businesses and, most importantly, some families relocated to outside of Chinatown. Chinatown was rebuilt, but in 1899, in an attempt to control an outbreak of the bubonic plague, a fire was intentionally set by the fire department and went out of control, devastating the community once again. To Chinatown residents this fire had a tremendous impact. Many were not able to recover their losses, others simply moved away from Chinatown. Many were unable to prove ownership of their property because records had been lost or burned.

Out of the ashes of the 1899–1900 fire Chinatown was rebuilt. By the 1930s, Honolulu's Chinatown was the largest in the United States. Today, many of the Chinese-owned businesses have given way to Vietnamese restaurants and shops, but the bustling ambiance of old Chinatown still pervades. There are approxi-



Honolulu's Chinatown, view along Maunakea Street. Photo by William Chapman, 1993.

mately 80 Chinese Associations that still exist in or near Chinatown. Most are family surname, sub-district, and district societies. Others are trade guilds, special-interest clubs, and secret societies. Generally, these organizations can be considered to be social clubs in the 1990s, and most own one or more pieces of land in Honolulu.

It is acknowledged by most owners and residents, as well as city and county officials, that the old and historic buildings need to be preserved, and the existing ordinance, which governs signs, facade changes, and the streetscape, addresses this issue. However, it is recognized that social issues, including housing in particular, are critical problems. The Downtown Neighborhood Board, for one, believes that more residents will improve the security and crime problems in Chinatown. As a result of increased emphasis, a number of recent housing projects and condominiums have been built at the fringes of the district, taking advantage of higher-density zoning allowed in the peripheral area. The city has also underwritten parking facilities at the edge of the district, hoping to attract more visitors.

Today, potential threats of gentrification and rapid redevelopment appear to be held at bay for the time being, though Honolulu's Chinatown remains a fragile resource.

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