

# Teaching Geography through “Chinatowns”: Global Connections and Local Spaces

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Chinatowns are familiar emblems of “Chineseness” in many countries and are among the most visible and tangible spatial manifestations of Chinese migration. Large and well-established Chinatowns can be found in diverse locales, including New York, San Francisco, Vancouver, Paris, Sydney, and Singapore. Despite sharing numerous easily recognizable features, the different Chinatowns also possess many unique and distinct characteristics.

In this article, we suggest comparing two or more Chinatowns in different countries or regions as a means for teachers to illustrate key geographical understandings and concepts such as stereotyping, migration, cultural diversity, and governance. How and why did Chinatowns in different countries and regions develop? What does the idea of a “Chinatown” signify? What does it mean to be Chinese? What are the similarities and differences between Chinatowns? We provide resources such as a sample case study and worksheet for teachers to conduct a field-based exercise on the Chinatown nearest to them. Alternatively, if a field-based investigation of a Chinatown is not feasible, teachers can adapt the activity for an investigation based on secondary data or other ethnic enclaves. As a follow-up activity, students can compare the features of the Chinatown they have investigated to the Singapore case study provided in this article.

This unit allows social studies educators the opportunity to teach their Grades 8–12 students about and with maps.<sup>1</sup> Students will learn a range of skills highlighted in the U.S. National Geography Standards such as asking geographical questions about location and context, and exploring the complex

dynamic between place, power, authority, and social categorization. Students will also acquire other geographical skills such as interpreting and producing maps, conducting transect surveys, and comparing the spatial patterns, forms, functions, and histories of the Chinatowns that they investigate. In doing so, students will be led to think about the global diffusion of cultural norms and practices, and the place-specific articulations of culture as it takes root and develops across diverse locales.

## Chinese Migration: A Brief History

Narratives of Chinese migration vary greatly and the discourse tends to be dominated by nation-based perspectives. Terms such as immigration, emigration, integration, and assimilation all serve to link migrants to particular nation-based frames of reference such as national histories and identities.<sup>2</sup> The concept of a diaspora or “huaqiao” (Overseas Chinese), on the other hand, emphasizes transnational institutions, cultural ties, and historical relationships between migrants and their families.<sup>3</sup>

Modern Chinese migration, particularly from southern China, can be attributed to developments in the late nineteenth century such as the development of economic and transportation

networks across the Pacific. A combination of harsh economic conditions and political unrest in China, as well as the annexation of California in 1848, contributed to an influx of Chinese migrants to the United States.<sup>4</sup> In the past 40 years, however, changes in Chinese migration patterns have resulted in an increasing Chinese population in North American cities such as Vancouver, Sydney, and New York.<sup>5</sup>

It is important, however, to avoid stereotyping the experiences and motives of migrants across time and space. From the migrant’s perspective, migration can also be seen as an economic strategy to help ensure the family’s survival through diversification of economic activities.<sup>6</sup> Other reasons for migration include political freedom as well as better economic and educational opportunities.

## Comparing Chinatowns in Different Contexts

From one perspective, Chinatowns served as an embodiment of the differences between Chinese immigrants and the dominant culture, not only in European and North American cities, but also in Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Chinatown, Anderson argues, “is a social construction with a cultural history and a tradition of imagery and institutional practice that has given it a cognitive and material reality in and for the West.”<sup>7</sup>

Historically, Chinese immigrants to the U.S. preferred settling near Chinese-dominated enclaves such as the New York Chinatowns in Lower Manhattan and in

Flushing because of the availability of jobs, education, and business opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Notably, because of the changing demographic and economic profile of the more recent Chinese immigrants, the spatial patterns of these new arrivals differ markedly from the earlier arrivals. This has resulted in a dispersal of many middle-class Asian immigrants, including Chinese, from traditional downtown enclaves to other neighborhoods in the suburbs. Chinatowns have also emerged as informal capital cities.<sup>9</sup> The San Francisco Chinatown, for example, has a high concentration of cultural and social institutions as well as Chinese businesses and services, and this helps maintain links to ethnic Chinese living in other parts of the region.

To maintain economic and social ties to ancestral villages, Chinese migrant communities all over the world formed “hui guan” or associations. For instance, the largest association in New York’s Chinatown is the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association founded in 1883. The Association serves numerous civic, economic, social, and cultural functions and this includes providing social services and hosting major celebrations such as the Chinese New Year.

Finally, it is important to note that Chinatowns are not homogenous but are, instead, dynamic and complex. Different languages, religions, traditions, and political beliefs are represented in different Chinatowns. The diverse and varied nature of Chinese migration and settlement, therefore, requires recognition that the label “Chinese” signifies “something slightly different in each local context.”<sup>10</sup> For instance, people of Chinese origin from Canada, Indonesia, and Singapore will have very different understandings of ethnic identity, values, and practices. How then can social studies teachers make use of Chinatowns in different locales to help students understand and appreciate both the global connections and local differences within the Chinese diaspora? And what do these similarities and differences tell us about the ethnic identity, values, and practices in a glo-

balized world?

### Analyzing Chinatown

One of the ways that teachers can provide students an entry point into analyzing the characteristics of a chosen Chinatown would be to tap into their existing knowledge of such spaces, and leverage this to form the categories to undergird the study.

For example, students could be asked to think back to their last visit to a Chinatown and list all the things they remember about the place—individually or in groups. Alternatively, teachers could provide photos or show a video with a Chinatown as a backdrop to trigger students’ experiential knowledge of the space. The teacher can then conduct a discussion to elicit and categorize students’ impressions of Chinatown; this could include the features of the built landscape, and the types of products, services, and activities that the students associate with the space.

A field study, supported by secondary research, of the nearest Chinatown can also be conducted to allow students to confirm their impressions (see Sample Worksheet Questions on page 40). For example, students can observe and document the features of Chinatown in the following way:

1. Locate and indicate the boundaries of Chinatown on a map and provide reasons for the demarcation of the boundary. For example, they might consider if the types of street names and signage, the features of the built landscape, and land use patterns change across space. They could also compare their boundaries with other boundaries of this Chinatown found in secondary sources, such as boundaries demarcated by tourist boards and city authorities.
2. Study and document the features of the built landscape that to them appear to be “Chinese” and are frequently associated with Chinatowns. For example, students

## TEACHING RESOURCES

The following websites are useful resources for teachers.

Life Magazine: A slide show of the Chinatowns of the world:  
[www.life.com/gallery/49021#index/0](http://www.life.com/gallery/49021#index/0)

Museum of Chinese in America: History of Chinese in America: An Interactive Timeline:  
[www.mocanyc.org/learn/timeline](http://www.mocanyc.org/learn/timeline)

Chinatowns of the world:  
[www.chinatownology.com/chinatowns\\_of\\_the\\_world.html](http://www.chinatownology.com/chinatowns_of_the_world.html)

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**Singapore’s Chinatown**  
 The Chinatown Heritage Centre:  
[www.chinatownheritagecentre.sg/](http://www.chinatownheritagecentre.sg/)

Stories of Chinatown:  
[www.chinatown.sg/index.php?fx=stories-chinatown](http://www.chinatown.sg/index.php?fx=stories-chinatown)

The Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan:  
[www.shhk.com.sg/aboutus/aboutus.html](http://www.shhk.com.sg/aboutus/aboutus.html)

The Sri Mariamman Temple:  
[www.heb.gov.sg/smt/main-smt.html](http://www.heb.gov.sg/smt/main-smt.html)

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**Other Chinatowns**  
 San Francisco Chinatown:  
[www.sanfranciscochinatown.com/](http://www.sanfranciscochinatown.com/)

London Chinatown:  
[www.londonchinatown.org/home/](http://www.londonchinatown.org/home/)

New York Chinatown:  
[www.explorechinatown.com/gui/Content-23.aspx.htm](http://www.explorechinatown.com/gui/Content-23.aspx.htm)

could note if the street names and signs are written in Chinese, and look out for what they understand to be “Chinese” motifs (e.g., dragons and phoenixes), geometric forms (e.g., pagodas), the use of certain colors (e.g., red and gold), and decorative features (e.g., red lanterns) that are associated with Chinatowns.

3. Conduct a transect study (refer to the sample transect map on Singapore’s Chinatown, pg 39) of the land use at street level along designated streets. Students should note the types of food, products, and services found there, and pay particular attention to whether they are “Chinese” in character. In the transect study, it would also be useful to observe the types of societies and organizations that use the buildings. Finally, students could find out about the types of festivals or events that are celebrated in Chinatown. Students should also take note of features of Chinatown that they might consider as not ethnically “Chinese.”

Back in the classroom, students can compile reports and conduct a comparative analysis. Students can identify the features that are common to and different about the two Chinatowns (the Chinatown they investigated and the information on the Singapore example provided in the next section). More importantly, they should be encouraged to offer preliminary explanations for these similarities and differences (e.g., the built landscape, the types of food sold, or languages spoken).

At the same time, students should also be guided to understand that Chinatowns are not identical or homogenous entities. Their spatial forms and uses are dependent on the contextual particularities of the Chinatowns being compared. For example, based on the number of souvenir shops located in the area, the Chinatown in Singapore can be seen as



Places of Worship: The Sri Mariamman Hindu Temple and the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple

a conserved ethnic enclave marketed as a tourist attraction for international visitors. There are, in contrast, relatively few grocery stores that specialize in Chinese products. This can be explained by the fact that Singapore is dominated by ethnic Chinese and such products and services can be accessed across the city. Students can then compare and contrast this to the primary functions of Chinatowns in the United States and other countries and examine the Chinatown’s role in providing the Chinese minority with products and services that are relatively difficult to find outside of these agglomerations. Finally, teachers can also adapt this activity to include analyses of other ethnic enclaves such as spaces dominated by Koreans and Indians. In the next section, we provide a sample case study to show how this geographical study can be conducted. Teachers and students can also use this case study for their comparative study of different Chinatowns.

#### Sample Case Study: Singapore’s Chinatown

Singapore’s Chinatown, while sharing many similarities with Chinese-dominated enclaves in other countries, has several unique characteristics. Notably, nearly three-quarters of Singapore’s population consists of ethnic

Chinese. Why would a majority Chinese country have a Chinatown? This can be traced to the government policies instituted by British colonial authorities who preferred to designate separate areas for different ethnic groups.

In terms of location, from the 1820s, the Chinese immigrants, mainly from Southern China, were required to settle south-west of the Singapore River. The colonial authorities also divided the Chinese according to occupation and region of origin within Chinatown. For instance, the Cantonese were located in Kreta Ayer while the Hokkiens dominated Telok Ayer. It is interesting to note that these district names are essentially Malay names—a reflection of how Singapore was originally a fishing village inhabited by indigenous Malays.

Some of the street names in Chinatown reflect the heritage of the area. For example, Ann Siang Hill was named after a wealthy Chinese businessman while Club Street is a reflection of the Chinese clan associations that are located in the area. Mosque Street and Temple Streets reflect the locations of the Indian-Muslim Jamae Mosque and Hindu Sri Mariamman Temple.

Important and visible symbols of migration include places of worship and clan associations (see photos of



A Chinese clan association and traditional shophouses selling Chinese cultural and religious artifacts.

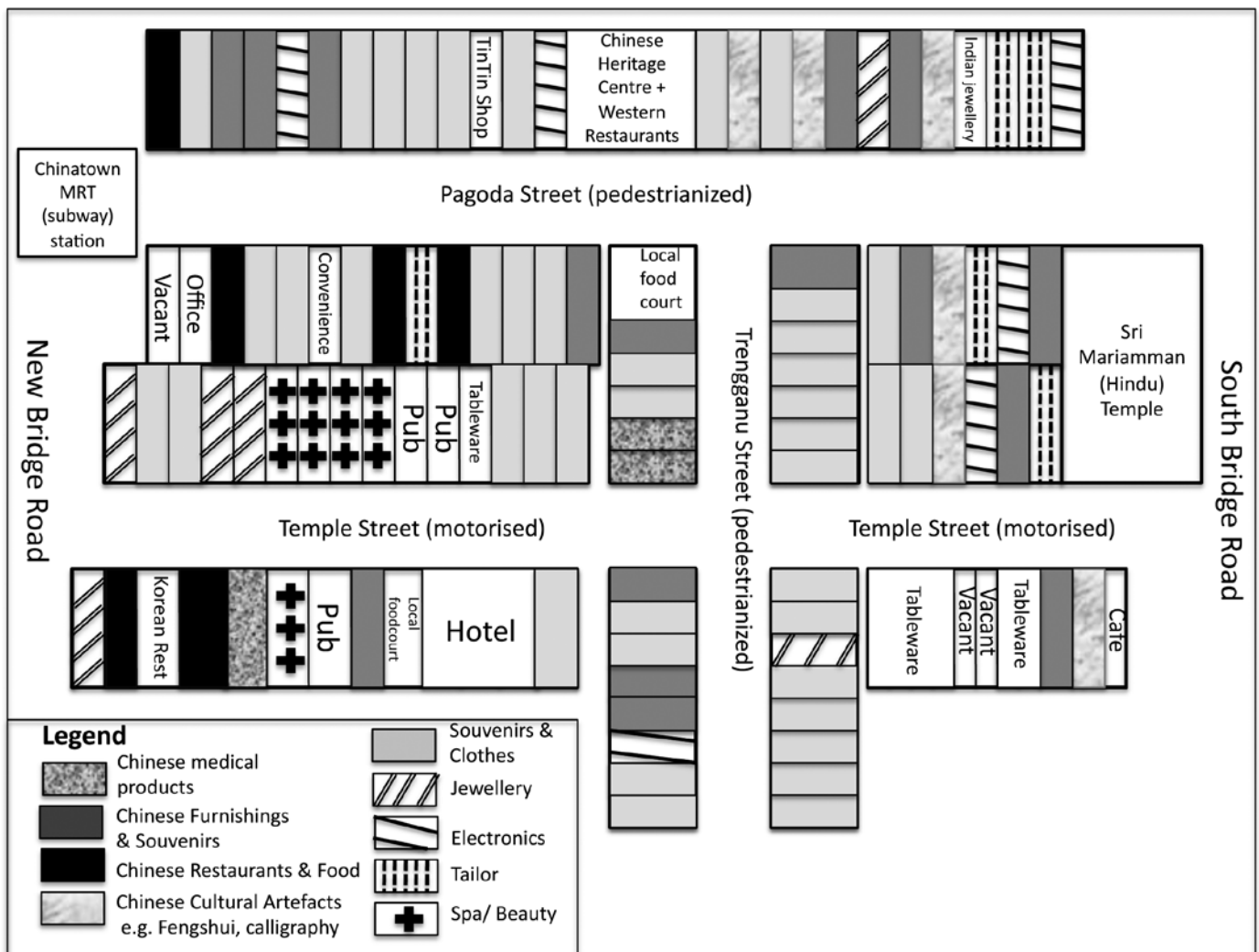


Figure 1: Sample Transect Study of Land Use Patterns in Singapore's Chinatown

The Sri Mariamman Hindu Temple and the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, on page 38). For example, the Thian Hock Keng Temple (Temple of Heavenly Happiness) was built by early immigrants to thank Ma Zu, the sea goddess, for their safe arrival in Singapore. Notably, Singapore's Chinatown, like that of many other Chinese enclaves, was never entirely homogenous. Small communities of South Indian traders were located along South Bridge Road and consequently, there are elements of the built landscape which are not Chinese, including the Sri Mariamman Temple and the Jamae mosque.

In order to assist the new immigrants and to serve as a voice of the community, associations such as the Teochew Lee Clan Association were set up to help migrants look for employment, provide

funeral arrangements, or organize social activities. Over time, these associations evolved to play different roles in order to maintain their relevance in modern day Singapore, including setting up of schools such as Tao Nan Primary school and helping to preserve linguistic and cultural traditions.

The most common historical feature of this area is the traditional "shophouse" landscape, a low-rise architectural building type commonly found in Southeast Asia (see photos of Chinese clan association and traditional shophouses, on page 39). Shophouses are characterized by a shop or commercial space located on the ground floor and residential accommodation on the second or third floor. In the nineteenth century, a British colonial administrator mandated that it was compulsory for all shophouses in

Singapore to incorporate a sheltered public walkway, known as "five-foot ways," to provide shelter to pedestrians during Singapore's torrential thunderstorms—a frequent phenomenon in the tropics. Here, students can be led to observe the interaction of environmental and historical phenomena in shaping the built form of Singapore's Chinatown, and to compare this to other Chinatowns that they have studied.

Singapore's Chinatown contains other motifs that are common to the Chinese and to Chinatowns across the world including red lanterns and pagoda-shaped motifs. Another feature is the presence of street signs in both English and Chinese characters. The street signs are accompanied by a sign denoting the Chinatown heritage area featuring a Chinese lattice design. These signs are

## Sample Worksheet Questions Analyzing Chinatowns

Chinatowns can be found in many cities and countries, including New York, San Francisco, Vancouver, London, Paris, Sydney, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. Despite sharing numerous easily recognizable features, the different Chinatowns also possess many unique and distinct characteristics. Individually or in your groups, conduct a field-based study of a Chinatown that is located near you and answer these questions. You might need to support your investigation with secondary research data.

1. Where is this Chinatown located within the city? Locate it on a map. Why do you think a Chinatown developed in that location and not in another part of the city?
2. Identify the different groups of Chinese migrants that are located in the Chinatown you are studying. Which region or country did they migrate from? Did they migrate directly to this Chinatown? When did they migrate to this Chinatown? Why?
3. Locate and indicate the boundaries of this Chinatown on a map. What evidence did you use to determine the boundaries of this Chinatown? For example, did you walk around the area and take note of the changes across space in the signage, built features, types of goods and services as you walked further away from the commonly accepted "core" of Chinatown? Compare your boundaries to the boundaries demarcated by other organizations such as tourist boards

and city or municipal authorities. In what ways are they similar or different? Why?

4. Identify and document the features of the built landscape that appear "Chinese" to you. Are there any buildings or structures that do not appear "Chinese"? For example, what types of motifs, geometric forms, colors, and decorative features do you normally associate with "Chinese culture"?
5. Conduct a transect study (refer to the sample transect map on Singapore's Chinatown) of the land use at street level along designated streets. Note the types of food, products, and services found there. Find out about the types of festivals or events that are celebrated in Chinatown. Are there also features of Chinatown that you might not consider "Chinese"?

### *Suggested post-fieldwork activities*

6. Based on your research, have the boundaries, types of land use, types of residents and migrants, and physical features of this Chinatown changed over time? What could have caused these changes?
7. Compare the Chinatown you studied to another Chinatown located in a different city (for example, you may want to use the Singapore case study provided). Identify the features that are common to and different from the two Chinatowns. Account for the similarities and differences.

indicative of the “Chinese” character of the space, as well as its situation within a larger national context where English dominates as the official language of discourse. Plaques outlining the history of the area are also common and it is interesting to note that these plaques contain not only English and Chinese explanations, but also Japanese script—suggesting the importance attached to visits by Japanese tourists to the area.

Since obtaining independence in 1965, the Singapore state has sought to dismantle the spatially separate ethnic areas and relocate large segments of the Chinese population to newly created residential areas in Singapore. Since the late 1980s, however, there was growing concern that Singapore risked losing its cultural identity and heritage. Consequently, a Committee on Heritage was set up by the government for the preservation of historically significant districts. Ironically, the conservation of Chinatown and the subsequent post-conservation rent hike has squeezed out many small traditional businesses and Chinatown today consists of more upmarket shops aimed at the tourist dollar.

A transect study of Chinatown incorporating Pagoda Street, Temple Street, and Trengganu Street in the Kreta Ayer area reveals that many of the shops in the area tend to sell products that are generally considered to be “Chinese” including Chinese food, furnishings and cultural artifacts (See Sample Transect Study, Figure 1). The presence of a hotel and the proliferation of shops selling souvenirs and clothes marketed to tourists also indicate that these shops cater more to tourists. Very little of the land use is dedicated to traditional Chinese foodstuff and medicinal products. Here, students can be led to think about the role of Chinatowns both as a tourism space as well as a heritage space for Chinese culture, and to consider the local environmental, social, and political forces that have shaped land use. They could be encouraged to compare its role and functions as an ethnic space in a Chinese-dominated context like Singapore to other

spaces where it functions as an enclave for minority Chinese populations.

### Conclusion

A comparison of the history and geography of different Chinatowns will allow students to understand how places such as Chinatowns are influenced by global and local processes and environments. Migration patterns vary across time and space and this has also resulted in changing patterns of social and spatial interaction within ethnic enclaves. The geographical fieldwork activity can also help students understand the influence of local spaces and contexts that shape the unique and distinct features found in different Chinatowns. This is because local culture and social institutions impact people’s perceptions of places. Lastly, this study will provide social studies teachers and students with the opportunity to examine how social markers of difference such as ethnic categorizations are dynamic, hybrid, and continually evolving, and how definitions of culture and cultural diversity are social constructions that are constantly being negotiated. ●

### Notes

1. Sarah W. Bednarz, Gillian Acheson, and Robert S. Bednarz, “Maps and Map Learning in Social Studies,” in *Social Studies Today: Research and Practice*, ed., Walter C. Parker (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2010), 121-132.
2. Adam McKeown, “Conceptualizing Chinese Diasporas, 1842 to 1949,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2, (May 1999): 306-337.
3. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 110-119.
4. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (New York, N.Y.: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 191-192.
5. Christopher J. Smith, “Asian New York: The Geography and Politics of Diversity,” *International Migration Review* 29, no. 1, (Spring 1995): 59-84.
6. McKeown, 318.
7. Kay J. Anderson, “The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 4, (1987): 581.
8. Smith, 70.
9. Michel, S. Laguerre, *Global Ethnopolis* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 28-30.
10. McKeown, 329.

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Understanding the Near East and the dramatic events of the Arab Spring are important content for today’s social studies classrooms. Whether it is the democratic revolutions in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia or the push for reforms in Morocco, the people of these North African countries have taken a stand for freedom and democracy. This is just the latest chapter in the centuries-old history of human occupation of these lands that stretch back before the Roman Empire.

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