

Original Paper

Consequences Beyond Intent: Economic Mechanisms Behind Cultural Continuity in San Francisco's Chinatown

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Abstract

This study examines how ordinary economic decisions made by business owners in ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown can contribute to the preservation of culture, specifically when preservation is not within the owner's primary objective. In interviews with Chinese immigrant business owners in San Francisco's Chinatown, the study identifies three mechanisms through which cultural preservation could occur as a secondary outcome: business clustering, adjustments to regulations, and family or off-hour labor. These mechanisms help sustain businesses by creating a distinct market, adapting to changing legal and economic conditions, and reducing operating costs, respectively. The findings in this study suggest that cultural preservation can occur as a consequence beyond intentional economic decisions, as opposed to only deliberate efforts to maintain culture.

Keywords

Chinatown, cultural preservation, economic impact

Introduction

Cultural assimilation is often viewed through two different lenses: forced assimilation and voluntary assimilation (International Catholic Migration Commission, 2025). There is much debate and literature on the definitions and mechanisms behind both concepts. Yet, there is a clear distinction between the two forms; the choice between forced and voluntary processes remains a pervasive contrast throughout assimilation literature. However, there is less attention to whether “forced” and “voluntary” can also be applied to cultural preservation. As Ruggiero, Taylor, and Lambert (1996) wrote in their paper, *A Model of Heritage Culture Maintenance*, “culture maintenance involves a choice on the part of ethnic group members.” Ruggiero and his coauthors did not present this as their own assumption; rather, they reviewed pre-existing theory, such as Moghaddam and Taylor (1987), where they stated that Canadian policies assume cultural maintenance “is desired,” concluding that both assimilation and preservation

were based on an assumption of choice by ethnic members. Similar choice-based literature appears in Luo and Wiseman's (2000) article on ethnic culture maintenance, where they examine children's "decisions to retain their ethnic language." Together, these studies illustrate the broader literature space and consensus on preservation research: cultural continuity often occurs through decisions and intentional acts of maintenance. This reflects an influential interpretation of cultural preservation being willed by groups.

I will argue in this paper that this assumption may overlook ways economic necessity can bring about cultural continuity independent of an explicit intent to preserve culture. From the outside, traditional architecture and types of businesses may suggest that some business owners are consciously maintaining their culture. Chinatowns are among the most recognized centers of cultural preservation, making them a prime consideration for the mechanisms behind cultural preservation. They are a place to support new immigrants lacking sufficient funds and give aid to startup businesses. But there is still the assumption that cultural continuity in places like Chinatown primarily results from a conscious decision to preserve heritage.

Immigrants are often pressured to ask themselves if they are to adapt to the host country's culture and standards, or to remain in their ethnic enclave. Their economic well-being can play an important role in determining their response to these pressures. In some cases, immigrants may intentionally preserve their culture, but in other cases, cultural continuity may come from decisions made for other purposes, such as economic ideals. In this paper, we will consider cultural preservation as a secondary consequence of those decisions. This consideration raises the question: how do ordinary economic decisions and activities contribute to the preservation of culture, even when not deliberate? To examine this relationship, this paper will consider cultural preservation in the face of economic survival within ethnic enclaves by using interviews with Chinese immigrant business owners throughout San Francisco's Chinatown as case studies.

This paper argues that some Chinese immigrant business owners still preserve culture even without it being their primary objective. Cultural continuity can result from ordinary economic decisions regarding labor, regulation, and business survival. Business agglomeration, for example, may be pursued for economic reasons but can still reinforce Chinatown as a cultural space. This research will answer the question of how business clustering, off-hour labor (which will be defined as labor contributed to the business outside of the owner's primary employment), family labor, and adaptation produce cultural preservation even when it is not the business owner's immediate objective.

This paper will first examine the different perspectives of assimilation and Chinatown as an ethnic economy, before analyzing Chinatown's broader role in the preservation of culture. This paper will also present findings on cultural preservation through clustering, labor, and adaptation using interviews with Chinese immigrant business owners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Assimilation, Adaptation, and Cultural Continuity*

Cultural assimilation is often understood as the process through which individuals or groups adopt the culture, values, and behaviors of a different community. It usually encompasses the loss of language, mannerisms, and traditions.

A distinction can be made in cultural assimilation: there is forced assimilation and voluntary assimilation. Forced assimilation is when policies or structural pressures push immigrants to reduce cultural practices in favor of the host society's (ICMC, 2025). An example could be a policy discouraging the use of a student's native language in a school, which forces students to rely more heavily on the host country's language. Structural forces such as gentrification are less direct; it doesn't force assimilation itself, but can cause rising rents and land prices to displace businesses and homes from ethnic enclaves, leading to the weakening of cultural institutions.

The second type of assimilation is voluntary assimilation. This process occurs when immigrants selectively choose certain parts of their culture to continue practicing while lowering emphasis on others (ICMC, 2025). Sometimes, the selected parts of culture are not entirely lost, but are mixed with the host country's culture to create a unique immigrant identity. These unique cultures are formed through cultural adaptation, which is a mechanism of preservation. The main difference between assimilation and adaptation is that the cultural roots are not necessarily reduced in the case of adaptation.

Next is cultural continuity, or preservation. While there is no single specific definition, the term can be defined as the continuity of practicing one's culture, including language and tradition, in a new environment.

However, for this study, cultural preservation will refer more specifically to the continuity of practices, institutions, goods, languages, or social relationships after immigration. Preservation does not mean these aspects must remain unchanged. They can be modified in response to the host country without losing their culturally identifiable functions.

This ambiguity raises a more specific question for immigrant businesses. Does adapting to American laws and markets necessarily push a business towards cultural assimilation, or can adaptations facilitate the survival of culturally distinct institutions and culture?

2.2 *A Possible Force of Assimilation*

A possible determinant of assimilation is an immigrant's proficiency in the host country's language. This comes from the idea that language is a primary skill and form of human capital. Chiswick noted in his *Economics of Language* (2008) that immigrants unable to speak the host country's language could have their social and informational networks "confined" to their ethnic enclave. The study suggests that immigrants could receive economic and social benefits, along with an increase in community range if they left their enclave. However, these language barriers can contribute to making an ethnic enclave a social and economic network for immigrants: they can remain within an enclave for the shared

language, and familiarity makes economic participation easier. Limited proficiency in a host country language can indirectly contribute to cultural continuity by reinforcing a dependence on the ethnic enclave even if the immigrant's main concern is employment or economic survival. However, this does not necessarily mean that the immigrants stay in the enclave for the purpose of cultural preservation.

One idea arising from this study is that economic advancement could encourage reduced dependence on one's ethnic enclave in favor of integration into mainstream society. While it may be statistically supported that immigrants receive better working conditions and income from branching out of their ethnic enclave, it doesn't explain why many Chinese immigrants decide to stay in their ethnic enclave even with the benefits. Chan and Zhou (2022) offer a different perspective that can explain the "confinement" of Chinese immigrants to Chinatown. Cultural preservation may certainly be voluntary for some immigrants who wish to stay connected to their cultural heritage, but this does not necessitate cultural preservation as the primary motivation for all immigrants residing in ethnic enclaves. Social familiarity and economic opportunities can independently make Chinatown an ideal place to remain, while creating cultural continuity as a secondary impact.

For social familiarity, many immigrants in a new host country may want to seek an area with people they can easily connect with. The "enclave economy" of Chinatown encourages and facilitates these interactions by giving immigrants new opportunities and social networks. But immigrants may not necessarily enter these networks for the explicit reason of cultural preservation; they could be simply motivated by communication and familial support.

A second distinct motivation is economic opportunity; it may be easier for immigrants to find residence and employment to support themselves in their ethnic enclave (Chakraborty and Schüller, 2022). Even if an immigrant's primary goal is to be financially stable, their actions within the enclave still interact with the different businesses and networks that keep Chinatown culturally distinct. In this way, preservation can still result from economic participation even if it was not the primary objective of the immigrant.

Thus, the "confinement" of immigrants to their ethnic enclaves is not necessarily something to be considered negative. Even if they potentially sacrifice higher incomes or a wider communication range, they still find the support they need in their own enclave. Immigrants can retain their human capital without needing to rely on a new language, and the intertwined community can create specialized demand for services such as traditional Chinese medicine. Therefore, economic incentives can explain why remaining in an enclave may be attributed to economic security rather than the purpose of cultural preservation. Repeated decisions to work, consume, and interact within Chinatowns help sustain cultural institutions. From this analysis, it can be established that the primary goals of economic self-interest and the secondary impact of cultural preservation are not mutually exclusive.

2.3 Chinatown as a Cultural and Commercial Space

The businesses within Chinatown preserve culture through their own operations. Institutions such as Traditional Chinese Medicine stores or restaurants are, in and of themselves, physical cultural preservation, keeping old practices alive. A study by Rafique, Song, and Feng (2026) described the environment created by these kinds of businesses. In an interview with an older immigrant, they stated that the streets of Chinatown reminded them of their home in Guangzhou and that Chinese history is carried in the ethnic enclave. This cultural and commercial mix of Chinatown is also supported by a study by Schuch and Wang (2015) and Liu, Miller, and Wang (2014), in which they assessed that businesses can act as “economic, social, and cultural centers.”

These studies also point out the mechanisms by which cultural preservation is produced beyond a business’s primary goal. By operating within the ethnic enclave, businesses can provide social and economic networks that connect immigrants. The employment and information provided also make businesses themselves viable. In this way, cultural preservation does not only depend on the deliberate action to preserve it, but through every day economic activity. Their assessment demonstrates that businesses across Chinatown can create a social net for their community, allowing financial support in times of need. Support from these businesses was both critical and helpful during COVID-19, when the popularity of many institutions decreased by nearly 40%. The continued help from these businesses therefore not only helped to preserve their individual stores and well-being, but also the broader cultural continuity in Chinatown.

2.4 Literature Gap and Contribution

Existing literature, such as Takamatsu’s article *Socioeconomic Adaptation Through Ethnic Business* (2026), explains how ethnic enclaves are “community anchors” and their intricate connections with businesses can preserve culture. Ethnic businesses can often function as social and cultural centers that facilitate the practices and cultural identity exemplified throughout Chinatown. Yet, there is an imbalance in how scholars have generally treated the role of non-voluntary forces in comparison to voluntary ones. External pressures and economic incentives are often examined as mechanisms that could push an immigrant towards the road of assimilation, but less often analyzed as a way to preserve culture. This leaves room for questions specific to those who run these businesses. Through what ordinary economic mechanisms do business owners create cultural continuity? Rather than treating cultural preservation as an explicit objective, the next section will present case studies to support how immigrants can preserve culture as a secondary outcome without necessarily being its primary objective.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Overview

The following subsections will draw from and present three semi-structured interviews conducted with Chinese immigrants and business owners in Chinatown. The subsections will be organized by the

preservation mechanism they correspond to: business clustering, adaptation to regulations, and off-hour and family labor. Interviewees were selected because of their direct experience in operating a culturally distinctive business and navigating the economic conditions of Chinatown. Most interviews were conducted in Chinese, then translated and transcribed into English; passages with uncertainty were excluded from central claims. The original Chinese can be found in the Appendix. Direct consent to mention each interviewee's name was not received, so for consistency, interviews will be cited by their interview number in the order they were conducted and timestamped throughout the rest of the paper (For example, Interview 3, x:xx–x:xx). Timestamps may vary slightly because the transcript omits questions, irrelevant commentary, and stutters. These interviews are not meant to represent every Chinese business statistically. They function as qualitative case studies from culturally distinctive institutions under the economic conditions of Chinatown. Together, the cases will provide perspectives and insight into Chinese medicine, service, and immigrant family life.

3.2 Business Clustering

The first interview was conducted with the owner of a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) clinic located in San Francisco's Chinatown. He stated the clinic had been operating for around eight years at the time of the interview. The business owner stated he had worked as a doctor in China before migrating to the United States, and when asked if he previously practiced medicine there, he responded, "Yes, back in China, I was already... a doctor" (Interview 1, 00:12–00:25).

The practitioner stated to have lived in the US for around twenty years, dealing with a diverse customer base throughout China and Chinatown. When asked about the demographic composition of his patients, he responded, "Anyway, 80% or 90% of them are Chinese" (Interview 1, 02:05–02:16). Non-Chinese patients also used services of the clinic, as the practitioner explained that they were already familiar with TCM: "Generally, the people who come here already have some understanding of Traditional Chinese Medicine. If they didn't, they wouldn't dare use it, even if you told them to" (Interview 1, 02:16–02:40).

The most important section of the interview is the practitioner's thoughts on business clustering. The interviewer initially presented the assumption that more businesses in the same industry would create greater competition. However, the practitioner disagreed with this assumption, explaining: "Many people think that the more competitors there are in the same industry, the harder it is to do business," and "Well, actually, that's not the case. Not at all. We have a saying, how should I put it? About a 'cluster effect' where businesses of the same type gather together," (Interview 1, 04:09–04:35).

The practitioner then compared wholesale markets in China to the markets in Chinatown. He stated that "It's like one of those wholesale markets back home, specifically a clothing wholesale market, right? Anyone looking to buy or wholesale clothes would definitely head straight to a market like that," (Interview 1, 04:35–04:48). This comparison was then applied to TCM in Chinatown being benefited from a cluster of businesses: "That makes it easy to attract patients—or rather, consumers. It's the same for our Chinatown. If all the TCM clinics are located here, people will naturally come to this area.

Whenever someone wants to see a TCM practitioner, their first thought will be, ‘Oh, Chinatown.’ Wouldn’t that be even better?” (Interview 1, 04:48–05:10). This idea was supplemented by the argument made by the practitioner, stating that another clinic should not be automatically considered competition, since the concentration of business would attract more consumers; “So, well, don’t just think, ‘Oh no, another shop means more competition’ the number of customers being attracted is growing, too” (Interview 1, 05:10–05:26).

This case provides a firsthand view from a TCM practitioner in both China and US Chinatowns, facing very diverse and different economic environments. His account specifically includes and documents the understanding of business clustering and agglomeration in Chinatown.

3.3 Preservation in Business Clustering

The first mechanism for maintaining cultural continuity as a secondary outcome is the clustering of businesses in Chinatown. Interview one provides the most straightforward example with the TCM clinic. When asked whether more similar businesses in one area would increase competition, the practitioner rejected this assumption. The practitioner instead turned toward the idea of clustering, explaining that similar businesses in one area create a more recognizable market space. Instead of the business itself bringing in customers, the creation of a market would increase popularity to one area as a whole. The TCM practitioner compared the arrangement to a wholesale clothing market in China: customers seeking a particular product would be naturally inclined to travel to the location where many sellers of the product may be located.

This comparison of products is important as the practitioner describes clustering in primarily economic terms as opposed to cultural. He never presented the proximity of similar businesses as an effort to preserve TCM as a cultural practice, but explicitly states that clustering attracts customers more easily. The cluster of businesses becomes a destination for consumers seeking their product or service. As stated by the practitioner himself, “If all the TCM clinics are located here, people will naturally come to this area. Whenever someone wants to see a TCM practitioner, their first thought will be, ‘Oh, Chinatown.’” (Interview 1, 04:48–05:10).

Thus, the primary objective of clustering can be considered mainly commercial. A greater concentration of TCM clinics can increase the number of customers seeking their services in Chinatown. Furthermore, the practitioner argues that a nearby clinic would not necessarily harm their own business due to the increased attraction of customers. In his own words, “So, well, don’t just think, ‘Oh no, another shop means more competition’; the number of customers being attracted is growing, too” (Interview 1, 05:10–05:26).

Even with cultural preservation not being the primary objective, business clustering can still reproduce cultural continuity. As customers repeatedly associate TCM clinics with Chinatown, they will also begin to seek the service constantly in Chinatowns. The practitioner’s statement that the first thought someone seeking a TCM clinic would have is “Oh, Chinatown,” reinforces this process of association. The occupation of businesses in a space is not just physical, but an imprint that makes Chinatown itself

a recognized location for Chinese medicine and related services. Business agglomeration, therefore, creates a cultural association as a secondary outcome between a place and a product or service.

The clinic's customer demographics further support this relationship. The practitioner estimated that their customers were "80% or 90%" Chinese (Interview 1, 02:05–02:16). He also stated that non-Chinese customers were often already familiar with the practices of TCM. Cultural familiarity therefore has an economic function. This reinforces the relationship between culturally familiar customers and culturally distinctive businesses: customers demand TCM, while the cluster of TCM businesses in Chinatown provides a primary market for those customers. Neither part of this relationship necessitates the owner of the business to be consciously trying to preserve culture. Even though the practitioner is focused on attracting customers and operating in a market, the result still provides cultural continuity, sustaining TCM as an accessible practice in Chinatown.

The distinction between objectives is important, as clustering is not in itself unique to Chinese businesses. Agglomeration occurs in many other economic industries to reduce search costs and create a recognizable market. Therefore, the mechanism of clustering is an ordinary and economic one. What makes it different for businesses in ethnic enclaves is the cultural consequences of sustaining them. For TCM clinics and other culturally distinctive institutions, ordinary business clustering can contribute to maintaining Chinatown as a recognizable environment for cultural services.

The arts-and-crafts business in interview three, which is described fully in the section below, can provide an antithesis by showing the result of a weakening in business agglomeration. The owner of an arts-and-crafts store stated many more arts-and-crafts stores residing in the neighborhood before, but during the time of the interview, only a few remained. The reason behind this decline was attributed to poor economic conditions following COVID-19 and the retirement of other business owners. Although the third interview does not provide direct evidence that businesses survived from clustering before the pandemic, it can still demonstrate that the environment of a certain economic activity within Chinatown was reduced once the collective market declined.

Together, these interviews suggest that business clustering can preserve culture as a result of market incentives. Enclave businesses gather to attract customers and create a recognizable market. Consumers then associate a particular cultural good or service with the enclave itself. Therefore, cultural preservation is produced not because it is the primary objective of clustering, but due to an economic strategy sustaining and reproducing the cultural identity of Chinatown.

3.4 Adaptations to Regulation

The market and laws surrounding TCM were also different in both areas. As the practitioner explained, "The regulations here in the U.S. are quite strict and differ from those back home. In China, a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can also prescribe some Western medicines such as painkillers or anti-inflammatories, but that isn't allowed here. In the U.S., we [TCM] practitioners are restricted to using only Chinese herbal medicines and [TCM] therapeutic methods," (Interview 1,

00:52–01:19). It was later clarified that his clinic was mainly restricted to Chinese herbal medicine and traditional treatment methods, such as cupping, acupuncture, and preparation of herbal medicine.

A similar process of adjustment was shown in the third interview, conducted in English with an operator of a small Chinese arts and crafts business in San Francisco's Chinatown. Her business spanned multiple generations and countries. When asked whether this was her first business or not, the owner replied: "Actually, it started with my grandfather," and "No, my grandfather started in China, then then here" (Interview 3, 00:29–01:08). She characterized the family businesses as a succession or series of stores. She later referred to it as a "pass-on, pass-on business" (Interview 3, 05:40–06:10).

When she and her family moved to the US, she explained that the business was in the "ivory business" (Interview 3, 01:10–01:12). The store then continued to operate after the family moved away from this product. They shifted towards other goods that were imported from China, such as linen, ceramics, and handmade objects and crafts.

Differing from the TCM clinic, the owner's store served relatively few local Chinese customers compared to other demographics, stating that her customers were mainly "more tourists" (Interview 3, 01:57–01:59). The owner also stated that some tourists would revisit the store, mainly visitors from other states who collected the store's goods, but the owner did clarify that most tourists did not return.

The owner also recalled that COVID-19 had affected the broader Chinatown neighborhood, stating, "During that time... Chinatown was pretty much dead" (Interview 3, 03:58–04:45). She described the decline leading to shutdowns, fewer tourists, and anti-Chinese discrimination. According to the owner, the store also applied for financial assistance but did not receive any.

This interview documents a business with direct family lineage from China to the US. Merchandise changes were in response to restrictions on ivory, and their customer base and economic environment also changed after immigration and during Covid 19.

3.5 Preservation in Adaptations to Regulation

A second mechanism of cultural preservation that appeared throughout the interviews is the adjustment of businesses to legal and economic conditions. In these cases, businesses often survive by changing their operations, whether in their practices or products. Though these decisions are made for practical reasons, there is still room for culturally distinctive institutions to reproduce cultural continuity in their operation.

The first interview with the TCM clinic again provides a clear example of adjustments to regulations. The TCM practitioner explained that medical practices in the United States were different from those in China: there were far more restrictions on the products that could be sold. According to the practitioner, TCM clinics in China could prescribe some Western medicines such as painkillers or anti-inflammatory medications. In the US, however, the practitioner stated that he was restricted to mainly Chinese herbal medicine and treatment methods. In his own words, "In the U.S., we [TCM] practitioners are restricted to using only Chinese herbal medicines and [TCM] therapeutic methods" (Interview 1, 00:52–01:19).

The immediate reason behind following these restrictions is legal compliance. TCM practitioners must operate within American medical regulations if they wish to keep practicing. The regulation provided a secondary cultural consequence: by narrowing a clinic's legal practice, there is a high likelihood of preservation of Chinese herbal medicine and treatment. Yet, there is no indication that either the restrictions or the practitioner's compliance was done for the purpose of protecting cultural traditions.

The third interview with a multigenerational arts-and-crafts business also demonstrates adjustment. Originating with the owner's grandfather in China, it continued in the United States. However, the products that the business sold changed throughout the years. The owner explained that their primary product was ivory when the business was still operating. However, due to high restrictions on ivory sales in the United States, the family shifted towards imported handmade Chinese goods such as ceramics and crafts. Similarly to the TCM clinic, the owners adapted to new legal regulations, which in turn helped maintain their culturally distinctive business.

Thus, these cases demonstrate preservation under constraint. External restrictions were not enacted with the intention to preserve Chinese medicine, yet they helped shape businesses in a way that maintains their cultural practices. In this case, cultural continuity occurs partly through compliance with legal rules rather than a deliberate decision to preserve tradition.

These examples demonstrate why adjustments to regulation should not be automatically considered intentional cultural assimilation. Businesses can change their form and operation while remaining culturally distinctive. The TCM clinic and arts-and-crafts business both had to change their products and services according to legal regulations, yet their decisions did not necessarily have the objective of preserving culture. Instead, they are decisions about what the business can continue doing, legally and economically. Cultural continuity only follows those adjustments, allowing a culturally distinctive institution to be sustained.

3.6 Off-Hour and Family Labor

The second interview was conducted with the co-owner of a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco's Chinatown. Unlike in the other interviews, the interviewee stated that she had not engaged in restaurant operations in China, meaning her entry into the restaurant management business occurred after immigrating to the US.

The restaurant itself predated the current owners by many years, as the owner discussed the history behind the business: "This restaurant has been around for years—decades, perhaps... The previous owners retired," and "This was the original shop, and the two of us, the new owners, bought it together" (Interview 2, 01:47–02:17). The continued operation of the restaurant was not a direct family inheritance, but due to the purchasing of an already existing restaurant. The restaurant is, however, operated with substantial amounts of family involvement. The interviewee explained: "My husband is a chef; he's in there cooking," and "My friend's husband is in there, too" (Interview 2, 02:02–02:32). The owner herself also works a part-time job outside of the restaurant for more financial security. She stated: "I also have to work a second job. I also work at a hotel," "I do housekeeping," and "After finishing

work at the hotel, I come back to the restaurant at 5:30.” (Interview 2, 02:32–03:02). The owner’s reasoning behind this workload was related to economics as opposed to direct cultural preservation: “There is no other way. It’s just to make a living” (Interview 2, 03:02–03:18).

Interview two therefore provides a case of a long-established and continuing Chinese restaurant whose current survival relies on co-ownership and off-hour and family labor. The owner’s own explanations center around economic sufficiency and livelihood.

The third interview also provided understanding of family involvement through the multigenerational passing down of the arts-and-crafts business. The continuation from her grandfather to her father, and subsequently to her, demonstrates the operation’s success.

These cases show businesses that depend on individual, family, and off-hour labor. The restaurant owner combines a part-time job and the operation of her restaurant, and the arts-and-crafts store has continued across multiple generations.

3.7 Preservation in Off-Hour and Family Labor

Family and off-hour labor appears as a third mechanism of preservation across the three interviews, which refers to the labor performed by owners or family members outside their primary employment or business operation work hours.

This mechanism can be clearly analyzed in interview two. In addition to the two owners, their husbands work inside the restaurant, with the interviewee’s husband working as a cook (Interview 2, 02:02–02:32). The owner herself works a separate hotel housekeeping job before returning to the restaurant around 5:30 in the evening (Interview 2, 02:32–03:02). She explains that the workload is necessary to make a living (Interview 2, 03:02–03:18), therefore allowing her to obtain income external to the restaurant. The owner obtains this external income while still maintaining necessary labor for the continued operation of the business.

Off-hour and family labor demonstrates an important connection between economic survival and cultural preservation. The owner doesn’t describe the additional labor as an effort primarily to preserve culture, but instead frames the business’s survival in terms of livelihood and as a family obligation. Their family labor helps lower the threshold at which their business can continue operating. Sustaining the business is possible even when they may not be able to support a full-time staff. Thus, family and off-hour labor could help prevent the disappearance of culturally distinctive institutions. Cultural preservation can be produced as a secondary outcome from the economic decision to keep a marginal business operating.

Operating a business even when a secondary job is necessary could be understood through the distinction between a business’s break-even and shutdown point. A business does not necessarily need to be fully profitable for continued operation; in the short run, a business can remain open if its revenue covers the costs directly associated with its operation (variable costs) and contributes to fixed expenses that would remain even if the business closed. Furthermore, finding new jobs for every member of a family-run business may cause financial issues, meaning sustaining the business may be their best

option. Therefore, family and off-hour labor can help reduce the immediate cost of operation with the extra assistance. Although the labor will carry opportunity costs for the individuals providing it, family and off-hour labor can still help small businesses operate under difficult conditions. However, it is important to note that there is too little accounting data to show that any of the businesses interviewed is operating at this midpoint. The interview can show a labor arrangement consistent with this mechanism, which will help lower the costs for a business's continued operation.

Interview one also provides an example of maintaining a business even with a lack of staff. The TCM clinic itself operates with little staff: one woman occasionally helped, but the owner himself was responsible for most of the work (Interview 1, 08:25–08:50). Limited staffing shows a similar mechanism, as the owner has to substitute for work that could be done by additional staff. The TCM practitioner can lower the practical cost of the business's operation by taking on more of the clinic's operations himself. Therefore, limited staffing supports the mechanism of family and off-hour labor in demonstrating how the continuation of a culturally distinct institution could stem from economic motivations as opposed to explicit cultural preservation.

3.8 Synthesis

Clustering, adjustments to regulations, and labor all operate differently. However, the interviews also show they can reinforce each other. Business clustering can create demand for a certain good or service in a specific place; in the case of the TCM practitioner, this concentration can help make Chinatown a recognizable location for TCM medicine. Regulatory and economic adjustments then allow businesses to remain viable despite changes to the business environment. The TCM clinic and arts-and-crafts store both modify their practices to comply with American regulations, such as restrictions on Western medicine and ivory. Family and off-hour labor can provide the effort necessary to keep these businesses in operation even with limited resources. When these mechanisms help sustain businesses, their economic consequences become cultural ones as well.

The interviews do not demonstrate business owners' lack of interest in Chinese culture, nor do they establish that cultural preservation is never deliberate. Instead, these mechanisms show that it is not necessary for cultural continuity to occur only through explicit preservation. The decisions examined in the case studies were described primarily in terms of livelihood or business survival by the interviewees; yet, their decisions still keep TCM clinics, restaurants, and multigenerational businesses operating in Chinatown. Cultural preservation, therefore, can be understood as an outcome of ordinary economic decisions that keep businesses alive, rather than a deliberate choice by business owners.

4. Conclusion

This paper argues that cultural preservation can arise as a secondary consequence of ordinary economic decisions rather than through the intentional effort of individuals to maintain culture. In the presented interviews, there were three identified mechanisms through which cultural preservation could occur as a consequence: business clustering, adjustment to regulations, and family or off-hour labor. Within each

case presented, the business owner's objectives and actions were mainly related to the operation of the business or their livelihood.

Clustering can allow these culturally distinct businesses to form recognizable markets. This is seen through the case of the TCM practitioner, where they describe how Chinatown becomes associated with Chinese medicine. Economic and regulatory adjustments help sustain businesses that are culturally distinct even if their service or product changes. Family and off-hour labor provide income to help businesses to remain open, as seen in the case of the restaurant owner working a separate hotel job before returning to work at the business. These mechanisms demonstrate that decisions for economic survival don't necessarily sideline cultural preservation.

Therefore, cultural preservation can be understood to be a secondary consequence rather than only the result of a conscious decision to maintain heritage. The interviews presented do not suggest business owners lack cultural motivations. Instead, they show that explicit preservation does not have to be the purpose of business owners in order for cultural continuity to occur. Ordinary decisions made for economic survival can still maintain the environment for cultural institutions within Chinatown and ethnic enclaves beyond.

5. Appendix

The following are the Chinese transcriptions and their translations from the interview, labelled by interview and time stamp.

"Yes, back in China, I was already... a doctor" (Interview 1, 00:12–00:25)

"The regulations here in the U.S. are quite strict and differ from those back home. In China, a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can also prescribe some Western medicines such as painkillers or anti-inflammatories, but that isn't allowed here. In the U.S., we [TCM] practitioners are restricted to using only Chinese herbal medicines and [TCM] therapeutic methods," (Interview 1, 00:52–01:19)

"Anyway, 80% or 90% of them are Chinese" (Interview 1, 02:05–02:16).

"Generally, the people who come here already have some understanding of Traditional Chinese Medicine. If they didn't, they wouldn't dare use it, even if you told them to" (Interview 1, 02:16–02:40)

"Many people think that the more competitors there are in the same industry, the harder it is to do business," and "Well, actually, that's not the case. Not at all. We have a saying, how should I put it? About a 'cluster effect' where businesses of the same type gather together," (Interview 1, 04:09–04:35)

"It's like one of those wholesale markets back home, specifically a clothing wholesale market, right? Anyone looking to buy or wholesale clothes would definitely head straight to a market like that," (Interview 1, 04:35–04:48)

"That makes it easy to attract patients—or rather, consumers. It's the same for our Chinatown. If all the TCM clinics are located here, people will naturally come to this area. Whenever someone wants to see

a TCM practitioner, their first thought will be, 'Oh, Chinatown.' Wouldn't that be even better?" (Interview 1, 04:48–05:10)

"So, well, don't just think, 'Oh no, another shop means more competition' the number of customers being attracted is growing, too" (Interview 1, 05:10–05:26)

This restaurant has been around for years—decades, perhaps... The previous owners retired," and "This was the original shop, and the two of us, the new owners, bought it together" (Interview 2, 01:47–02:17)

"My husband is a chef; he's in there cooking," and "My friend's husband is in there, too" (Interview 2, 02:02–02:32)

"I also have to work a second job. I also work at a hotel," "I do housekeeping," and "After finishing work at the hotel, I come back to the restaurant at 5:30." (Interview 2, 02:32–03:02)

"There is no other way. It's just to make a living" (Interview 2, 03:02–03:18)

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