

Place, Community, and Identity: The Preservation Movement of San Francisco's Japantown

Yoko Tsukuda

要 約

カリフォルニア州サンフランシスコ市のジャパントウンは20世紀初頭に日本人移民の集住地域として誕生した。現在の日系人人口は郊外など各地に分散しているが、日系アメリカ人の多くにとってジャパントウンはエスニシティの象徴として今なお重要とされている。本論文は近年の人文地理学の空間理論を援用し、1990年代末から活発化したジャパントウンの保護運動が日系アメリカ人のアイデンティティ形成に果たす役割を考察した。2006年、一日本企業の撤退に伴いジャパントウンのショッピング・モールやホテル等が一度に売却されることになった。これに危機感を募らせた日系コミュニティの指導者たちはサンフランシスコ市行政委員の支援を受けてロビー活動を展開し、ジャパントウンを「Special Use District (SUD)」という土地利用が制限される特別地区に指定することに成功した。SUD制度は「場所」の境界線を定め、場所のアイデンティティを「日本・日系アメリカ文化」に限定した。

本論文は場所の永続性と開放性という対照的な観点から、SUD制度の利点と問題点を指摘した。場所を永続的なものとみなした場合、SUDにより場所の境界とアイデンティティを再定義することはジャパントウンの求心力低下に直面しているコミュニティ指導者たちにとって喫緊の問題であり、SUDの熱心なロビー活動は当然の行動だったといえる。SUDはジャパントウンの経済的・文化的な発展を促すばかりでなく、多文化都市サンフランシスコの観光産業にも利益をもたらす可能性がある。しかし、場所を開放的なものとみなした場合、SUDはジャパントウンに居住する非日系人グループらを周縁化し、「我々」と「他者」の境界を益々強固にするという危険性も孕むといえるであろう。

Introduction

I'm sure that J-town is always going to be there....It's important to maintain community spirit and to maintain [J-town] for younger Japanese Americans, so they have a sense of identity and can be proud of who they are and where they came from.¹⁾

This statement accompanies a photograph of a middle-aged Japanese American man in *Generations: A Japanese American Community Portrait*, a book that commemorates the 25-year anniversary of the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California

¹⁾ JCCNC, *Generations: A Japanese American Community Portrait* (San Francisco: JCCNC, 2000), 124.

(hereafter JCCCNC), a Japanese American community organization located in San Francisco's Japantown. This photograph also shows the landscape of Japantown at night in the background, including the location of a nightclub that he once owned. As the former owner of this business and a long-time community organizer, the man in this portrait believes that the maintenance of Japantown as a physical space is an essential source of ethnic identity, from which the younger generations may learn ethnic history and take pride in being Japanese Americans. This is just one example of the personal accounts collected in *Generations*, which affirm a strong and deep connection between Japantown as a place and Japanese American identity.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the preservation of San Francisco's Japantown as a place (Figure 1) conditions the identity formation of the Japanese American community as a whole. Identities are formed through connections to particular places and often a strong ethnic consciousness results in the making of "ethnic places." Many of these places have become heritage tourism sites where the acculturated and assimilated generations of ethnic groups may discover and celebrate their own ethnic identities.²⁾ For Asian Americans, place can also be a useful tool for mobilizing themselves as a community and



Figure 1. Peace Pagoda, a cultural icon of San Francisco's Japantown, located between malls of the Japan Center. (photograph taken by author, September 2006)

²⁾ M. R. Esmán, "Tourism as Ethnic Preservation: The Cajuns of Louisiana," *Annals of Tourism Research* 11 (1984): 451-67; Steven D. Hoelscher, *Heritage on Stage: The Invention of Ethnic Places in America's Little Switzerland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

calling for recognition of their contribution to US society.³⁾

This paper especially focuses on the Japanese American community's successful lobbying for the creation of the "Japantown special use district" in San Francisco in 2006. The community's effort culminated in the passing of legislation that designated an eight-square-block of Japantown as a special use district (hereafter SUD) in order to protect the unique cultural characteristics of the area from developers who might potentially have destroyed local traditions. The case of the Japantown SUD shows a spatially dispersed Japanese American community trying to formulate its ethnic identity by preserving a certain area of the city.

San Francisco's Japantown was established as an urban ethnic enclave of Japanese immigrants about a century ago. As more Japanese Americans experienced upward mobility and dispersed into suburbs in the postwar period, the nature of Japantowns began to change, and today they are no longer at the center of the everyday lives of the majority of Japanese Americans. Rather, they have become symbols of community and ethnicity. In the late 1990s, the preservation movement of the San Francisco Japantown was initiated by some leaders of the city's Japanese American community, who had growing concerns over its decline. Under these conditions, the designation of the area as an SUD was considered meaningful to the community because it re-emphasized and re-defined Japanese American identity by stabilizing the significance of Japantown as a place while also clearly demarcating and fixing its boundaries.

"Place" is one of the most common terms used in our everyday lives. For geographers, however, it is a highly complex concept, and debates over the nature of place have long been a central concern within the discipline. In the light of these debates, this paper shows that the creation of the Japantown SUD depended on a particular set of commonly-held assumptions about the nature of place and its relation to community. One of the main ideas that has developed within geography since the resurgence of interest in place in the 1970s, has been that place is not "just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world."⁴⁾ In this paper, I will use this view of place as a "way of understanding" to reconsider the case of the Japantown SUD in relation to two contrasting conceptualizations of place: first, a view of place as something permanent and introverted, and second, a view of place as something open and extroverted. The first view understands place as essentially stable, homogeneous, and bounded, while the second understands it as unstable, heterogeneous, and unbounded. This double perspective makes it possible to expand the range of ways in which the significance of the preservation movement of Japantown has been understood.⁵⁾

³⁾ Linda Trinh Võ, *Mobilizing an Asian American Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

⁴⁾ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 11.

⁵⁾ Many geographers have discussed the nature of place in relation to race and ethnic identity. For example, Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press); Youngmin Lee and Kyonghwan Park, "Negotiating Hybridity: Transnational Construction of Migrant Subjectivity in Koreatown, Los Angeles," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 25, no. 3 (October 2008): 245-62.

The remainder of this paper consists of five sections. The first section is devoted to the development of the concept of place and its recent discussion in human geography. The second section is a brief historical description of San Francisco's Japantown, especially the process of its symbolization in the postwar period. Based on this history of the place, the third section discusses the recent formation of the Japantown SUD in detail, including its background and the process of its proposal and approval. In the following two sections, I analyze the overlapping and contested meanings Japantown had for different interest groups, drawing on two different conceptualizations of place: one focusing on permanence and the other on openness. These contrasting conceptualizations help us see both the positive and the negative effects of the SUD. On one hand, it enabled the Japanese American community to protect the bounded space of Japantown institutionally, as a physical symbol of their community, while also making possible a future cultural and economic revitalization of the neighborhood by bringing in more Japanese/Japanese American and other visitors. On the other hand, the SUD might also lead to the marginalization of non-Japanese residents and businesses and to the construction of a rigid division between "us" and "Others."

1. Place in the globalized world

The concept of place has been dramatically developed in human geography since the era when the primary objective of geography was to identify differences among regions and draw boundaries between them.⁶⁾ For humanistic geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph, place was "a concept that expressed an attitude to the world" that "emphasized subjectivity and experience."⁷⁾ John Agnew provides one useful way of defining place in his argument that place is constituted of the following three major elements: location (a quantitative segment on earth's surface), locale (material components forming social relations, e.g. building, walls), and sense of place (subjective affection).⁸⁾ This concept has contributed to articulating the complexity of the term "place" as it has been used in a variety of ways in geography.

The growth of globalization exerted a great influence on the meanings of place among the general public as well as geographers. Manuel Castells argues that the homogenization of the world caused by the globalized economy, culture, and politics has led to "the end of place."⁹⁾ "Time-space compression"¹⁰⁾ has greatly influenced our sense of place as the global

⁶⁾ Noel Castree, "Place: Connections and Boundaries in an Interdependent World," in *Key Concepts in Geography*, ed. Sarah L. Holloway, Stephen P. Rice, and Gill Valentine (London: Sage, 2003), 165–85.

⁷⁾ Cresswell, *A Short Introduction*, 19–20.

⁸⁾ John Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

⁹⁾ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁰⁾ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

flows of commodity, capital, and people have been accelerated. On the other hand, David Harvey points out that the distinctiveness of place has become more important not despite but because of globalization:

While the collapse of spatial barriers undermined older material and territorial definitions of place, the very fact of the collapse...has put renewed emphasis upon the interrogation of metaphorical and psychological meanings which, in turn, give a new material definition of place by way of exclusionary territorial behavior.¹¹⁾

Harvey also argues that the uniqueness of each place has begun to be emphasized in order to attract investment from global capital in close competition with other places, as seen in the Olympic Games and the World Expos. In this way, while Harvey's work can be understood to represent a theoretical advance from the works of humanistic geographers, it tends to sustain the commonsense view that place is something stable, discrete, and bounded; in other words, it is in line with the way in which place has been generally thought of as a "container" in a metaphorical sense.

Questioning this enduring "container" view of place, some contemporary geographers have developed an alternative concept of place that focuses on the interdependency among multiple places. Especially, the "global sense of place" proposed by Doreen Massey emphasizes that place is constituted out of changing social relations in the contemporary globalized world.¹²⁾ This provides several alternative metaphors for place, such as "a switching point in a larger global system" or "a node in translocal networks."¹³⁾ It regards the identity of place as shifting and heterogeneous, and its boundaries as tenuous. In other words, place is not stable but unfixed and is itself a *process* because the social interactions constituting a place are always changing and never static.¹⁴⁾ The case of San Francisco's Japantown is a useful example with which to explore and compare different concepts of place underlying contemporary ethnic communities in the US, which might contribute to the further study of the relationship between identity and location.

In this context, it is worth considering the difference between the concept of place and that of community, and the difficulty in separating them.¹⁵⁾ These two different concepts have often been conflated and used interchangeably among those dedicated to the preservation of Japantown. However, as Sheila Muto points out, the term "community" has an unusual

¹¹⁾ David Harvey, "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity," in *Mapping the Futures: Local Culture, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird et al. (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

¹²⁾ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

¹³⁾ Castree, "Place," 174.

¹⁴⁾ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 155.

¹⁵⁾ Nicholas J. Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

meaning in the case of Japantown since “most of the people who consider Japantown their community actually live outside the area.”¹⁶⁾ Although Japantown was originally established as a segregated ethnic enclave for Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century, today the Japanese American population is widely dispersed and few of them remain in this neighborhood. Their ethnic community is not necessarily place-based but has become more network-based.¹⁷⁾ Still prevalent, however, even among the geographically dispersed Japanese American population is the notion that an ideal community consisting of the same ethnic cohorts exists in a discrete location.¹⁸⁾ Throughout this paper, I use the term community to indicate certain groups composed of individuals who share a significant overlap in social interests, such as the Japanese American community, and clearly distinguish this community from the concept of location.

2. Japantown as a symbol of community

San Francisco’s Japantown is officially and publicly called “Japantown” or *Nihonmachi* in Japanese today, but it was once called “Japanese town” or *Nihonjin machi*, meaning an area where Japanese people live. This slight difference is not a mere abbreviation but actually implies the shifting role and meanings of Japantown. It was established as an urban enclave for Japanese immigrants in 1906 and was at its most thriving just before all Japanese and their descendants living in the West Coast military zones were forced to move to internment camps in 1942. Currently Japantown is no longer a place for the everyday lives of the majority of Japanese Americans in the area, but rather a place to visit occasionally for shopping, dining, or community events. As Japanese American populations dispersed residentially and became acculturated, the necessity of visiting Japantown decreased. Nevertheless, a strong emotional attachment to the place is still retained among the dispersed community. This section describes the process by which “Japantown” became a symbol of the Japanese American community as a whole.

The redevelopment project led by the City of San Francisco in the 1950s to 60s dramatically changed Japantown from an ethnic residential area to a tourist attraction.¹⁹⁾ The

¹⁶⁾ Sheila Muto, “3 Generations of S.F. Japantown,” *Asian Week* (Mar. 8, 1991).

¹⁷⁾ Stephen S. Fugita and David J. O’Brien, *Japanese American Ethnicity: The Persistence of Community* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991).

¹⁸⁾ This notion is reflected on Japanese American community leaders’ hope that the younger generations come back to old ethnic enclaves and choose them as their new residences. Associated Press, “LA’s Little Tokyo Seeks to Get Back Japanese Vibe,” *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 8, 2008, <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/10/08/america/NA-FEA-US-Little-Tokyo.php> (accessed Dec. 13, 2008).

¹⁹⁾ Sheridan Tatsuno, “The Political and Economic Effects of Urban Renewal on Ethnic Communities: A Case Study of San Francisco’s Japantown,” *Amerasia Journal* 1 (1971): 33–51; John H. Mollenkopf, *Contested City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Tadashi Sugiura, “San Francisco Japantown Saikaihatsu no Kozo to Kenzo Kankyo no Henyou: Katsudoshutaikan Kankei ni Chakumoku Shite” (The structure of redevelopment and changing built environment of San Francisco Japantown: Focusing on the interactions of local actors), *Kikan Chirigaku* (Quarterly Journal of Geography) 59, no. 1 (2007): 1–23.

project led to the removal of about 8,000 residents including many African Americans and Japanese/Japanese Americans from the Western Addition, the district including a part of Japantown, and the demolition of 6,000 units of low-rent housing.²⁰⁾ The city offered the north side of the project area to Japan-based corporations, which were eager to establish themselves in the US at that time of rapid economic growth in Japan. Although some residents and young Japanese American community activists were strongly opposed to the eviction, those Japan-based corporations managed to open luxury hotels, a Japanese theater, and the Japan Cultural and Trade Center (today known as the Japan Center), consisting of three shopping malls, in 1968.²¹⁾ The mall not only provided a showcase for both traditional and modern Japanese cultural products for domestic and international tourists but also housed overseas branch offices of many Japanese companies. By 2000, Kintetsu Enterprise Co. of America, an overseas subsidiary of a major railroad corporation in Japan, owned two malls of the Japan Center, two hotels, and a bowling alley, while the rest of the Center belonged to a Chinese investor and Kinokuniya Bookstores of America, an overseas branch of a major bookstore in Japan.

The redevelopment marked an important transformation in the role and meanings of Japantown within the great social upheaval of the nation and the local demographic changes involving Japanese Americans of that time. Many ethnic and racial minorities began to assert their ethnic identities and pride and to demand recognition from the mainstream society in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement era. Japanese Americans, especially Sansei (the third generation of Japanese Americans), also began to seek a symbolic meaning for their ethnicity in Japantown. The process of symbolization coincided with the younger generations moving out of the urban ethnic enclave to suburban residential areas. According to the 2000 US Census, Japanese constituted just 8.8% of Japantown residents, with non-Hispanic whites as the majority (52.6%), followed by African Americans (14.4%), Japanese, Chinese (8.7%), and Korean (5.9%).²²⁾ Despite the decrease in the percentage of Japanese/Japanese American residents, many Japanese American community organizations still have offices and hold community activities in Japantown today. San Francisco's Japantown is no longer *Nihonjin machi*, where Japanese residents are concentrated, but rather it has turned into "Japantown," a place which was expected to represent and preserve Japanese/Japanese American culture and the Japanese American historical legacy.

The preservation movement of Japantown was initiated by community leaders who were worried about the unstable economy and the fading Japanese features of Japantown in the late 1990s. Long-time Japanese American residents were aging and Japanese American

²⁰⁾ Shizue Seigel, "San Francisco: Nihonmachi and Urban Renewal," *Nikkei Heritage* 12, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 6.

²¹⁾ Committee Against Nihonmachi Eviction, *One Year of Struggle* (San Francisco: CANE, [1974]).

²²⁾ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census 2000*, Summary File 1, P1, P9, PCT7. The definition of Japantown is Census Tracts 152, 155, and 159.

family-owned shops closing one after another since they could not find anyone to take over their businesses.²³⁾ Accordingly, Korean and Chinese merchants transformed those properties into their own ethnic businesses.²⁴⁾ The economic recession in Japan in the early 1990s caused the withdrawal of Japan-based companies from Japantown and led to a decrease in the number of tourists from Japan. At the same time, real estate values in Japantown skyrocketed and profit-seeking developers became interested in its land and properties.²⁵⁾ Concerned about this situation, community leaders of San Francisco's Japantown launched the preservation and revitalization planning of Japantown by collaborating with two other established Japanese American communities in Los Angeles and San Jose. The coalition of these communities claimed that there were only three Japantowns left in the US—Los Angeles' Little Tokyo and the Japantowns in San Jose and San Francisco—and emphasized their historical significance. Their efforts resulted in California Senate Bill 307, approved in 2001, which provided \$450,000 for the preservation of those historic Japantowns.²⁶⁾ San Francisco's Japantown, first built as a segregated urban ethnic enclave of Japanese immigrants a century ago, is now regarded as a symbol of the Japanese American community; the preservation of the physical space has been a consistently important issue.

3. The Japantown Special Use District

In the midst of the preservation planning, the unexpectedly introduced “Special Use District” enabled the community to territorialize Japantown and to define the identity of the place. This section will detail the Japantown Special Use District (SUD) and how it was introduced and approved in the end. In early February of 2006, the year of the centennial celebration of San Francisco's Japantown, the community was stunned to learn that Kintetsu was intending to sell all of its properties in Japantown.²⁷⁾ Since the time when the city's redevelopment project had started, Kintetsu had owned two hotels with a total of more than 300 rooms and two shopping malls that encompassed 80,000 square feet and housed more than seventy Japanese-related retail stores and restaurants. However, their declining business in Japan had forced the head office to decide to restructure the overseas branches. In the end, Kintetsu decided to sell its properties to 3D Investments LLC, a Beverly Hills-based firm run by a Jewish-Iranian family, who also owned condominiums and shopping centers in Southern

²³⁾ *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 16, 1988; Joyce Nishioka, “Japantown's Mission: To Re-Crete Community; Inclusion of Others Seen as Key,” *Asian Week* (July 8, 1999).

²⁴⁾ *Nichibei Times*, Jan. 1, 1996.

²⁵⁾ *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 26, 2000.

²⁶⁾ “Senate Bill 307,” Japantown Task Force, Inc., <http://www.jtowntaskforce.org/> (accessed Aug. 28, 2008).

²⁷⁾ *Hokubei Mainichi*, Feb. 10, 2006. To make matters worse, at almost the same time as Kintetsu's news, AMC Entertainment, the owner of the Kabuki 8 Theater adjacent to the Japan Center, announced that it had to sell the theater because of its merger with another theater chain. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 10, 2006.

California and Hawaii.²⁸⁾

The local community kept pressuring both Kintetsu and the buyer to listen to their concerns over Japantown. Several community-based organizations, such as the Japantown Task Force²⁹⁾ and the JCCCNC, held meetings with them many times and expressed their emotions in community newspapers. Some claimed that Kintetsu should return its properties to the local community since it had just bought a part of the Japantown “during [the] wholesale auction” of the 1960s redevelopment.³⁰⁾ Others even tried to buy the properties on sale by collecting money from several community members after they learned that the prospective buyer was neither Japanese nor Japanese American and “not from our community.”³¹⁾ The younger generations initiated a “Save Japantown” movement and collected more than 16,000 signatures through online petitions. This movement led to a rally at the City Hall, in which not only Japanese Americans but also many other Asian Americans, including politicians, participated.³²⁾

What made this sale of the private properties unusual was the high degree of involvement of the City of San Francisco as well as the local community. As the term of the redevelopment project for the area covering Kintetsu’s properties had already expired, the community thought that public protection of the land use within the area was necessary. The city’s Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi, whose district included Japantown, led a successful initiative to request the city to enforce covenants between Kintetsu and 3D.³³⁾ In addition, Mirkarimi proposed legislation to designate San Francisco’s Japantown as a “special use district” in order to be able to apply special zoning rules to the land use (see Figure 2). The ordinance was also quickly adopted within two months.

Designating Japantown as an SUD meant defining its geographical boundaries and restricting the land use within it exclusively to those that matched the “identity” of the place. While the SUD Planning Code was usually applied for such purposes as keeping liquor stores out of particular neighborhoods,³⁴⁾ the major purpose of the Japantown SUD was its preservation and development “by revitalizing its commercial, recreational, cultural and spiritual identity as a local, regional, statewide, national, and international resource.”³⁵⁾

²⁸⁾ *Hokubei Mainichi*, Mar. 8, 2006. 3D also purchased a luxury hotel and a shopping mall in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, in the following year. *Rafu Shimpo*, Aug. 27, 2007.

²⁹⁾ Japantown Task Force is a non-profit organization established in 2000 in order to plan for the preservation of San Francisco’s Japantown. It was initially organized as the Japantown Preservation, Planning, and Development Task Force as a community-based mayor’s task force in 1999.

³⁰⁾ *Hokubei Mainichi*, Mar. 22, 2006.

³¹⁾ *Hokubei Mainichi*, Feb. 25, 2006.

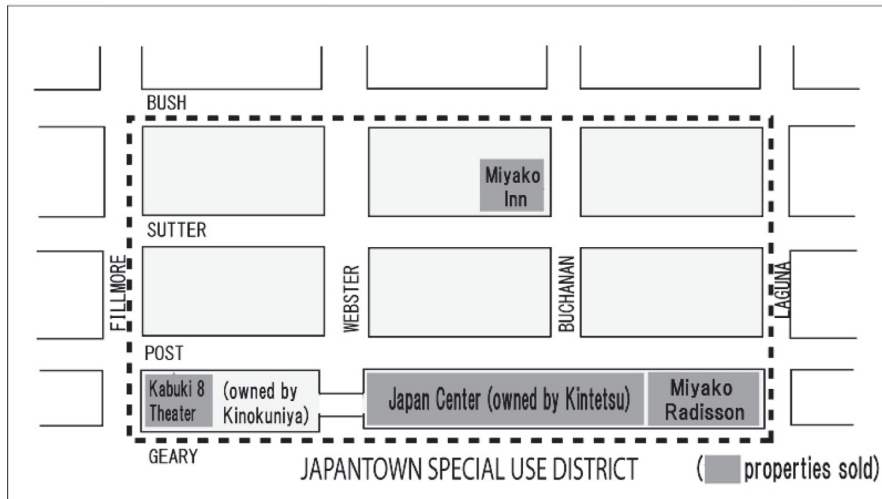
³²⁾ *Hokubei Mainichi*, Mar. 17, 2006.

³³⁾ *Hokubei Mainichi*, Feb. 11, 2006.

³⁴⁾ *Nichi Bei Times Weekly*, May 11, 2006.

³⁵⁾ City and County of San Francisco Municipal Code, Planning Code, Sec. 249.31. Japantown Special Use District, <http://www.municode.com/Resources/OnlineLibrary.asp> (accessed Nov. 24, 2008).

Figure 2. Japantown Special Use District (Map by author)



Developers were required to follow these criteria. Authorization from the city would become mandatory for any new land use of more than 4,000 gross square feet or any new merger of existing buildings with more than 2,500 gross square feet within the designated area in order to assess if they were appropriate to Japantown. Local residents and community members had to be informed of any changes in land use by a notice being posted in advance. In order to avoid the “invasion” of huge corporations such as Wal-Mart and McDonald’s, chain businesses with more than eleven retail stores would also be required to receive authorization from the city to start a business in Japantown.³⁶⁾ Although the SUD did not include any control over sales of land, it provided the local community with a means to control land use to a considerable degree. The SUD prevented current property owners from building anything in Japantown without listening to the opinions of the community.

4. The permanence of place

The geographer David Harvey argues that “the process of place formation is a process of carving out ‘permanences’ from the flow of processes creating spatio-temporality.”³⁷⁾ In those terms, the SUD can be considered as an attempt to embed certain “permanences” into a bounded geographical location. It set boundaries of Japantown, defined its meanings in relation to the Japanese/Japanese American cultural core within its bounded area, and assured its stable and cohesive identity. Although Harvey points out that the permanences are conditional and subject to change due to the flow of global capital in the contemporary world,

³⁶⁾ Japanese corporations were exceptional to this anti-chain business policy as long as they were approved by the community members. *Nichi Bei Times Weekly*, May 11, 2006.

³⁷⁾ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 261.

he believes that a search for “authenticity” and “rootedness” is central to the process of constructing place. The case of the Japantown SUD shows that both the city and Japanese American community leaders reconstructed and redefined Japantown as a place by carving out “permanences” from the changing social, economic, and political conditions surrounding them, even though each has different interests in preserving Japantown.

The city regarded the stable Japanese cultural characteristics of Japantown as a vital economic resource to attract domestic and international tourists and investment. The economy of San Francisco has traditionally been highly dependent on money spent by tourists. The city’s revenue drawn from tourists was as high as 473 million dollars in 2005, the third highest of all US cities after New York and Los Angeles.³⁸⁾ As Supervisor Mirkarimi emphasized at the Land Use and Economic Development Committee hearing for the resolution of the SUD, Japantown has been one of the most successful tourist destinations in San Francisco. The economy of Japantown has relied on money spent by tourists, not by residents. According to a study about tourism in Japantown, more than 500,000 tourists visited, 143,500 dined, and 127,100 shopped there in 1998. The same year’s data also showed that the estimated average sales per square foot of small businesses in Japantown was higher than or as high as that of Ghirardelli Square, one of the famous tourist destinations in San Francisco.³⁹⁾ Japantown is an indispensable piece of the multicultural package that the city “sells” to tourists and global capital in order to compete with other leading tourist cities.⁴⁰⁾

In addition, the city’s multicultural politics preferred that the authentic identity of Japantown remained Japanese rather than non-ethnic or even Asian. Chinatown and North Beach, a historical Italian neighborhood, had already been given some zoning restrictions about two decades earlier.⁴¹⁾ That precedent was well recognized by the city’s ethnically and racially diverse Planning Commission. At the Planning Commission hearing for the resolution of the Japantown SUD, a Latina commissioner shared her personal experiences of going to a concert at the theater and eating Japanese noodles at a restaurant in Japantown and noted American culture’s exposure to Zen. A Chinese American male commissioner was also supportive of the SUD, mentioning the benefits that would arise from the large number of Japanese tourists who visited San Francisco and the sister-city relationship with

³⁸⁾ San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau, “San Francisco Visitor Industry Statistics,” <http://www.sfcvb.org/research/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2007); U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, Statistics Administration, Bureau of Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: The National Data Book*, 126th ed. library edition (Lanham, Md.: Bernan Press, 2007).

³⁹⁾ Japantown Planning Preservation and Development Task Force (hereafter JPPDTF), *Concepts for the Japantown Community Plan* (San Francisco: n.p., 2000), 10.

⁴⁰⁾ Gerry Kearns and Chris Philo, eds., *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993).

⁴¹⁾ For planning codes for Chinatown and North Beach, see, for example, Sec. 810. 1. Chinatown Business Community District (adopted in 1987) and Sec. 722. 1. North Beach Neighborhood Commercial District (adopted in 1987).

Osaka, Japan. Not only the commissioners but also other city politicians supported the Japantown SUD.⁴²⁾ Regionally, the San Francisco Bay Area is the home of many Japanese American politicians, including Norman Mineta, the former Secretary of Transportation, and Congressman Michael Honda, to mention just a few. Although the Japanese American population is relatively small compared to other Asian American groups, they have held on to a strong political influence in the Bay Area for a long time. The political economy surrounding Japantown was compelling enough for the city officials to approve the SUD very quickly. However, this does not necessarily mean that the city's interests always match those of the local Japanese American community. The city once dismissed the community's objections to the sale of a bowling alley in Japantown and its replacement with a luxury condominium.

While the city viewed Japantown as an economic and cultural resource in the context of the political economy, Japanese American community leaders regarded it as a necessary component for the survival of their spatially dispersed community and the maintenance of their ethnic identity. The SUD ordinance enabled the community to reconfirm a coherent identity for Japantown by institutionally defining its rigid boundaries and restricting the land use within it to the "culture" deemed suitable to the identity of the place. The community leaders held a strong sense of mission to save Japantown because they felt a growing fear that the Japanese American community as a whole and even the identity of being Japanese American might fade away in the future. They believed that its preservation was indispensable to the maintenance of the community and that the place offered a stable source of identity to those who identified themselves as Japanese American. What the community leaders sought was to fit a single *sense of place* (a symbol of Japanese American community) and a particular *locale* (a Japanese-themed landscape) into a specific *location* (Japantown).

Japanese American community leaders have seen the presence of Japanese-related businesses in Japantown to be vital to the survival of the community organizations, for which many of them work as full-time employees. In their understanding, the business management of the Japan Center has a significant impact on the sustainability of small businesses and community organizations located within Japantown.⁴³⁾ Many of those community organizations are experiencing a decline in Japanese/Japanese American membership and as a result are expanding their target clientele to non-Japanese. The community leaders are aware that Japanese-related businesses encourage Japanese Americans living at a distance and with few ties to their ethnic community to visit. The Japan Center was once unwelcome to some community members who saw it as the glossy commercialization of Japanese culture. However, many now recognize that the Center has played a key role in keeping the

⁴²⁾ Hokubei Mainichi, Mar. 16, 2006.

⁴³⁾ JPPDTF, *Concepts for the Japantown Community Plan*, 8.

primary characteristics of Japantown “Japanese enough.”⁴⁴⁾ The city’s interests in the tourist industries of Japantown matched those of the Japanese American community leaders.

Preceding the SUD, community leaders made elaborate efforts to maintain a stable Japanese American identity within the bounded territory of Japantown. Geographers have often pointed out that defining “Others” is a critical element in the process of constructing a place,⁴⁵⁾ and clearly this community has consistently defined and distinguished the Other or outsiders in order to construct, reinforce, and maintain the uniformed identity of Japantown. Different kinds of Others were identified according to changing social circumstances: African Americans during and after the wartime internment, Japan-based corporations in the redevelopment, Korean and Chinese population and their businesses later, and developers and representatives of global capital like Wal-Mart and McDonald’s today. Although many Japanese American community individuals recognize the importance of actual racial and ethnic diversity within Japantown as one source of its economic and cultural strength, they often assume that the authentic characteristics of the place were derived from Japanese/Japanese American culture.⁴⁶⁾ For example, many Japanese Americans have been concerned over the Hangul signboards of Korean businesses at the corner of Laguna and Post Street, and Chinese and Hangul signboards on the south side of the Japan Center.⁴⁷⁾ The degree of visibility of those Others, especially their racial/ethnic visibility, has been deliberately controlled in order to maintain the cohesive identity of Japantown.

In addition to the presence of Others, the community was also afraid that global forces represented by large corporations would make Japantown “placeless”. For example, Starbucks was offered a tenant retail space in a newly-built luxury condominium in Japantown in 2005. When the community learned about the offer, they organized a campaign to oppose Starbucks’ entry into the neighborhood, and, as a result, Starbucks gave up the plan of opening a shop there. One organizer of the campaign stated that “we don’t want [Japantown] to be like Anywhere, USA.”⁴⁸⁾ That is, the community feared that the invasion of global capital represented by Starbucks would deprive Japantown of its unique identity and lead it to become “placeless”.⁴⁹⁾

⁴⁴⁾ Although the Japanese American community of San Francisco has gradually been admitting Japan-based corporations’ economic contributions to Japantown, it is important to note that the community still retains an antagonistic view to the corporations and often sees them as outsiders as found in the community leaders’ criticism to Kintetsu.

⁴⁵⁾ Relph, *Place and Placelessness*; Tuan, *Space and Place*; Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 157-73.

⁴⁶⁾ Muto, “3 Generations of S.F. Japantown”; *Nichibei Times*, Jan. 1, 1996; *San Francisco Examiner*, Mar. 21, 1999; Nishioka, “Japantown’s Mission”; JPPDTF, *Concepts for the Japantown Community Plan*, 8, 63.

⁴⁷⁾ *Nichibei Times*, Jan. 1, 1996.

⁴⁸⁾ Scott Sherwin, “Starbucks Booted from Japantown,” *San Francisco Observer* [online edition], June 13, 2005, <http://news.sfoobserver.com/> (accessed Aug. 27, 2008).

⁴⁹⁾ Relph, *Place and Placelessness*.

The process of forming the Japantown SUD shows the “exclusive territorial behavior” of the city and the community leaders. The two groups had different but partially overlapping interests in setting boundaries and redefining the stable identity of the place. Both groups saw permanence—the permanence of boundaries and identity—as essential components to constitute the place in order to resist the changing political economy under the influence of global capital and the shifting identity and geography of the Japanese American community. This case exemplifies Harvey’s point about the increasing importance of place-identities in response to the homogenization of the world caused by globalization. The SUD is certainly beneficial to both the city and Japanese American community as a whole. The preservation of Japantown contributes to revitalizing the economy of Japantown and the city by attracting tourists and Japanese visitors and by fueling a multicultural atmosphere in San Francisco. It also helps Japantown to remain as a symbol of Japanese American community. However, has the process of defining Japantown always come out of a defensive move against fears of outside forces such as globalization, “Others,” and the competition with other places?

5. The openness of place

The “global sense of place” proposed by Doreen Massey focuses on the openness of place rather than its permanence and offers alternative ways of seeing Japantown. This conceptualization of place takes it for granted that a place does not stand independently but is instead connected and interdependent.⁵⁰⁾ The “sense of place” is as a result not single or unitary but multiple and heterogeneous, and its boundary is tenuous. This alternative conceptualization of place enables us to see Japantown as open and extroverted rather than closed and internalized.

Japantown has never been a homogeneous place defined by its Japanese American community; indeed, as Massey points out, the “persistent identification of place with ‘community’ in any simple way is problematic.”⁵¹⁾ Japantown has consisted of many ethnic and racial groups since its beginnings, and there have existed multiple senses of place for Japantown even within Japanese American community. Such a heterogeneous sense of place can be identified in the discussions over the SUD designation. Several public comments at the commission hearing on the SUD revealed that the identity of Japantown as a place was neither necessarily fixed nor cohesive and that its boundary varied according to the mental maps of different individuals. At the first commission hearing, 6 out of 17 speakers stated their opposition to the SUD. One of the opponents was the Japantown Merchant Association, an organization consisting of Japanese, Japanese American, Chinese, Korean, and other ethnic groups’ business owners in Japantown. They claimed that the SUD was too restrictive, that prospective businesses would hesitate to enter the neighborhood and that it would make it

⁵⁰⁾ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*.

⁵¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 153.

difficult for existing businesses to expand.⁵²⁾ At the commission hearing, a representative of Kinokuniya Bookstores of America insisted that the SUD would become an obstacle to their future expansion plan in Japantown, and that the requirement for authorization would delay the commercial development of the area. Similar oppositions also came from a Chinese property owner, who stated that the SUD was against the idea of free market economy. A Korean business owner, believing that his office is not a part of Japantown, claimed that the boundary be changed.⁵³⁾ In the end, the Merchant Association reluctantly agreed to the establishment of the SUD as long as it would not interfere with the growth of Japantown businesses.

Not only merchants but also some non-Japanese residents opposed the SUD, questioning the Japanese/Japanese American identity of the place. A long-time Caucasian resident claimed that the north border of the SUD should be changed from Bush Street to Sutter Street since he doubted that the historical Victorian houses on the south of Bush Street could be characterized as Japanese. He also mentioned that there were few Japanese or Japanese American residents among his neighbors. The bounded area of the Japantown SUD also overlapped with the Fillmore District, another historically designated district which was once the center of African American jazz clubs in the 1940s to 60s.⁵⁴⁾ An elderly African American woman, the owner of a famous bookstore specializing in African American Studies on Fillmore Street, also questioned the inclusion of her store in the SUD since she had never been invited to “community” meetings held by Japanese American organizations. These public comments demonstrated that there existed different views regarding the historical values and boundaries of the place. That is, the sense of place or place-based identity of Japantown was actually diverse and flexible rather than singular and fixed.

Massey also argues that place is constructed out of social interactions with “Others” or “outsiders.” The uniqueness of a place is constantly reproduced by continuous interactions with the “outside” since each place is interconnected and interdependent.⁵⁵⁾ While what constitutes a place is its specificity or uniqueness, connectedness to other places is simultaneously an indispensable part of what constitutes a place. Although it might sound paradoxical, the specificity of a place does not stand on authenticity or rootedness in a history that generates nostalgia and emotional affections toward particular past memories. It is instead derived from “the fact that [a place] is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus.”⁵⁶⁾ Rigid boundaries enclosing places are not always required for conceptualization of place, either. Place can

⁵²⁾ Planning commission hearing on May 25, 2006. The video was available online through the website provided by the City and County of San Francisco.

http://sanfrancisco.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=20 (accessed Aug. 8, 2007).

⁵³⁾ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁾ Robert Oaks, *San Francisco's Fillmore District* (San Francisco: Arcadia, 2005), 54.

⁵⁵⁾ Castree, “Place,” 175.

⁵⁶⁾ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 154.

retain its specificity even if it is unstable and heterogeneous and has no enclosed boundaries.

From this viewpoint, what has kept San Francisco's Japantown uniquely distinct from other places is not rootedness in the Japanese American history. Rather, it is the fact that people, information, and commodities that came from "outside" met at or through a particular location which later became to be called *Nihonjin machi* and then Japantown. This alternative concept of place makes it possible to avoid simply distinguishing "us" from "Others" and to recognize the different viewpoints and the variety of social relations that constitute Japantown. *Nihonjin machi* or the early Japantown was constituted of Japanese immigrants who came from "outside." When Japanese immigrants came to California at the beginning of twentieth century, they were seen as threats from outside. Before *Nihonjin machi* was built, a number of Jewish lived there.⁵⁷⁾ From the viewpoint of those Jewish residents, Japanese immigrants were outside forces. Japanese immigrants brought a wide range of connections between Japantown and other places such as immigrants' hometowns in Japan, other Japanese communities in the US, for example those in Los Angeles and San Jose, and other overseas Japanese communities. Those contingent intersections generated a particular network of social relations that contributed to constructing the place.

The appreciation of hybridity and heterogeneity of place in Massey's alternative conceptualization suggests the negative effects of the Japantown SUD. First, the SUD runs the risk of marginalizing the multiple views of Japantown as a place constructed by Japanese, Chinese, and Korean merchants, white and African American residents. Since Japantown has never been homogeneously Japanese, from its beginnings until today, fixing the identity of the place as Japanese through the SUD is an attempt to preserve a place that never existed. Many of those who expressed their opposition to the SUD at the commission hearing see Japantown as a place for their everyday lives, while most Japanese Americans see it as a symbol of their community. The different meanings and roles of Japantown given by merchants and non-Japanese residents should be appreciated as well as that of Japanese Americans. Secondly, the "exclusive territorial behavior" embodied in the creation of the SUD tends to emphasize the division between "us" and "Others" and to see the latter as simply threatening. From a different viewpoint, however, the Japanese were once and are still now often seen as outsiders. Being aware of connections and interdependences between Japantown and outside would help to form behavior able to include outsiders. Finally, it is unlikely that the SUD could reverse the tendency of dispersion among Japanese Americans and lead them to go back to the old urban ethnic enclave; what it could achieve would be to help Japantown to remain a symbol of the community. The challenge that Japanese American community leadership faces will be how Japantown can continue to offer symbolic meanings to Japanese Americans while Japanese American identity is shifting and the form of the community is changing.

⁵⁷⁾ Japantown Task Force, "Japantown Historic Context Statement," Prepared for Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board (Oct. 2003), 5.

Conclusion

The sale of major properties in San Francisco's Japantown led to the introduction of the Japantown SUD and resulted in the metaphorical territorialization of an actually dispersed Japanese American community. As there are few Japanese/Japanese American residents in Japantown, the SUD re-defined and re-confirmed the meanings of the place as the symbol of the community and the source of the ethnic pride for the future generations of Japanese Americans. The community leaders sought for control over what the place should represent by legislation. This zoning rule allowed them to set its boundaries and restrict the use of land and properties inside only to those considered representative of Japanese American cultural identity.

By applying spatial theories of place, this paper investigated the taken-for-granted definition of "place" and "community" and offered different ways of understanding the SUD and the preservation movement of Japantown. Harvey's conceptualization of place in terms of "permanence" supports the idea that creating the SUD was a reasonable decision, given the increasing dispersion of Japanese American populations and the decreasing Japanese characteristics of Japantown as a symbol of their community. The SUD may help the economic and cultural rejuvenation of the neighborhood, which would be beneficial to the city as well. On the other hand, Massey's conceptualization of place as open and extroverted shows how the exclusiveness of the SUD simultaneously runs the risk of marginalizing non-Japanese and making an excessive differentiation between "us" and "Others." Recent spatial theories of place suggest that meanings of a place vary according to each individual or group. However, as the case of the Japantown SUD indicates, there are many competing efforts to define meanings and boundaries of places in order to adapt to the mobility of global capital, the shifting identity of ethnic minorities, and changing racial politics in the US.

In the framework of the long-term city planning, the Japantown SUD, encompassing only eight square blocks, can be understood as a prologue to a much larger-scale city planning that is currently in the process. In September 2007, the San Francisco Planning Department launched the Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan, whose project area consists of about thirty blocks surrounding Japantown.⁵⁸⁾ This new plan aims "to improve connections" between Japantown and the Fillmore District, and is a part of the Geary Corridor Bus Rapid Transit project that expects to start the special rapid bus transportation service on Geary Boulevard in 2012.⁵⁹⁾ This plan will have a far greater impact on the physical space and landscape of Japantown than the withdrawal of Kintetsu; consequently, it might change the role and meaning of Japantown to the Japanese American community of the

⁵⁸⁾ Japantown Task Force, "Japantown B.N.P.," <http://www.jtowntaskforce.org/> (accessed Dec. 13, 2008).

⁵⁹⁾ San Francisco Planning Department, "Japantown Better Neighborhood Plan," <http://japantown.sfplanning.org> (accessed Dec. 13, 2008).

San Francisco Bay Area yet again. As this extensive planning area includes many non-Japanese neighborhoods and residents, it will be important to pay attention to how Japantown retains its unique Japanese characteristics while simultaneously keeping and constructing harmonious relationships with other places.