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CHINATOWN: TRADITIONAL STEWARDSHIP

The EOC in Chinatown

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Although there is a public image of Chinatown as a colorful, prosperous community that is an integral part of the tourist attraction to San Francisco, this exotic facade hides a community of 40, 000, of whom 40 per cent live in poverty in some of the worst and most expensive substandard housing in the city. There are high rates of unemployment, rising delinquency, and serious public health problems. Because of cultural patterns that stress the social responsibility of the extended family, "saving face," and a reticent, nonmilitant approach to problems, the existence of serious deprivations in Chinatown has usually not been recognized, and it was included as a target area by EOC staff only after the insistence of some of the more assertive younger spokesmen for the Chinese community.

Although over six hundred persons were sought out by EOC contact teams early in November, 1964 to determine the "needs of the poor," the involvement of low income persons was not regarded as a high priority by the area board. On May 4, 1965, two EOC staff members who later became the area director and community organization director, to form an interim board that would carry out the mandate to form a permanent board with the maximum feasible participation of the poor. The organizations included the Chinese Six Companies, Chinese American Citizen Alliance, Chinatown North Beach District Council, Greater Chinese Community Service Organization, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, Chinese Christian Union and the North Beach Place Improvement Association. Several months later it was decided to request representation from the Catholic Archdiocese, two Chinese veterans organizations, International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Italian and Filipino communities, together with some representatives from the fields of education, social work, and medicine. In addition, efforts were launched through the Area Development Program to find up to six low income persons from the Ping Yuen public housing project in Chinatown who could be elected to the board, but over a year elapsed before the first representative was seated. Imperceptibly, the interim board became the permanent board, since no elections were held nor were bylaws adopted. Criticized by some because of its overwhelmingly middle class, professional character, the board's composition and character were defended by its leadership on the grounds that there were no organizations of the Chinese poor, who have always been a voiceless class. Many of the Chinese poor, it was pointed out, were recent immigrants, understood no English, and worked long hours, frequently at night, and were thus unavailable for meetings. In addition to admit being poor would be to lose face in the community. As one board member put it, "the poor have enough troubles without having to go to endless meetings, too." For example, when the board decided to include North Beach in its target area, the Chinese members of the board seemed quite embarrassed at the prospect of the North Beach Tenants Improvement Association voting for a "recipient" to be elected to the board, believing that it was not proper since no one would want to be put in such a position. Also, despite a long history of discrimination against the Chinese in California, there were no organized groups comparable to those in the Negro community fighting for civil rights. As a result, there was no serious challenge to the elitist philosophy of representation and of the traditional stewardship whereby the more concerned and sophisticated delegates from key civic groups would administer the program until the disadvantaged overcome language and other cultural handicaps, including reluctance to be labeled as poor.

Meanwhile, the board made every effort to take full advantage of the opportunities to bring badly needed educational and health programs into Chinatown. In sharp contrast to the board in Western Addition, the Chinatown board was not at all interested in fighting the

Mayer, obtaining power, or waiting for plans to emerge out of a ~~yet-to-be-organized~~ low-income constituency. Instead, the attitude of the board was that programs should be activated without delay. At its second meeting on May 12, 1965, while the other areas were still debating resident participation and supporting CUAP, the Chinatown interim board passed a resolution endorsing the EOC's program proposal. Hence, it was no surprise that on August 30, 1965, the Chinatown Board, in contrast to the other area boards, voted full approval of all the agency-developed proposals. As the chairman, Father Wong, stated, "organization had to commence through traditional agencies which are necessary instruments by which people can be reached.

In addition to bringing into Chinatown additional English language classes, social services for the elderly, case work services, health screening, medical care, family planning, education, summer youth employment, and tutorial and study centers, an area development program was launched with 18 community aides. Low-income residents were sought out in the public housing projects, in sewing factories, and in selected census tracts to determine their needs and inform them about the antipoverty program and the availability of information and referral services. The referral services succeeded in generating hundreds of inquiries in the area office each week regarding citizenship, employment, and welfare matters.

An intensive organizational effort culminated in the formation in April, 1966 of the Ping Yuen Improvement Association, the first grassroots association to be formed in Chinatown. The association subsequently elected four representatives to the board late in 1966. Their participation and role were, however, exceedingly limited since only one, an eighteen-year-old college freshman, could speak English. Although the Ping Yuen Association, with considerable staff help, elicited and considered a variety of tenant complaints and developed an elaborate organizational structure, it accepted without protest the failure of the Public Housing Authority to grant it permission to use a meeting room after months of deliberation. Not able to effect any significant changes in housing policies, it functioned as a rather weak organization sponsoring essay contests and informational programs

The board as a whole had more cohesiveness, continuity, and stability than the boards in any of the other areas, though perhaps at the price of considerable apathy, relative lack of controversy, and a reputation for being a "rubber stamp." It viewed with considerable distaste the power struggle between central and area staff members and restrained its own area director after he became involved. Many Board members, being mainly Chinese middle-class professionals with a sprinkling of Italian and Filipino representatives, were unhappy with the over-representation of Negroes on the central staff and felt that the EOC, because of its internal conflicts, had made little impact on improving the lot of the poor.

Major conflicts in the Chinatown-North Beach Board occurred around the priority of the Area Development and language center programs, with the North Beach contingent favoring the former and the Chinese representatives favoring the latter. Characteristically, controversies around the resignation and replacement of the executive director, Larry Jack Wong, were resolved outside meetings in order to maintain the appearance of dignified consensus. Considerable favoritism and patronage were involved in the selection of staff but disruptive consequences these practices produced in the Mission or Western Addition.

Thus, the Chinatown-North Beach Area Planning Board represented a mingling of the old and the new, the traditional community interests and some of the younger, more liberal elements joined by representatives of the poor, who performed a largely symbolic role. Consisting largely of the responsible, community-minded leaders, and concerned mainly with efficient program implementation, the Chinatown board succeeded in bringing a small number of persons about the existence of poverty and the uses of current community resources. Although some new leadership emerged, it had little following and was now necessarily identified with some of the more popular programs sponsored by the Chinatown board, such as the language center. Because of the lack of consistent reporting to and from its organizational sponsors, the board tended to become another enclave with no strong roots in the community.