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New Chinatown: Chinese Presence in Little Saigon

Introduction

Argyle Street is home to an established Southeast Asian community, where Thai cafes and pho restaurants exist alongside community centers and cultural offices. But the pagoda that usually stands at the CTA station is markedly Chinese, and a few blocks down another Chinese-style gate bears the name of a Vietnamese grocery store. Argyle itself is known by many names: Little Saigon, Asia on Argyle, and, interestingly enough, New Chinatown, despite the overwhelmingly Vietnamese presence in the neighborhood. Here in this paper, I will focus on the prominence of Chinese multilingualism within the Asian-owned establishments of Argyle, and its role as an indicator of pan-Asian community and mixed Asian identities.

Chinese Immigration in Chicago

Chicago's first Chinese residents hailed from southern regions of China that spoke language variants such as Cantonese and Teochew, following the first wave of Chinese immigrants in the mid to late-1800s who sought opportunities in other regions of the US after the completion of the railroad along the West Coast. This population carved out a small working class ethnic neighborhood in the Loop, which eventually moved southwards to where the primary South Side Chinatown is currently located today around Cermak and Wentworth. Many of these lower class Chinese immigrants depended on familial connections to seek work and

housing, resulting in the growth of Chicago's Chinese ethnic communities as incoming waves of immigrants chose to live near each other and find work at Chinese-owned businesses[1]. Though older waves of immigrants were largely lower-class southern Chinese laborers seeking work, periods of turmoil in the mid to late 1900s, such as WWII and the Chinese Civil War, brought political and war refugees from all class brackets and regions of China.

The wealthy and educated Chinese immigrants that would arrive in later waves of immigrants would tend to instead try to assimilate with the white upper class, and more often resided in Chicago's suburbs or in higher-income neighborhoods. This was also observed in Southern Chinese immigrants from previous waves who became financially successful, where overall the wealthier and more educated Chinese immigrants tended to follow upper class trends of settling in the suburbs, instead of the Chinese ethnic neighborhoods. Additionally, since the late 1800s there had been notable instances of students who came from China to study in Chicago universities, many of which hailed from Mandarin-speaking northern regions and at times interacted with Chicago's Chinese communities for sociological research[1].

Argyle as an Asian Enclave

In the 1890s Chicago had roughly 500-600 residents of Chinese heritage, of which about 25% lived along and owned businesses along Clark Street in the Loop. By the 1910s the Loop's Chinese community began migrating southwards to the less crowded area surrounding the intersection of Wentworth Avenue and Cermak Road, establishing what is now the most prominent, or main 'Chinatown' of Chicago. The Loop's Chinatown has largely disappeared following its residents' migration southwards, but over the course of the 20th century the Chinese community around Cermak and Wentworth had expanded into Bridgeport, in addition to

some members of the community attempting to establish new ‘Chinatowns’ in other parts of Chicago, including Uptown[2].

In the 1970s, Jimmy Wong, a Chinese restaurant entrepreneur, began purchasing property in Uptown, along Argyle Street and the Argyle CTA stop, with the vision of creating a “New Chinatown”. At the same time, the Vietnam War resulted in an influx of immigrants from Indochina. Uptown’s low housing prices and high concentration of social services made it an attractive point of entry for immigrants arriving in Chicago. Southeast Asian immigrants began settling along Argyle, likely attracted by Wong, who was renting out his property to Asian-owned businesses[3]. Currently, Argyle is best known as a Vietnamese cultural neighborhood, with some presence here or there of other Southeast Asian countries. The most obvious remaining Chinese influence is the traditionally styled pagoda on the Argyle CTA stop, and the moniker ‘New Chinatown’.

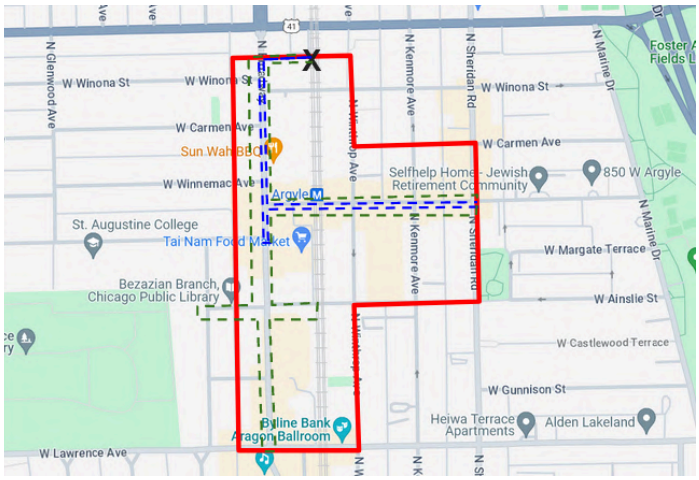


Figure 1: A map of the Argyle neighborhood (boxed in red)

The Argyle neighborhood is commonly considered to be the area enclosed within North Glenwood Avenue Winona Street, Sheridan, and Ainisle Street. However, there still exist a number of Asian-owned businesses south of Ainisle, extending southwards to West Lawrence Avenue, that I consider as part of the Argyle neighborhood (See Figure 1). The surrounding areas

to the east and west are largely residential, and the regions south of Lawrence, though commercial, have no establishments that are clearly Asian-owned or directed towards the Asian community.

Multilingualism in Commercial Establishments

Across Argyle, many storefronts incorporate signage with any combination of English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and varying other languages. The existence of these languages on storefronts is indicative of these communities being residents or common frequenters of Argyle. In Argyle, commercial Chinese presence can be divided into three general categories: establishments that can be identified as Chinese through strictly bilingual English-Chinese signage, Chinese-owned business chains local to Chicago, and non-Chinese or ethnically ambiguous establishments that incorporate Chinese into their signage.

Bilingualism in Chinese Establishments

While exploring Argyle, I was able to identify local Chinese businesses through signage that was bilingual English-Chinese or had Chinese names. Most, if not all of these establishments were restaurants, in comparison to Argyle's Southeast Asian businesses which also included local groceries and gift shops. Some like Lucks Food Bakery had seemingly closed down, with the only indicator that it had ever existed being the sign that remained on the storefront (Figure 2). The sign indicated that it specialized in Cantonese baked goods and Cantonese barbecue, which further suggested the likelihood that it was a Chinese establishment. However Furama, a dim sum restaurant established in 1985, was still in business. The restaurant's sign had its English name larger, in the center of the sign, with the Chinese name slightly smaller above it (Figure 3). Furama's menu was also taped to the window of the storefront, and I observed it was

mostly in English, with some of the featured menu items including the dish's name in Chinese next to the name in English (Figure 4). The emphasis on English in Furama's signage and menu appeared to indicate it expected a considerable amount of non-Chinese patronage, or was popular with multiple different communities. Additionally, the traditional Chinese-style awning on Furama's storefront (Figure 5), may indicate it has some kind of fame or longevity in Argyle, for it to have the time and money to build this architectural feature into the building.

Figure 2 (left): Lucks Food street sign

Figure 3 (right): Furama Restaurant street sign

Figure 4: Furama menu

Figure 5: Furama storefront

Multilingualism in Local Chinese-Owned Business Chains

One of the more recognizable Chinese establishments in Argyle was Chiu Quon, a Chinese-style bakery whose main location is in the South Side Chinatown. The storefront had the Chinese name in slightly larger text than the English name, indicating it was a Chinese-owned business selling Chinese goods that welcomed non-Chinese patronage (Figure 5). However, behind the counter was a sign completely in Chinese, which appeared to advertise different foods and drinks the bakery served (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Chiu Quon Bakery storefront

Figure 7: Sign behind the counter at Chiu Quon

The fact that this large sign was monolingual seemed to indicate that while non-Chinese patrons were welcome, Argyle's Chiu Quon was largely catered towards Chinese and Chinese-speaking customers and was not particularly interested in assimilating with the other cultures in the community. The bakery sold traditional Chinese pastries from a variety of regions, such as wintermelon cakes, pineapple buns, and egg tarts, in addition to refrigerated ready-to-eat

breakfast foods such as steamed buns, youtiao, and zhongzi. The pineapple buns, wintermelon cakes, and egg tarts were examples of Cantonese-style pastries, where European influences from nearby Hong Kong and Macau introduced baking to regional cuisines, while youtiao, a deep-fried savory dough stick similar to a donut, had strong associations with a classic Northern Chinese breakfast. This selection of food indicated that while Argyle's Chiu Quon was in a multicultural location, it maintained itself as a strictly Chinese brand. In contrast to Chiu Quon, which presented itself as a strictly Chinese business, Park to Shop appeared to have embraced the local Vietnamese community at its Argyle branch. The supermarket, which often refers to itself as a 'Hong Kong Market', has multiple locations across Chicagoland, particularly in neighborhoods with a significant Asian presence. In addition to the usual English and Chinese, the Park to Shop in Argyle included Vietnamese in almost all of its signage. On the outside, the supermarket boasted trilingual window signs, advertising their stock of seafood, meat, and vegetables, among other products, in English, Vietnamese, and Chinese (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Signs at Park to Shop advertising food items in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese

Some window signs had no English altogether (Figure 9) and were only in Chinese and Vietnamese, acknowledging the prominence of Argyle's Vietnamese community, and possibly a Chinese community, or Chinese individuals who come to Argyle's Park to Shop to buy Chinese groceries. Within the store was the usual selection of East Asian ingredients and products—a diverse collection of Chinese snacks, Korean ramen, and Japanese condiments, among others. Additionally, this Park to Shop stocked kecap manis, a sweet soy sauce commonly used in Indonesian cuisine, and had a selection of Lays potato chip flavors imported from Thailand. Neither kecap manis nor Thai Lays chips can be found in the Park to Shops in Chinatown, likely meaning that Argyle's Park to Shop adjusted its usual selection of items to include products that were popular with the Southeast Asian community.

Figure 9: A sign at Park to Shop only in Chinese and Vietnamese

Multilingualism in Non-Chinese Establishments

In addition to Chinese-owned businesses in Argyle, I noticed that many Southeast Asian businesses still incorporated Chinese into their storefronts and in signage across the neighborhood, even if they were not aimed towards Chinese clientele. A local Vietnamese supermarket, Viet Hoa, incorporated the Chinese characters for 'supermarket' into the storefront (Figure 10), but when I went inside the workers were conversing in Vietnamese, and the store stocked traditional Southeast Asian snacks such as pandan cakes. The Tai Nam Market Center, which contains another Vietnamese grocery store, had a Chinese-style gate at the entrance of the parking lot, with the name of the shopping center in Chinese, Vietnamese, and English (Figure

11). However, none of the stores in the shopping center used Chinese in their storefronts, and the Tai Nam supermarket only listed prices and names of wares in English and Vietnamese.

Figure 10: Outside of Viet Hoa supermarket

Figure 11: Dai Nam Market Center gate

While most of the commercially-oriented Chinese businesses were grocery stores or restaurants, there was a more diverse selection of goods and services offered by Southeast Asian businesses. The Tan Thanh Gift Shop was another Vietnamese store with signage that incorporated English, Vietnamese, and Chinese (Figure 10), though it dealt generally in imported Vietnamese items. Vinh Hoa was a store that sold Asian medicinal products, which they advertised as 'Chinese herbs, ginseng, and tea' (Figure 11). This phrase was about the only English text on the storefront, with the rest being a mix of Chinese and Vietnamese. The differences in how each language is used for these two stores indicates differences in who tends to enter these stores—while most English-speaking customers might be attracted to Tan Thanh to buy imported Asian novelties, people who buy traditional remedies from Vinh Hoa would largely be members of Asian communities who usually partake in those remedies.

Figure 10: Tan Thanh Gift Shop

Figure 11: Vinh Hoa storefront

Multilingualism in Community Establishments

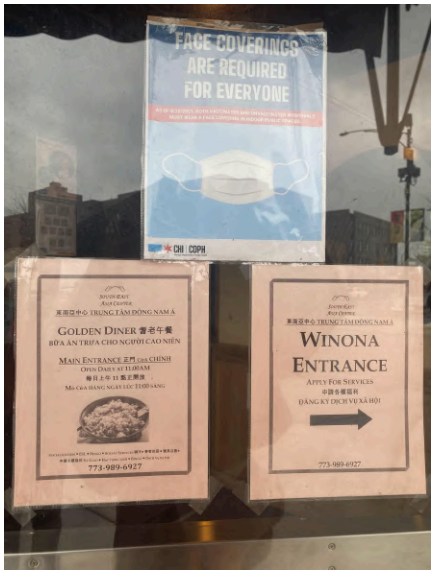
Indicators of Chinese presence were much clearer in Argyle's community-oriented establishments, where the community centers, cultural offices, libraries, etc. often had resources explicitly acknowledging the existence of a Chinese community through offered services such as English classes and government program assistance, and memorialization of local history through signage and plaques along the sidewalks. Some commercial establishments, such as Argyle's Park to Shop, also doubled as places of community, where the entryways of such stores would have a community board and Chinese or Vietnamese local newspapers available for taking. While I was unsure about Argyle's Chinese community having much of a commercially-facing presence in the neighborhood, the presence of Chinese-language materials in community establishments confirmed that there was at least a somewhat significant population of Chinese residents of Argyle.

South-East Asia Center

When I was in Argyle I found the South-East Asia Center, a community center that offered services such as childcare, community activities, and assistance for applying to different government programs. The center had a large sign saying ‘restaurant’, which made me at first mistake it as such. This, along with the Germanic design of the building exterior, did not make it immediately recognizable as an Asian community center. But on closer inspection, the SEAC had its name and some of the services it offered on the lettering of the building’s awning in English (Figure 12). This seemed to indicate that the ethnic communities in Argyle were largely able to communicate in English, or the SEAC otherwise overlooked the possibility that those who sought its services might not be English speakers. At the corner door of the center was a paper sign with large English text directing the reader to the SEAC’s entrance, with smaller Chinese and Vietnamese text below it (Figure 13). The prominence of English on the SEAC’s exterior was somewhat confusing, since my impression was that as a community center it would have been focused on supporting the ethnic communities of Argyle, who may not necessarily

Figure 12 (left): Exterior of the South-East Asia Center

Figure 13 (right): Signage on front of the SEAC

speak English.  

However, the windows of the SEAC were pasted with signs indicating the services it offered and bringing attention to different assistance programs that might pose of use to different community members. These signs all consisted of the same text, but printed three different times in English, Vietnamese, and Chinese, posted next to each other (Figure 14). This was much less surprising to me than the hard-to-spot exterior—after all, more recent immigrants would have a greater need to find government assistance programs and child or elder care services, and were more likely to be unfamiliar with English.

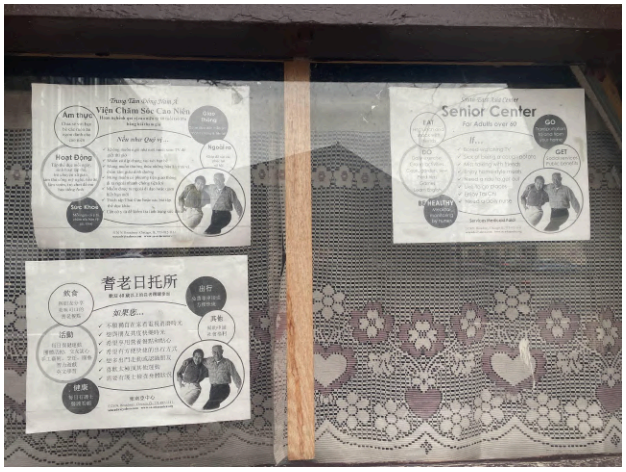


Figure 14: English, Vietnamese, and Chinese signs in the windows of the SEAC, offering different community services

Mutual Aid Groups

Many mutual aid or community organization offices I found in Argyle explicitly identified as Chinese, or were heavily associated with Chicago's Chinese community. The Hip Sing Association, historically a Chinatown-based gang in the early 1900s, had its office near the Argyle CTA station (Figure 15), though nowadays it appears to have shifted towards legal activities in the community. There was also the office of the Teochew Mutual Aid Association, Teochew being the name of a group of people from southern Guangdong in China (Figure 16).

Figure 15 (left): Hip Sing Association office

Figure 16 (right): Teochew Mutual Aid Association office

Throughout the Argyle neighborhood I also saw several signs and flyers for English classes at the Chinese Mutual Aid Association (CMAA). These signs had a strong emphasis on the English classes being free, and included text in non-Southeast Asian languages, in addition to the usual Chinese, English, and Vietnamese. Some I could identify were Ethiopian, Arabic, and Hindi (Figure 17), indicating that the CMAA, though probably a Chinese-run, or originally

Chinese-oriented group, had kept up with recent immigration trends and ultimately became a mutual aid group to help all immigrants that have arrived in Uptown.

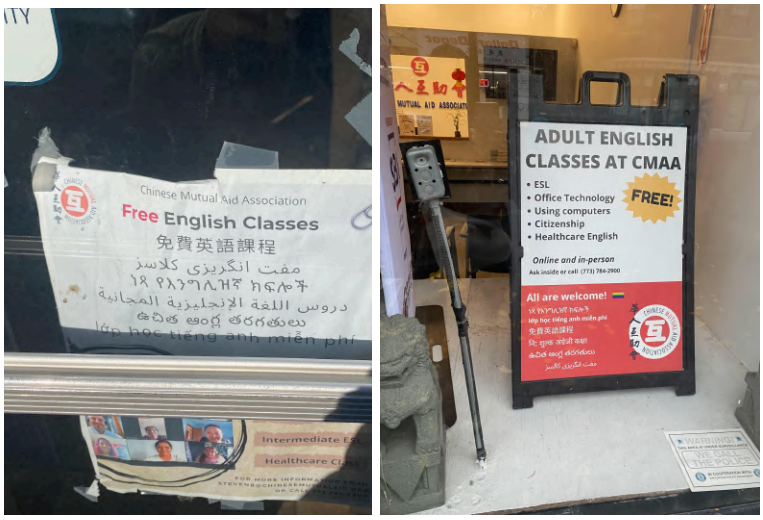


Figure 17: Flyers and signs offering free English classes at CMAA

The CMAA office, which I found along Argyle Street, included lots of signage offering different services for new immigrants, in addition to a few panels describing their history. Unlike their flyers for their English classes, the signs in the CMAA office's windows were primarily in English, and largely described the services they offered (Figure 18) and their role in Argyle's communities (Figure 19). However, these windows were very informative about Argyle's local history around the time of its original development in the 1970s, and cleared up several of the questions I had about Argyle's ethnic populations. From the information posted on the exterior of the CMAA office I found that Duc Huang, the founder of the CMAA, was a Vietnamese refugee after the Fall of Saigon who worked in a Chinese-owned company in Chicago. The immigrants who settled in Argyle, though largely Vietnamese, notably also included Vietnamese immigrants of Chinese heritage.

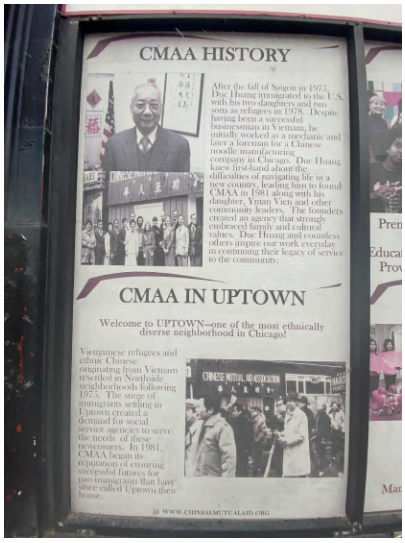


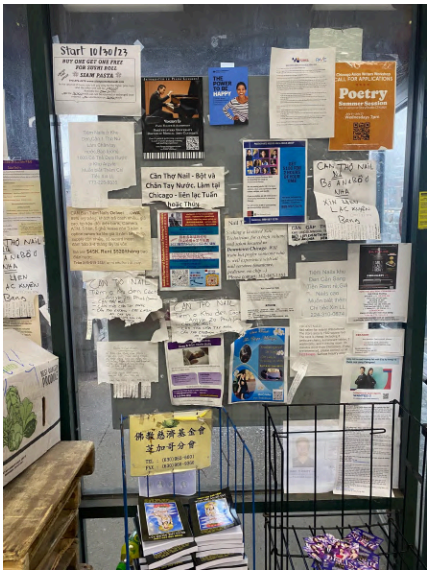
Figure 18 (left): Window of the CMAA office offering community services

Figure 19 (right): Window of the CMAA office describing local history

Other Public Spaces

The Bezazian branch of the Chicago Public Library, in Argyle, was stocked with some monthly Chinese publications and local Chinese language newspapers (Figure 20). Strangely enough, the library didn't carry Vietnamese newspapers or magazines, though I would have assumed there were at least as many, or possibly more Vietnamese-speaking residents of Argyle. The community board in Argyle's Park to Shop, though it largely consisted of handwritten Vietnamese signs, also included some amount of Chinese signage. The most obvious one was placed above a stack of Buddhist pamphlets (Figure 21). This seemed to indicate the possibility that many in Argyle's Vietnamese community might've had some degree of fluency in Chinese, either as a Vietnamese person of Chinese heritage or someone who often interacted with the Chinese community in Chicago.

Figure 20 (left): Chinese



newspapers in Bezazian Public Library

Figure 21 (right): Park to Shop community board

Conclusion

Despite being most famous as a Southeast Asian neighborhood, Argyle is surprisingly multicultural and reveals much about the interactions between Chicago's different immigrant communities. In addition to the distinct Chinese and Southeast Asian communities that coexist in Argyle, there is a sort of mixed Chinese-Vietnamese heritage that comes from the migratory history of individual households and the collaboration between new and old immigrants. Seasonal events, such as the Asia on Argyle food festival and the summer night markets, seem to support this pan-Asian identity. Despite the ongoing renovation of the Argyle CTA stop's iconic pagoda, the persistence of multilingual iconography and communication in the area indicates a will for Argyle to remain a multiethnic Asian neighborhood for quite some time.

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