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“No Walmart in Chinatown”:

Chinatown Community for Equitable Development and the Campaign Against the World’s  
Largest Retailer in Los Angeles Chinatown, 2012-2013

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Asian American Studies

by

Lawrence Chi-Yi Lan

2016

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“No Walmart in Chinatown”: Chinatown Community for Equitable Development and the Campaign Against the World’s Largest Retailer in Los Angeles Chinatown, 2012-2013

by

Lawrence Chi-Yi Lan

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Keith Lujan Camacho, Chair

This thesis documents and analyzes the campaign against Walmart in Los Angeles Chinatown. During the campaign, which lasted from March 2012 to September 2013, a broad coalition of community groups and organized labor converged to oppose the opening of a Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown. Drawing on online and mainstream media accounts, city and legal documents, and qualitative interviews with Chinatown activists, this thesis (1) examines the media narratives that were constructed around the Chinatown Walmart; (2) reflects on the debates and discussions captured in the city and legal archives; and (3) traces the formation and evolution of a multiethnic, intergenerational community organization, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), during the campaign. Through their relationships, political vision, and organizing tactics, CCED members attempted to broaden their activism at the same time that they built grassroots power in Los Angeles Chinatown.

The thesis of Lawrence Chi-Yi Lan is approved.

Kyungwon Hong

Victor Bascara

Keith Lujan Camacho, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

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### **List of Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Initialisms**

AAFE	Asian American for Equality
ABA	Asian Business Association
APALA-LA	Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance – Los Angeles
APALC	Asian Pacific American Legal Center (now Asian Americans Advancing Justice – LA)
APCF	Asian Pacific Community Fund
BID	Business Improvement District
CACA	Chinese American Citizens Alliance
CAM	Chinese American Museum
CASP	Cornfield Arroyo Seco Specific Plan
CCED	Chinatown Community for Equitable Development
CD 1	(Los Angeles City) Council District 1
CHSSC	Chinese Historical Society of Southern California
CPA-SGV	Chinese Progressive Association – San Gabriel Valley
CSC	Chinatown Service Center
ICO	Interim Control Ordinance
KCCD	Korean Churches for Community Development
LA County Fed	Los Angeles County Federation of Labor
LA CPC	Los Angeles City Planning Commission
LAANE	Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy
LEAP	Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc.
NCRR	Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress
OUR Walmart	Organization United for Respect at Walmart
PLUM	Planning and Land Use Management Committee (of LA City Council)
PWC	Pilipino Workers Center
SEACA	Southeast Asian Community Alliance
SEIU - ULTCW	Service Employees International Union – United Long Term Care Workers
SIPA	Search to Involve Pilipino Americans
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers Union



### Timeline of “No Walmart in Chinatown” Campaign

February 26, 2012	Walmart confirms plans to open Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown.
March 22, 2012	Walmart receives building permits from the Los Angeles City Department of Building and Safety.
March 23, 2012	Councilmember Ed Reyes introduces motion to draft an interim control ordinance (ICO) that would temporarily prohibit permits for new formula retail uses (i.e., big-box retailers) in Los Angeles Chinatown. City Council unanimously approves the motion.
June 30, 2012	LA County Fed organizes community-labor rally and “March on Chinatown” against Walmart. Thousands of protestors show up.
July 3, 2012	APALA and UFCW file lawsuit against the city in a legal challenge, <i>Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.</i>
July 12, 2012	Los Angeles City Planning Commission votes 5-2 to disapprove ICO.
August 14, 2012	Planning and Land Use Management Committee votes 2-1 on ICO.
December 9, 2012	CCED hosts first ever Chinatown “Cash Mob” event that brings people to shop at various small businesses in Los Angeles Chinatown.
January 11, 2013	CCED members begin holding “Friday night vigils”—weekly, anti-Walmart demonstrations at the corner of Cesar Chavez Avenue and Grand Avenue in Los Angeles Chinatown.
February 8, 2013	CCED hosts Lunar New Year action at the site of Walmart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown.
February 21, 2013	CCED hosts Chinatown Candidates Forum at Alpine Recreation Center featuring contenders for the Los Angeles City Council District 1 seat—Gil Cedillo, Jose Gardea, Jesse Rosas, and William Morrison.
May 10, 2013	CCED holds solidarity vigil in support of Bangladeshi garment workers, in the wake of the April 24, 2013, Rana Plaza building collapse that killed over 1,000 workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
June 2013	CCED begins supporting residents of the Rowland Heights Mobile Estates who are organizing in response to harassment by the management.
June 30, 2013	CCED hosts its first anniversary celebration dinner at Golden Dragon Restaurant in Los Angeles Chinatown.
July 19, 2013	CCED launches “The Streets Between Us: A Snapshot of Chinatown,” a photography exhibit featuring the lives of Chinatown community members, at the Chinese American Museum. (The exhibit remains on display at CAM through September 19, 2013.)
July 31 — August 2, 2013	CCED members participate in first national gathering of Grassroots APIs Rising for Racial Justice in New Orleans, LA.
September 13, 2013	CCED, LAANE, and allies hold a morning rally at the soft opening of the

	Walmart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown.
September 19, 2013	Hundreds of people show up to demonstrate at the grand opening of the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown.
October 27, 2013	CCED hosts an open house at its new office location, Kleverdog Co-Working on Bamboo Lane, in Los Angeles Chinatown.
November 7, 2013	Walmart workers coordinate largest civil disobedience in Walmart history outside the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown.
January 17, 2016	Walmart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown closes after it makes a public announcement with two days' notice. The Chinatown store is 1 of 9 stores statewide, 154 stores nationally, and 269 stores around the world whose closures Walmart announces on January 15.

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For those who I have not named here, please fault my mind and not my heart. All the contributions of this thesis are ours; all the mistakes and shortcomings are my own.

## **Introduction**

### Los Angeles Chinatown, the “No Walmart in Chinatown” Campaign, and Chinatown Community for Equitable Development

“No Walmart in Chinatown!”

The explanatory power of this slogan holds a good deal of meaning, specifically in terms of what it portended before the 2012-2013 campaign against a proposed Walmart in Chinatown officially coalesced, what it meant during the campaign, and what it means in retrospect, given that there is no more Walmart in Chinatown. On January 17, 2016, the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market on Cesar Chavez Avenue in Los Angeles Chinatown shuttered its doors to the public without much ado. The store’s closing marked a comparatively quiet end to a much-contested, locally-rooted struggle to keep the Wal-Mart from opening. Less than two and a half years earlier, on September 13, 2013, activists, community members, and local and regional stakeholders had welcomed the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market with a direct action on the morning of its grand opening. The local campaign against the Wal-Mart’s entry into Los Angeles Chinatown had lasted over a year and had witnessed the creation of a new local community group, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), made up of activists and stakeholders—including residents and small business owners—in Los Angeles Chinatown. Though the organization’s formation coalesced around the campaign against Wal-Mart, the community activism that emerged in 2012 and 2013 represented a symbolic stand for community-driven change in Los Angeles Chinatown rather than corporate-driven development. In that sense, the grassroots community organizing that emerged in response to the Wal-Mart can be read at a broader scale as a response to the specter of corporate-driven development that Wal-Mart symbolized, and the concomitant gentrification that it potentially augured for Los Angeles Chinatown.

This thesis analyzes a case of community organizing in Los Angeles Chinatown as a response to the neoliberal state's escalation of devolution, deregulation, and privatization in recent years, using insights provided by social movement theory, urban geography, and political economy to better understand place-specific struggles in Los Angeles. Specifically, this thesis focuses on a community organization, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), as a case study for place-based grassroots organizing, looking at how CCED practices various forms of scalar mobilizations, specifically against Walmart in 2012 and 2013. Based in Los Angeles Chinatown, the multiethnic, multiracial, and multi-generational CCED is an unincorporated volunteer organization that supports low-income and immigrant communities in Los Angeles Chinatown.

The existing literature in geography primarily understands gentrification to be “nothing more and nothing less than the neighborhood expression of class inequality.”<sup>1</sup> While this class analysis is significant, race also figures prominently into gentrification—especially in a city like Los Angeles, where processes of racialization have dictated material and spatial constraints on communities of color. In addition to developing a geographical perspective that scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Laura Pulido, George Lipsitz, and Clement Lai have brought to Ethnic Studies literature, this thesis explores how grassroots organizing and mobilization in CCED have drawn an intergenerational array of people into a progressive or left politics.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, a theoretical contribution of my thesis expands upon recent scholarship that brings Marxist

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<sup>1</sup> Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Clement Lai, “The Racial Triangulation of Space: The Case of Urban Renewal in San Francisco’s Fillmore District,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 1 (2012): 151-170; George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

human geography into further conversation with Ethnic Studies.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, this thesis explores how CCED has incorporated notions of place, land use, and equitable development into their anti-gentrification organizing strategy. This project likewise extends the research that Sophia Cheng has done on Chinatown organizing, as well as adds to Angie Chung's notion of "geoethnic bridging organizations" as that which strengthen multiethnic, multiracial relationships in a rapidly changing global city.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis on Los Angeles Chinatown is significant to Asian American Studies specifically, and to Ethnic Studies in general. First, it contributes toward a broad political economic analysis of the recent development of Los Angeles Chinatown, especially in the years since Governor Jerry Brown's dissolution of the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency in 2011. Second, the spate of private developers moving into Chinatown and nearby Echo Park and Boyle Heights underscores the importance of a comparative ethnic studies approach, and a spatial analysis, to the current wave of development. Activist organizations like CCED consciously engage in scalar strategies to build more sustainable and large-scale movement. Therefore, I ground my interdisciplinary research project in Ethnic Studies, which has a historical commitment to serving the community, in order to think through the specific questions of my research in Chinatown and also the broader question of how to connect Ethnic Studies units to the various formations of community activism that are happening on the ground.

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<sup>3</sup> In thinking about Marxist human geographers, I am specifically considering the work of Neil Smith, Doreen Massey, and David Harvey. See Neil Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 427-450; Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Sophia Cheng, "Community Organizing in Los Angeles Chinatown: Historical Case Study of the Cornfields," MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2013; Angie Chung, *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

## *Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework of this thesis rests on three primary themes: (1) the mutually constitutive nature of race and space; (2) the *relational* nature of racialization processes; and (3) the complex entanglements of race, gender, political economy, and geography in Los Angeles. By exploring each of these ideas with respect to Los Angeles Chinatown, this thesis situates Los Angeles Chinatown as a local site of contemporary grassroots place-based organizing and also as a case study of how race and gender operate in a multiethnic, multiracial *spatial* context. This thesis engages critical geographical conceptualizations of space, racial formation theory, and critical race theory in order to expand on the existing scholarly conversations between geography and ethnic studies. In engaging various disciplines and expressing a clear commitment to community activism, my research project theoretically positions itself within Critical Ethnic Studies, which has as its central goal the development of “an approach to scholarship, institution building, and activism animated by the spirit of the decolonial, antiracist, and other global liberationist movements that enabled the creation of Ethnic Studies, and which continues to inform its political and intellectual projects.”<sup>5</sup>

Though I draw from the theoretical and methodological insights of various disciplines, I ground this thesis, too, in the commitment of Ethnic Studies to serving communities in material ways—that is, finding and making clear linkages between research and action/advocacy outcomes. In an article that demonstrates a strong relationship between policy advocacy and research, sociologist Lynn Fujiwara takes on the ways in which immigration discourse and social welfare policy discourse converged in the 1990s at the contested sites of Asian immigrant mothers and their children. Fujiwara argues that the welfare reform policies that emerged from

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<sup>5</sup> “About,” Critical Ethnic Studies Association, accessed April 15, 2015, <https://www.criticalethnicstudies.org/content/about>.



that historical moment in the 1990s demonized and disproportionately hurt Asian immigrant women and their children.<sup>6</sup> In the context of a neoliberal state that has retracted its policy responsibilities in a show of devolution and privatization—a phenomenon that geographers have referred to as “dumping scale”—Fujiwara invokes Stuart Hall and David Held’s notion of a “politics of closure,” analyzing the ways in which differential citizenship is used to exclude certain groups from civic participation.<sup>7</sup> To that end, I situate the development happening today in Los Angeles Chinatown in the broader ideological, discursive contexts around gentrification (or perhaps more precisely, neoliberal urban revitalization). As Fujiwara’s work does, this thesis makes clear the relationship between the discourse around neoliberal conceptions of ‘revitalization’ and the lives of low-income people of color and small business owners living and working in Chinatown. By conveying the stories of the majority low-income immigrant population living in Chinatown and by trying to understand the macro-level context in which all of this is happening, my thesis project borrows from Fujiwara’s methodological approach.

Moreover, as a member of Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), an activist organization building power with low-income immigrants and workers in Chinatown, I have a clear political stake in my research. Ultimately, I hope to find a way to turn my research into actionable lessons for community organizing that can improve the lives of people living in Chinatown. While I hope to convey the voices of my interlocutors in my project, I understand the ways in which these voices will be filtered through my own motivations, agendas, and stakes in this research given my positionality as an activist.

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn Fujiwara, “Mothers Without Citizenship: Asian Immigrants and Refugees Negotiate Poverty and Hunger after Welfare Reform,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Fujiwara, “Mothers Without Citizenship,” 282.

Taking inspiration from Fujiwara, I interviewed members of the community organization, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), to gain insight into the history of progressive organizing in Los Angeles Chinatown and to better contextualize the founding of CCED at a specific historical moment. My interviews with CCED members provide the context for understanding how Los Angeles Chinatown has changed with the presence of CCED, and how CCED has evolved with the Chinatown community. These interviewees were recruited for this project using a combination of my own contacts in the organization, CCED, and snowball sampling to find others to interview.

Another concept at the core of my thesis project is the spatiality of race and the ways in which the geographies of Los Angeles are informed by structures of access, power, and racial inequity.<sup>8</sup> In this way, my project's conceptual approach draws from the work of Laura Pulido to incorporate the ways in which race is (re)produced spatially in the uneven urban development of Los Angeles. Furthermore, this project borrows from Clement Lai's application of Claire Kim's work on racial triangulation and relational racial positioning to "analyze urban renewal as a case of spatialized racial triangulation."<sup>9</sup> This theoretical approach frames my project's discursive analysis of how Los Angeles Chinatown as an urban space has been and continues to be racialized in relation to surrounding downtown neighborhoods and even in relation to the Chinese ethnoburbs of the San Gabriel Valley.<sup>10</sup> The key research questions are as follows: How are changes in capitalism and changes in the state influencing the changes in American cities,

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<sup>8</sup> Laura Pulido, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 1 (2000): 12-40; Lai, "The Racial Triangulation of Space"; Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*.

<sup>9</sup> Lai, "The Racial Triangulation of Space," 153.

<sup>10</sup> Wei Li, *Ethnoburb: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

especially in the city of Los Angeles and Los Angeles Chinatown? What does power mean for low income, immigrant communities fighting gentrification? How can Ethnic Studies serve the people in the current historical moment? And how can we imagine the possibilities for a closer community-university relationship?

### *Research Design & Methodology*

Space is just as much about the people who reside in it or use it and the activities they do in relation to space. As Caroline Knowles notes, space is “an active archive of the social processes and social relationships composing racial orders.”<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, this thesis employs methods in part to expand on extant ethnographic research to explore the various processes of race making in and around Los Angeles Chinatown. There are two primary methodological components to this proposed thesis research project: (1) ethnographic interviews with Chinatown activists and residents and (2) an analysis of city planning documents and media accounts related to the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown during 2012 and 2013.

Between April 2016 and May 2016, I interviewed thirteen Chinatown activists, all members of CCED. They ranged from ages 18 to 70 from a variety of backgrounds, primarily Chinese/Chinese American by way of Vietnam, Cambodia, mainland China, and Taiwan. Interviews with activists in Chinatown prove significant to my research. In their overview of contemporary Asian immigration patterns to and spatial settlement patterns within the United States, Min Zhou and James Gatewood advocate for re-conceptualizing contemporary immigration not simply as a byproduct of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act. They assert that immigration additionally entails “the effects of globalization, uneven political and economic developments in developing and developed countries, the social processes of international migration, and the role

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<sup>11</sup> Caroline Knowles, *Race and Social Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 80.

of the United States in world affairs.”<sup>12</sup> While Zhou and Gatewood present a satisfactory overview of the diversity of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, their statistical narratives—while very useful—do not reflect the level of community engagement that I want out of my own research. I do not wish to diminish the statistical context of Chinatown, in which 94 percent of residents are renters, making them particularly vulnerable to predatory rent increases. However, I want to explore the subjectivities of the people living and working in Chinatown in a way that supplements these statistical narratives.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the scope of this thesis does not include substantive interviews with other Chinatown stakeholders beyond CCED members. This restricted focus is a limitation and perhaps an opportunity for future research in Los Angeles Chinatown. Thinking about other Chinatown stakeholders to interview cannot be overstated, inasmuch as interviews with only activists who are engaged in anti-gentrification work may not provide enough context to understand the complex dynamics of development in Chinatown. In her work on call center workers in India, sociologist Kiran Mirchandani focuses on the *practices* of globalization in order (1) to highlight “the active ways in which workers define and construct their work situations” and (2) to shed light on the “cracks” and inconsistencies of global capitalism and reveal “opportunities for political resistance,” in Mirchandani’s words.<sup>14</sup> I draw from Mirchandani’s deliberate eschewing of “trade agreements, state policies and corporate structures” in favor of localized experiences

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<sup>12</sup> Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood, “Transforming Asian America: Globalization and Contemporary Immigration to the United States,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 119.

<sup>13</sup> Randy Mai and Bonnie Chen, *The State of Chinatown Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, May 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Kiran Mirchandani, “Practices of Global Capital: Gaps, Cracks and Ironies in Transnational Call Centres in India,” *Global Networks* 4, no. 4 (2004): 357.

and practices of the very people working in transnational call centers.<sup>15</sup> Mirchandani's methodological insights can be applied to my own research in Los Angeles Chinatown. For example, Mirchandani makes sure to interview not only call center workers, but also managers and training agency representatives in order to provide a relatively comprehensive analysis of call center workers. Given the diverse array of stakeholders, future research could carefully the position of other Chinatown stakeholders (e.g., Chamber of Commerce members, business owners like Roy Choi and Andy Ricker, local business elite, benevolent association members) while still maintaining the residents of Chinatown as a center of gravity.

### *Chapter Overview*

Given the valuable insights that media analysis provides, I incorporate media analysis in Chapter One. To contextualize the campaign against the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown, I examine various online media outlets writing about the proposed Walmart in Los Angeles Chinatown as well as mainstream media (e.g., *Los Angeles Times*) accounts of the issue. In his work on neoliberalism in New York City and its “violent remapping of lives, bodies, and desires of queers of color,” Martin Manalansan demonstrates the powerful ways that media analysis can be brought to bear on discourses around urban space.<sup>16</sup> In his “triangulated exploration of space, race, and queerness,” Manalansan uses media analysis to expose the discursive making of Jackson Heights as “the new exotic gay mecca...not a space but a commodity to be consumed and literally eaten up for people who will spend a few hours being

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Manalansan, “Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City,” *Social Text* 23, no. 3-4 (2005), 141.

temporary gay tourists.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, I analyze mainstream media accounts of Los Angeles Chinatown—much of which focuses on foodie culture and Chinatown as a culinary/consumptive space in the wake of neoliberal revitalization—in order to argue that the media accounts of the Chinatown Walmart sometimes limited the scope of the struggle. In revealing the constraints that the media narratives sometimes imposed on the Chinatown Walmart campaign, I offer some context to discuss the community organizing against the Walmart and situate this activism in the contemporary context of gentrification and development.<sup>18</sup> I suspect that, much like Manalansan argues, neoliberal practices have shaped the lives of poor immigrants in Chinatown in distinct ways reflected in the media discourse.

In Chapter Two, I examine official Los Angeles City documents around the passage of an interim control ordinance to ban big-box retailers in Chinatown, City planning documents regarding a challenge to Walmart’s building permits, and selected documents from the legal attempts to obtain an injunction against the Chinatown Walmart to argue that these archives present a distinctly limited narrative of the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign.

Analyzing the qualitative interviews with CCED members, I explore in Chapter Three the ways that contemporary community organizing takes local form in Los Angeles Chinatown, particularly in the case of the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign. In relying on ethnographic research, I incorporate Lane Hirabayashi’s recent reflections on *mutuality* in research, through which engaged scholars reconcile their shared identities as researcher and subject and ensure that

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<sup>17</sup> Manalansan, “Race, Space, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics,” 147.

<sup>18</sup> For one such example (of many), see Jonathan Gold, “Chinatown emerging as L.A.’s hottest restaurant destination,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 2015.

their research is produced *with* communities.<sup>19</sup> As a participant-subject in CCED and its ongoing anti-gentrification work in Chinatown, concerns around mutuality and insider/outsider research are pertinent.

At a time when Los Angeles is becoming increasingly multiethnic, multiracial, and multi-class in the context of neoliberalism, Asian Americans and other people of color continue to organize to preserve historic neighborhoods and prevent the displacement of longtime residents. Post-recession development is quickly escalating the stakes in racialized and economically vulnerable communities like Los Angeles Chinatown. In this thesis, I illuminate the discursive processes that informed the media narratives during the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign, evaluate the extent to which the city and legal archives documented one dimension of the campaign, and trace the formation and evolution of CCED. Through their relationships, political vision, and organizing tactics, CCED members attempted to broaden their activism at the same time that they built grassroots power in Los Angeles Chinatown.

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<sup>19</sup> Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, “Thinking About and Experiencing Mutuality: Notes on a Son’s Formation,” in *Mutuality: Anthropology’s Changing Terms of Engagement*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 118-129.

## Chapter One

### The Communications Blast Radius of the World's Largest Retailer in Los Angeles Chinatown<sup>20</sup>

The community response is clear and we look forward to serving residents here for years and years to come.<sup>21</sup>

—Steven V. Restivo, senior director of community affairs, Walmart

How might we read the partial histories of media accounts? What kind of explanatory power do they have over the past, present, and future—and what do they reveal about a particular historical moment? Conversely, what are the explanatory limitations of these partial media histories? This chapter considers these questions in relation to the production of media narratives from February 2012, when news of Walmart moving into Chinatown became public, to September 2013, when the Chinatown Walmart store opened. From the start, mainstream and independent media outlets alike understood there would be a struggle over the Chinatown Walmart, especially given the history of Walmart's attempts to gain access to the Los Angeles City market in the past decade.<sup>22</sup> This chapter examines the narratives that gradually emerged in 2012 and 2013 around the Chinatown Walmart and the support and opposition it received from various stakeholders throughout Los Angeles. I argue that the mainstream media narratives attempted to do what Joseph Nevins has characterized as “privatizing” a conflict; more

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<sup>20</sup> For more on Walmart's size, growth, and role in the U.S. economy, see Emek Basker, “The Causes and Consequences of Wal-Mart's Growth,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 177-198.

<sup>21</sup> Steven V. Restivo, quoted in Tiffany Hsu, “Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market opens in Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-mo-walmart-neighborhood-market-chinatown-20130913-story.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Patt Morrison, “Walmart faces fight as it plans first store in downtown L.A.,” February 27, 2012, <http://www.scpr.org/programs/patt-morrison/2012/02/27/22689/wal-mart-to-build-grocery-store-in-chinatown/>. See also Sonali Kolhatkar, “Walmart Pushes for First New Store in LA in a Decade—Activists Push Back,” *Uprising Radio*, March 16, 2012, accessed April 26, 2016, <http://uprisingradio.org/home/2012/03/16/walmart-pushes-for-first-new-store-in-la-in-a-decade-activists-push-back/>. For a scholarly legal case study of Walmart's efforts to open up shop in Inglewood in the early to mid-2000s, see Scott L. Cummings, “Law in the Labor Movement's Challenge to Wal-Mart: A Case Study of the Inglewood Site Fight,” *California Law Review* 95, no. 5 (October 2007): 1927-1998.



specifically, by rhetorically containing the issue of the Walmart in Chinatown within certain legal parameters, mainstream media attempted to restrict and limit the scope of the Chinatown Walmart struggle—a tactic that some scholars have characterized as “dumping scale.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, as I will demonstrate, the various people and groups opposed to the Chinatown Walmart attempted to broaden the scope of the struggle to include Los Angeles Chinatown while making connections to anti-Walmart struggles in other places.

In this chapter, I also attempt to expose the dominant economic common sense—one grounded in neoliberal thought that supports privatization and “free-market competition”—that the media narratives intentionally or unintentionally permitted and reproduced. In perpetuating this economic mode of thought, the dominant media narratives help to bolster what sociologist Moon-Kie Jung has called “a racial logic that devalues the suffering, indeed the lives, of certain categories of people.”<sup>24</sup> In the context of this thesis, the mainstream media narratives espouse a pervasive narrative of economic common sense that comes at the expense of considering the lives and livelihoods of Chinatown residents and small businesses.

### *Media Coverage of the Chinatown Walmart*

In this section, I discuss the media coverage of the Chinatown Walmart. Special attention is paid to the ways in which dominant media outlets like the *Los Angeles Times* and smaller, independent online news outlets generated narratives in the period leading up to the opening of

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph Nevins, “Contesting the Boundaries of International Justice: State Counter-Mapping and Offshore Resource Struggles Between East Timor and Australia,” *Economic Geography* 40, no. 1 (2004): 13; for more on the idea of dumping spatial scale, see Clement Lai, “Between ‘Blight’ and a New World: Urban Renewal, Political Mobilization, and the Production of Spatial Scale,” ISSI Fellows Working Papers, Institute for the Study of Social Change (University of California, Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, 2006), 3.

<sup>24</sup> Moon-Kie Jung, *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing U.S. Racisms Past and Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 19.

the Chinatown Walmart in September 2013.<sup>25</sup> How did the media accounts of the Chinatown Walmart differ, and what do those differences reveal about the representations of Chinatown, Walmart, and other stakeholders? The news media did not simply present events as they happened; they constructed specific representations of Chinatown, Walmart, and the people who supported and opposed the entry of Walmart into Chinatown. For example, the first news of Walmart's plans to open a store in Chinatown appeared in February 24, 2012.<sup>26</sup> Within a day of this announcement, media outlets had confirmed with city government officials that the giant retailer had filed permit applications with the Los Angeles City Department of Building and Safety in late 2011.<sup>27</sup> By that time, Walmart's senior director of communications, Steven Restivo, had also formally announced their plans to open a Neighborhood Market in Chinatown with major media outlets; Restivo had likewise sought to pre-empt early opposing arguments by justifying Walmart's decision to open in Chinatown.<sup>28</sup> Restivo upheld the company's decision in a message that went out to several mainstream news outlets in Los Angeles:

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<sup>25</sup> For the source of inspiration for my analysis of media narratives and representations, see William Edward Gow, "I Went to the Protest and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt: Media Representations, Sweatshops, and the Abercrombie & Fitch Controversy" (MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> News of Walmart's plans to open up a Neighborhood Market location in Chinatown came out on February 24-25, 2012. See "Breaking News: Walmart Trying to Open First LA Grocery Store, Major Fight Looms," *Capital and Main*, February 24, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/latest-news/issues/labor-and-economy/breaking-news-walmart-trying-to-open-first-la-grocery-store-major-fight-looms/>; "Wal-Mart plans to open grocery store in L.A.'s Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2012, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/02/wal-mart-chinatown-market.html>; and Jacquelyn Ryan, "Wal-Mart to Put Grocery in Downtown L.A.," *Los Angeles Business Journal*, February 24, 2012, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.labusinessjournal.com/news/2012/feb/24/wal-mart-put-grocery-downtown-l/>.

<sup>27</sup> "Breaking News: Walmart Trying to Open First LA Grocery Store, Major Fight Looms," *Capital and Main*, February 24, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/latest-news/issues/labor-and-economy/breaking-news-walmart-trying-to-open-first-la-grocery-store-major-fight-looms/>.

<sup>28</sup> Dennis Romero, "Walmart Aiming For Chinatown in a Los Angeles Hostile to This Big-Box Retailer," *LA Weekly*, February 25, 2012, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/walmart-aiming-for-chinatown-in-a-los>

We're finding that the more people learn FACTS [sic] about the company, the more they see the value in brining [sic] a Walmart store to their community. For example, our wages and benefits are competitive with a majority of our California competitors and our stores are often magnets for growth and development. We're proud of the contributions we make in communities across the country - from creating jobs and generating tax revenue to helping customers save and contributing to local non-profits - and look forward to engaging with downtown residents to listen, answer questions and share information about our company.

Our new Walmart Neighborhood Market will serve as a new option for customers who want access to a broad assortment of affordable groceries. Plus, the opportunity to revive the vacant property is in line with our sustainability goals and will help deliver an added economic boost to the area. We expect to start work this summer.<sup>29</sup>

Restivo cited the Walmart decision to move into Chinatown as one that served customers who wanted to see “a broad assortment of affordable groceries,” without specifically explaining what constituted affordability and who the Walmart’s intended customers were. He added that by reviving the previously empty property on Cesar Chavez Avenue Walmart would boost the area economically. Restivo’s use of the allure of economic benefits like job growth, tax revenue, and contributions to non-profits around “the communities across the country” rhetorically allows Restivo to pivot to the “FACTS [sic]” of the Chinatown location. These “facts” included the need in Chinatown for affordable groceries, implying that existing Chinatown businesses did not

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[angeles-hostile-to-this-big-box-retailer-2398269](#); Walmart spokesperson Steven Restivo also emailed the identical message to other mainstream media outlets in Los Angeles, including the *LAist*. Lauren Lloyd, “Coming to Chinatown: L.A. County’s First Wal-mart Grocery,” *LAist*, February 25, 2012, accessed July 3, 2016, [http://laist.com/2012/02/25/coming\\_to\\_chinatown\\_wal-mart\\_grocery.php](http://laist.com/2012/02/25/coming_to_chinatown_wal-mart_grocery.php).

<sup>29</sup> Steven Restivo, quoted in Romero, “Walmart Aiming For Chinatown in a Los Angeles Hostile to This Big-Box Retailer,” *LA Weekly*, February 25, 2012.

fulfill that need and proposing that Walmart's occupation of the vacant property would address such an urgent economic need in the community.

Understanding the demography of Los Angeles Chinatown is helpful for understanding better the context in which Restivo's remarks emerge. Socioeconomically, Los Angeles Chinatown is an area characterized by concentrated poverty. The household median income in Chinatown is \$19,500, which falls drastically below the Los Angeles County household median income of \$56,000.<sup>30</sup> The demographic landscape of Chinatown reveals that immigrants make up a majority (91 percent) of the Chinatown population. Additionally, 94 percent of the immigrant population in Chinatown speaks a language other than English; 89 percent of the immigrant population speaks English less than "very well," indicating the significant language barrier that exists for many of the immigrants who live in Chinatown.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, housing data shows that renters make up 94% of Los Angeles Chinatown.<sup>32</sup> The limited English proficiency of a majority of the population also indicates that many may not have access to in-language information regarding their rights as workers and tenants.<sup>33</sup> Taken together, the majority renter status and low socioeconomic level of Chinatown residents reveal a majority low-income Chinatown population that is largely economically vulnerable to rent increases.

Restivo's remarks construct in Los Angeles Chinatown the image of a neighborhood in need of economic assistance and access to affordable groceries; his remarks aligned the proposed Chinatown Walmart with the aims of a Walmart initiative started in 2011 that sought to prioritize

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<sup>30</sup> Randy Mai and Bonnie Chen, *The State of Chinatown Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, May 2013), 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

healthy foods and to “address food deserts by building stores in underserved communities that are in need of fresh and affordable groceries.”<sup>34</sup> Significantly, at the time of Restivo’s comments in 2012, Los Angeles Chinatown was home to at least one full-service grocery store and many smaller grocery stores that carried groceries and produce.<sup>35</sup> To combat the narrative that Chinatown was a food desert in need of “affordable groceries,” CCED created a flyer that mapped out the various grocery stores and markets that existed in Chinatown and implicitly troubled Restivo’s claims (see Figure 1).<sup>36</sup> From the discrepancy between Restivo’s claims that Chinatown represented a food desert and the reality of existing grocery vendors in the area, one question in particular emerges: for what purpose did Restivo—as a spokesperson of Walmart—construct this narrative of Chinatown? In framing the corporation’s aggressive pursuit of urban markets as one that also fulfilled a societal problem or need (namely, the lack of affordable groceries), Restivo attempted to justify Walmart’s entry into the neighborhood.

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<sup>34</sup> “Walmart Launches Major Initiative to Make Food Healthier and Healthier Food More Affordable,” Walmart press release, Washington, DC, January 20, 2011, <http://corporate.walmart.com/news/news-archive/2011/01/20/walmart-launches-major-initiative-to-make-food-healthier-healthier-food-more-affordable>. See also Hank Cardello, “The Reasons for Walmart’s Healthy Foods Initiative,” *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/02/the-reasons-for-walmarts-healthy-foods-initiative/70904/>.

<sup>35</sup> Yosuke Kitazawa, “Will Downtown L.A. Get Its ‘Holy Grail’ of Grocery Stores?” *KCET Departures*, May 29, 2012, <https://www.kcet.org/departures-columns/will-downtown-la-get-its-holy-grail-of-grocery-stores>.

<sup>36</sup> “Grocery Shopping in Chinatown” flyer, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.laane.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Walmart-and-Grocery-Shopping-Flyers-Final.pdf>.

# Grocery Shopping In Chinatown



**Chinatown is not a Food Desert.  
Support Local Markets!**

1. **AI HOA SUPERMARKET 愛華超級市場**  
860 N. Hill Street Los Angeles, CA 90012
2. **HONG SANG LUNG CO**  
930 Chung King Road Los Angeles, CA 90012
3. **GG MARKET**  
665 N Spring St Los Angeles, CA 90012
4. **BJ MARKET 百佳超級市場**  
711 N Broadway #117 Los Angeles, CA 90012
5. **JC MARKET 發興平價市場**  
801 North Hill Street Los Angeles, CA 90012
6. **WATER PLUS MARKET**  
528 Alpine St Los Angeles, CA 90012
7. **FAMILY'S MART**  
633 N Spring St Los Angeles, CA 90012
8. **LAU'S RANCH MARKET 花菜山莊**  
705 N Spring St Los Angeles, CA 90012
9. **WON WON MINI MARKET 旺旺**  
700 N Broadway Los Angeles, CA 90012
10. **FAR EAST SUPERMARKET 遠東超級市場**  
758 New High St Los Angeles, CA 90012
11. **YUE WA MARKET**  
658 N Broadway Los Angeles, CA 90012
12. **GW MARKET 結仔成結**  
672 N Spring St Los Angeles, CA 90012
13. **NAM HOA FISH MARKET 南華海產**  
656 N Broadway Los Angeles, CA 90012
14. **METRO MART**  
711 N Main St #102 Los Angeles, CA 90012
15. **SORRENTO LIQUOR STORE**  
801 W Cesar E Chavez Ave Los Angeles, CA 90012
16. **SUNNY'S MARKET**  
1033 Alpine St Los Angeles, CA 90012

**CHINATOWN COMMUNITY  
FOR EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT**  
cceda.org // ccedchinatown@gmail.com

**Figure 1.1.** “Chinatown is not a Food Desert. Support Local Markets!” This flyer, created by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) members in September 2013, encouraged shoppers to support local markets. This inventory of grocery vendors in Chinatown also troubled the narrative that Chinatown was a food desert and that Walmart was much needed in the community to provide access to healthy, affordable groceries.

## *Media Timeline of Walmart in Chinatown*

Walmart's proposed entry into Los Angeles Chinatown made local and national headlines as the first location to open in Los Angeles proper.<sup>37</sup> Both mainstream news outlets and independent publications (primarily online sources, including planning-oriented blogs that tracked development in Los Angeles) reported on the Chinatown Walmart as groups simultaneously opposed it and as lawsuits by community groups proceeded through the courts.<sup>38</sup> The mainstream news outlets avoided editorializing wherever possible and took a "just the facts" approach that featured the requisite diversity of opinions on the issue over time. On the other hand, the smaller, independent news outlets in Los Angeles tracked the development progress and also offered opinion pieces, first-person reflections, and commentary on both sides of the Chinatown Walmart issue. Over time, the independent news outlets became a place where the various narratives of the Chinatown Walmart were debated and contested.

An overview of the key moments in the media coverage of the Chinatown Walmart helps us to situate (and perhaps also periodize) the various media accounts that emerged at different

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<sup>37</sup> While the Chinatown Walmart marked the retailer's first location in the city of Los Angeles, Walmart had already successfully managed to open its first supercenter location in Palmdale (in the north part of Los Angeles County) in 2005. See Natasha Lee and David Pierson, "L.A. County Gets Its First Wal-Mart Supercenter," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2005, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/aug/31/local/me-supercenter31>. As the article notes, the choice behind the Palmdale location was an intentional part of Walmart's strategy: "Wal-Mart's decision to place the first L.A. County store in Palmdale underscores the retail giant's strategy of opening its first supercenters in fast-growing, outlying areas where city leaders support new development and where unions are not as strong." By September 2012, the Chinatown Walmart made its way to the headlines of the *New York Times*. Ian Lovett, "A Walmart for Chinatown Stirs a Fight in Los Angeles," *New York Times*, September 7, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/08/us/a-walmart-for-chinatown-stirs-a-fight-in-los-angeles.html>.

<sup>38</sup> The main opposition to Walmart included the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), and Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), the community organization that emerged in Chinatown during this campaign. Organized labor was opposed, too, and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Union Local 770 was a part of the anti-Walmart coalitional formation. At the time, UFCW was backing OUR Walmart, an organization created to organize Walmart workers.



moments in 2012 and 2013. As noted above, the first news of plans for Walmart to open in Chinatown—on the ground level of Grand Plaza, a senior housing complex—broke on February 24, 2012, on the eve of the corporate retailer’s fiftieth birthday.<sup>39</sup> By late March, four weeks after Walmart announced its plans, Los Angeles City Councilmember Ed Reyes had proposed a temporary ordinance that would block building permits for “formula retail” stores with “standardized facades, color schemes, decor, employee uniforms and merchandise.”<sup>40</sup> Without naming Walmart, the proposed interim control ordinance appeared to target Walmart’s decision to enter Chinatown.<sup>41</sup> Reyes stated that his intent behind the proposed law was to “protect the character of Chinatown” and to safeguard small businesses.<sup>42</sup> Walmart criticized the proposed law, saying that it had “nothing to do with the needs of the district and everything to do with serving outside interests.”<sup>43</sup> Despite Reyes’ efforts to fast-track the vote for the proposed interim control ordinance to Friday, March 23, 2012, it was a moot point; Walmart secured the final

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<sup>39</sup> Bobbi Murray, “Grand Illusion: Walmart’s Birthday ‘Gift’ to Chinatown,” *Capital and Main*, March 5, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://capitalandmain.com/latest-news/issues/labor-and-economy/grand-illusion-walmarts-birthday-gift-to-chinatown/>. Murray’s piece provides a good analysis of the economic downturn, Walmart’s declining profits in the third quarter of 2011, and Walmart’s strategy to gain access to the new urban markets that would have included a downtown neighborhood like Los Angeles Chinatown. See also Stephanie Clifford, “Retailers See a Split in Behavior of Shoppers,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2011, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/16/business/walmarts-profit-slips.html>.

<sup>40</sup> David Zahniser and Shan Li, “L.A. Council Proposal Could Keep Wal-Mart Grocery Out of Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/22/local/la-me-walmart-chinatown-20120322>. At the time, Councilmember Ed Reyes represented Los Angeles City Council District 1 (which includes the neighborhood of Chinatown).

<sup>41</sup> Adrian Glick Kudler, “Proposed Ordinance Could Block the Chinatown Walmart,” *Curbed LA*, March 21, 2012, <http://la.curbed.com/2012/3/21/10386564/proposed-ordinance-could-block-the-chinatown-walmart>.

<sup>42</sup> Zahniser and Li, “L.A. Council Proposal Could Keep Wal-Mart Grocery Out of Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



building and construction permits that it needed that Thursday, March 22, 2012.<sup>44</sup> Following Walmart's securing of the final permits it needed to begin work on the Chinatown store, the city council voted 13 to 0 to move forward with the proposed interim control ordinance and to instruct City Attorney Carmen Trutanich to draft the ordinance.<sup>45</sup> One week later, on March 29, 2012, the Los Angeles chapter of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA-LA), working with the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and other groups, filed an administrative appeal to challenge the building permits and to stop Walmart from obtaining its final certificate of occupancy, citing a 2004 city ordinance that "prevented Walmart from expanding a big box retail outlet in Los Angeles."<sup>46</sup> At the same time, APALA-LA and the labor groups who signed onto the appeal sought legal injunctive relief to keep the Walmart from opening; this relief was denied by a judge in September 2012, and again in November 2012.<sup>47</sup> In

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<sup>44</sup> "L.A. Gives Wal-Mart Permits for Chinatown Store Despite Concerns," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/03/la-gives-wal-mart-permit-to-open-in-chinatown-despite-council-concerns.html>; Neal Broverman, "Chinatown Walmart Nabs Permits Before Vote to Ban Chains," *Curbed LA*, March 23, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://la.curbed.com/2012/3/23/10385802/chinatown-walmart-nabs-permits-day-before-vote-to-ban-chains>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> "Wal-Mart's Chinatown Permits Challenged by L.A. Labor Nonprofit," *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 2012, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/03/wal-marts-chinatown-permits-challenged-by-la-labor-nonprofit.html>; "Opposition Appeals for No Walmart in Chinatown," *KPCC's AirTalk*, April 2, 2012, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://www.scpr.org/programs/airtalk/2012/04/02/25845/chinatown-walmart/>; Bobbi Murray, "Chinatown Fight's Still On: Groups Appeal Walmart Permits," *LA Progressive*, March 30, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <https://www.laprogressive.com/chinatown-walmart/>.

<sup>47</sup> "Judge Refuses to Block Wal-Mart Project in Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/09/wal-mart-chinatown.html>; "Judge Again Refuses to Block Wal-Mart Construction in L.A. Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/11/judge-again-refuses-block-los-angeles-wal-mart-chinatown-construction.html>; Alice Walton, "Judge: Construction on Chinatown Walmart can continue for now," *KPCC*, November 20, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/news/2012/11/20/11182/judge-construction-chinatown-walmart-can-continue/>.

December 2012, city planning officials upheld the building permits as legitimately issued by the City's Department of Building and Safety.<sup>48</sup>

June saw the next spate of news headlines around the Chinatown Walmart. That month, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that an employee of Mercury Public Affairs, a public relations firm hired by Walmart, had attempted to spy on Walmart's opponents. Mercury Public Affairs, more specifically, was the lobbying firm that Walmart had contracted for \$60,000 to lobby L.A. City Hall between January and March of 2012 to help bring the store to Chinatown.<sup>49</sup> Stephanie Harnett, a senior associate at Mercury Public Affairs, had attended a closed news conference held by Warehouse Workers United—a labor organization that represented Walmart's warehouse workers in Los Angeles—under a fake name.<sup>50</sup> Using the moniker “Zoe Mitchell,” Harnett posed as a fictitious journalism student at the University of Southern California.<sup>51</sup> She attended another event using the borrowed identity. Harnett was later exposed as having fraudulently identified herself as a journalism student at the University of Southern California at a news conference held by Walmart opponents.<sup>52</sup> Walmart spokesperson Steven Restivo commented on the incident: “Our culture of integrity is a constant at Wal-Mart, and by not properly identifying herself, this

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<sup>48</sup> David Zahniser, “L.A. Zoning Official Upholds Permits for Wal-Mart in Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/28/local/la-me-wal-mart-chinatown-20121228>.

<sup>49</sup> “Wal-Mart Consultant Posed as Reporter at Opposition's L.A. Events,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/06/walmart-chinatown-mercury-lobbyist.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Patience Haggin, “Wal-Mart PR Rep Poses as Reporter to Infiltrate Union Meeting,” *Time*, June 15, 2012, <http://business.time.com/2012/06/15/wal-mart-pr-rep-poses-as-reporter-to-infiltrate-union-meeting/>.

<sup>51</sup> “Wal-Mart Consultant Posed as Reporter at Opposition's L.A. Events,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/06/walmart-chinatown-mercury-lobbyist.html>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

individual's behavior was contrary to our values and the way we do business." Restivo added, "We insist that all our vendors conduct themselves in a way that is transparent and honest and we will reinforce that expectation to ensure this type of activity is not repeated."<sup>53</sup>

The scandal involving Harnett was not the first involving Walmart and its questionable public relations ethics. In another 2006 incident, bloggers who were receiving compensation from Walmart had posed as ordinary consumers and had created a fake blog promoting the corporate retailer.<sup>54</sup> The blog followed a fictitious couple, Jim and Laura, as they traveled across the United States and interviewed Walmart workers who conveniently and consistently expressed their satisfaction with the corporate retailer and their working conditions.<sup>55</sup> Edelman, Walmart's public relations firm at the time, had helped organize the astroturfing project.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, the Harnett incident in 2012 occurred while Walmart was caught in a scandal involving the corporate retailer's role in paying off Mexican officials—in more than \$24 million in bribes—to secure building and construction permits in various locations throughout Mexico, as the *New York Times* first reported in April 2012.<sup>57</sup> Federal officials from the Department of Justice launched a criminal investigation over the bribery allegations.<sup>58</sup> As the

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<sup>53</sup> Steven Restivo, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Pallavi Gogoi, "Wal-Mart vs. the blogosphere," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 18, 2006, accessed August 20, 2016, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/15319926/ns/business-us\\_business/t/wal-mart-vs-blogosphere/#.V9HHID4rL-l](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/15319926/ns/business-us_business/t/wal-mart-vs-blogosphere/#.V9HHID4rL-l).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> David Barstow, "Vast Mexico Bribery Case Hushed Up by Wal-Mart After Top-Level Struggle," *New York Times*, April 21, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/business/at-wal-mart-in-mexico-a-bribe-inquiry-silenced.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/business/at-wal-mart-in-mexico-a-bribe-inquiry-silenced.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>58</sup> Sari Horwitz and Jia Lynn Yang, "Wal-Mart faces federal criminal probe tied to allegations of bribery in Mexico," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2012, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/wal->

*New York Times* reported, the city officials who issued building permits figured among the primary targets of the corporate bribes:

In the interviews [conducted by the *Times*], Mr. Cicero recounted how he had helped organize years of payoffs. He described personally dispatching two trusted outside lawyers to deliver envelopes of cash to government officials. They targeted mayors and city council members, obscure urban planners, low-level bureaucrats who issued permits — anyone with the power to thwart Wal-Mart’s growth. The bribes, he said, bought zoning approvals, reductions in environmental impact fees and the allegiance of neighborhood leaders.<sup>59</sup>

Reading the newspaper accounts across geography would bring to mind potential connections and similarities between the bribery in Mexico to secure building permits and Walmart’s last-minute securing of building permits for the Los Angeles Chinatown location. In fact, staff at the progressive online publication *Capital and Main* noted as much, writing that

Walmart is targeting Los Angeles for aggressive expansion, seeking to open some 200 stores in L.A. County. They hope one of the first will be in Chinatown, where, you may recall, last month, Walmart received building permits about 12 hours before a hearing in which the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously to move forward on an interim control ordinance that would block the issuance of those permits. The L.A. Times said the company “outwitted” the council. The Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance has appealed these permits, alleging that they were improperly issued.<sup>60</sup>

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[mart-faces-federal-criminal-probe-tied-to-allegations-of-bribery-in-mexico/2012/04/23/gIQA7t9lcT\\_story.html](http://www.capitalandmain.com/mart-faces-federal-criminal-probe-tied-to-allegations-of-bribery-in-mexico/2012/04/23/gIQA7t9lcT_story.html).

<sup>59</sup> Barstow, “Vast Mexico Bribery Case Hushed Up by Wal-Mart After Top-Level Struggle.”

On June 30, 2012, opponents of Walmart held a large rally and marched against the proposed Chinatown Walmart. The event began at the Los Angeles State Historic Park and ended at the dragon gates that mark the entrance to Chinatown at Broadway and Cesar Chavez Avenue. Because the action was designed to focus on Chinatown, this route allowed all the participants to march through the busiest commercial corridors of Chinatown where most small business owners could have witnessed the support. Thousands of people turned out. They included members of the Chinatown community, Walmart workers involved with the Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), local unions, and Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello and musician Ben Harper.<sup>61</sup>

After June, the media coverage of the Chinatown Walmart primarily focused on the legal and administrative appeals filed by a coalition of community and labor groups opposed to Walmart, as well as some other updates as Walmart proceeded with their plans to open up in Chinatown. On July 3, 2012, APALA and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Union Local 770 jointly filed a lawsuit against the City of Los Angeles, alleging that the Los Angeles City Department of Building and Safety “failed to notify the public of its decision to issue a Notice of Exemption (NOE), which allows Walmart to move forward on its Chinatown project without environmental review.”<sup>62</sup> The legal challenge—*Asian Pacific American Labor*

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<sup>60</sup> “WebHot: Walmart Bribery Scandal Explodes,” *Capital and Main*, April 24, 2012, <http://s628237100.onlinehome.us/webhot-walmart-bribery-scandal-explodes>.

<sup>61</sup> Ari Bloomekatz, “Thousands Rally Against Wal-Mart in Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/01/local/la-me-0701-walmart-protest-20120701>; Dennis Romero, “Walmart Protest in Chinatown is Turning Into Walstock Free Concert Featuring Tom Morello,” *LA Weekly*, June 28, 2012, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/walmart-protest-in-chinatown-is-turning-into-walstock-free-concert-featuring-tom-morello-2390058>.

<sup>62</sup> Aiha Nguyen, “Lawsuit Challenges City’s Action on Walmart Chinatown Store,” *Capital and Main*, July 5, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/lawsuit-challenges-citys-actions-on-walmart-chinatown-store>. The case was *Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*, case number BS138164, in the Superior Court of the State of California, County of Los Angeles.

*Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*—also requested a restraining order on construction at the Chinatown location. On September 7, 2012, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge James Chalfant refused to grant a restraining order on construction.<sup>63</sup> On November 20, 2012, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge James Chalfant again refused to grant an injunction to stop construction on the Chinatown Walmart store; Chalfant found no evidence of irreparable environmental harm from the ongoing Walmart construction.<sup>64</sup> The legal challenge only appeared in media outlets when it was first filed and again when the judge issued decisions.

In October 2012, Walmart announced its opening of a hiring center for the Chinatown store.<sup>65</sup> Opponents of Walmart at LAANE commented on the premature opening of a hiring center before Walmart had obtained the final certificate of occupancy.<sup>66</sup>

Notably, in February 2013, UCLA undergraduate student and CCED member Jenny Chhea wrote an opinion piece for the *Daily Bruin*. In it, Chhea outlined all the ways in which Walmart was a threat to Los Angeles Chinatown in both moral and practical terms:

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<sup>63</sup> Deborah Crowe, “Wal-Mart Opponents Seek to Stop Construction at Chinatown Store,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, September 5, 2012, <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2012/09/07/judge-denies-motion-to-halt-construction-on-chinatown-walmart/>; “Judge Denies Motion To Halt Construction On Chinatown Walmart,” *CBS LA*, September 7, 2012, <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2012/09/07/judge-denies-motion-to-halt-construction-on-chinatown-walmart/>.

<sup>64</sup> “Judge again refuses to block Wal-Mart construction in L.A. Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/11/judge-again-refuses-block-los-angeles-wal-mart-chinatown-construction.html>; Matthew Heller, “LA Judge Finds No Irreparable Harm From Chinatown Wal-Mart,” *Law360*, November 20, 2012, <http://www.law360.com/articles/395758/la-judge-finds-no-irreparable-harm-from-chinatown-wal-mart>.

<sup>65</sup> Shan Li, “Wal-Mart to Open Hiring Office for Chinatown Store,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 2012, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/11/business/la-fi-walmart-chinatown-hiring-20121011>.

<sup>66</sup> Kathleen Miles, “Chinatown Walmart is Hiring: LA’s Controversial Downtown Walmart Moving Forward Despite Opposition,” *Huffington Post*, October 11, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/chinatown-walmart-hiring\\_n\\_1958297.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/chinatown-walmart-hiring_n_1958297.html).

Wal-Mart should not be allowed to be built in Chinatown because of its labor practices, its destruction of small businesses, traffic and safety reasons and its gentrification effects – which would ultimately raise property values in Chinatown, displace low income families, and compromise the cultural integrity of Chinatown.<sup>67</sup>

Chhea criticized the poor treatment of Walmart workers by drawing historical connections between the proposed Walmart in Chinatown in 2012 and the state-sanctioned removal and dispossession of Old Chinatown in the 1930s to make way for the construction of Union Station.<sup>68</sup> Though the removal of Old Chinatown in the 1930s was a form of displacement facilitated by the state, the proposed Walmart in Chinatown in 2012 raised an ostensibly different specter of displacement, one that eschewed overt mass removal and took on a more indirect form. For Walmart, Chhea argued, that mode of indirect displacement marked a chain of events that began with the crowding out of small businesses from Los Angeles Chinatown and eventually manifested in higher commercial and residential rents—an increased burden on existing small business owners—as a result of increasing property values, driven by Walmart’s corporate entry into Chinatown.

Remarkably, Chhea’s piece was the only op-ed in those two years that caught the attention of Walmart spokesperson Steven Restivo, whose direct response to Chhea’s piece was

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<sup>67</sup> Jenny Chhea, “Addition of Wal-Mart to Chinatown Would Compromise the Area’s Cultural Integrity,” *Daily Bruin*, February 7, 2013, <http://dailybruin.com/2013/02/07/addition-of-wal-mart-to-chinatown-would-compromise-the-areas-cultural-integrity/>.

<sup>68</sup> For more on the removal of Old Chinatown in the 1930s, see Linda Ngov, “The Power of Publicity: The Fate of Los Angeles’ Old Chinatown, 1900-1939,” *Gum Saan Journal* 31:1 (2009): 1-18. See also Jan Lin and Eugene Moy, “The Removal and Renewal of Los Angeles Chinatown From the Exclusion Era to the Global Era,” American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, 2006.

published four days later in the *Daily Bruin*.<sup>69</sup> In it, Restivo addressed Chhea's critiques and defended the retailer's employment practices and the prospect of new jobs coming to Chinatown.<sup>70</sup> Restivo's response here was notable insofar as it would remain the only direct response and line-by-line argumentation to any of the opposing arguments against Chinatown Walmart over the course of the entire anti-Walmart campaign, from February 2012 until the store's opening in September 2013. Restivo had communicated Walmart's talking points with various media outlets: he had provided comments to media in support of the Walmart in Chinatown and the affordable groceries it would provide, and he had penned a piece in July 2012 in support of the City Planning Commission's vote to disapprove the proposed formula retail ICO.<sup>71</sup> In this case, Restivo specifically singled out Chhea's op-ed in the *Daily Bruin* to provide a direct response to the opposition. No non-UCLA media covered the exchange between Chhea and Restivo in the opinion section of the *Daily Bruin* or picked up the pieces for reprint.

In April 2013, construction was already under way at the Chinatown Walmart store. That month, the coalition of community and labor groups opposed to the Chinatown Walmart turned to the courts again to block Walmart. This time, APALA-LA, alongside the Chinatown-based nonprofit Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), filed a lawsuit on April 4, 2013, against the City of Los Angeles. According to this lawsuit, officially known as *Southeast Asian Community Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*, the nonprofit groups claimed that "the city's Community Redevelopment Agency board failed to review the Chinatown [Walmart]

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<sup>69</sup> Steven V. Restivo, "Submission: New Wal-Mart Would Benefit Chinatown Community," *Daily Bruin*, February 11, 2013, <http://dailybruin.com/2013/02/11/submission-new-wal-mart-would-benefit-chinatown-community/>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Steven V. Restivo, "Los Angeles Planning Commission Makes Smart Move for City, Downtown Residents," *Huffington Post*, July 13, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-v-restivo/la-downtown-walmart\\_b\\_1669872.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-v-restivo/la-downtown-walmart_b_1669872.html).



project before building permits were awarded for the planned supermarket...[and] that a redevelopment vote was required.”<sup>72</sup> Because there had been no such vote, the groups sought to revoke the building permits by challenging the propriety of the building permit issuance process.<sup>73</sup>

The mainstream media and other news outlets continued to report on large actions and events in the months leading up to the opening of the Chinatown Walmart store. The Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown opened its doors at a soft opening on Friday, September 13, 2013.<sup>74</sup> The soft opening was also met with an action: at 8:30am that Friday, dozens of protestors showed up carrying a large papier-mâché puppet of Walmart and three large cardboard reproductions of famous Beijing opera masks.<sup>75</sup>

The media accounts of the soft opening of Walmart noted both the potential benefits that the Chinatown store was poised to bring to the neighborhood while emphasizing the visibility of the opposition. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* article reporting on the soft opening remarked that the Chinatown Walmart would be “the first in the chain to sell tortilla strips and salsa from local nonprofit group Homeboy Industries.”<sup>76</sup> This statement draws attention to some

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<sup>72</sup> David Zahniser, “Groups Sue to Block Wal-Mart Grocery from Opening in Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2013, accessed July 4, 2016, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/04/local/la-me-ln-groups-sue-to-prevent-walmart-grocery-from-opening-in-chinatown-20130404>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Tiffany Hsu, “Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market Opens in Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-mo-walmart-neighborhood-market-chinatown-20130913-story.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. The *Los Angeles Times* article inaccurately claimed that the puppets were “designed to look like the ghosts of local small businesses”; the ghosts represented popular Chinese characters meant to protect Chinatown from Walmart (the corporate retail giant was personified in another puppet made to look relatively villainous).

<sup>76</sup> Tiffany Hsu, “Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market Opens in Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2013.

of the ways in which Walmart was able to win over supporters in the neighborhood and surrounding areas—with commitments to fund various nonprofits in the Asian American community and, in the case of Homeboy Industries, to carry their products. Additionally, the *Los Angeles Times* article carried a quick comment from Walmart spokesperson Steven Restivo:

Steve Restivo, Wal-Mart's senior director of community affairs, said shoppers were sending 'a message that they want more affordable grocery options in their neighborhood.' 'The community response is clear and we look forward to serving residents here for years and years to come,' he said.<sup>77</sup>

Restivo's comments fallaciously suggest that shoppers were speaking with their feet and demonstrating with their patronage at the store that they "want[ed] more affordable grocery options in their neighborhood." This statement functions to uphold the assumption that Chinatown was indeed a food desert in need of this Walmart to provide the access to affordable groceries that the neighborhood purportedly lacked. This portrayal of Chinatown as a food desert was one challenged by activists and opponents who pointed to many existing grocery stores and vendors in Chinatown. Additionally, Restivo's comments that the "community response [was] clear" were challenged by the opposition that greeted the Walmart at its soft opening and later.

Though the *Los Angeles Times* noticed the opposition to the Walmart on the morning of its soft opening, it overlooked the symbolism that went into planning the visuals for the action. The reporting from the *Times* characterized anti-Walmart activists and opponents as "toting papier-mache puppets designed to look like the ghosts of local small businesses."<sup>78</sup> In fact, these were not ghosts but rather well-known Beijing opera figures that symbolized cultural guardianship over Chinatown. The opera masks featured Zhongli Chun, a historic woman

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<sup>77</sup> Hsu, "Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market Opens in Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

warrior famed for cleverness; Guan Yu, a warrior general known for loyalty and righteousness; and Liu Bei, a warrior emperor associated with benevolence and humanity.<sup>79</sup> The visuals also featured a cartoonish puppet of Walmart made to look villainous (see Figure 2).



**Figure 1.2.** CCED members at the November 7, 2013, action wielding the cardboard Beijing opera masks—which represented famous heroes from Beijing opera—and a papier-mâché personification of Walmart. Masks/puppets from left to right: Guan Yu (red), Zhongli Chun (blue), Walmart puppet, Liu Bei (white).

<sup>79</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, Facebook page, November 8, 2013. The caption for the photo of CCED members with the Chinese opera masks and Walmart puppet briefly introduced each opera mask figure and the values associated with them.

These puppets would re-appear in a November 7, 2013, anti-Walmart action in Los Angeles Chinatown organized by Walmart worker members of the UFCW-supported Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart). During the November action, police officers arrested a group of 54 demonstrators outside the Chinatown Walmart location in a planned civil disobedience.<sup>80</sup> According to the organizers, the November 2013 action was the largest single act of civil disobedience in the history of Walmart.<sup>81</sup>

### *Analysis of Media Coverage*

Even in the mainstream media accounts of the opposition to the Chinatown Walmart, however, articles, stories, and news segments needed to aspire to impartiality by including arguments on both sides. For example, one local NBC news article cites Chinatown activist Sissy Trinh's arguments surrounding Walmart's reputation for unfair employment practices and pushing out local businesses: "We wouldn't be against Walmart if they didn't have such a bad track record."<sup>82</sup> In the balancing act to include the other side of the issue, the same segment provides a response to Trinh's comments, citing Jenny Schuetz, an assistant professor in urban economics from the USC Price School of Public Policy. According to Schuetz, "Walmart's economic success indicates that a superstore may be what consumers want."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Robert J. Lopez, "54 Demonstrators Arrested at Wal-Mart Protest in Chinatown," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-54-arrested-walmart-protest-chinatown-20131107-story.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Kathleen Miles, "Largest Civil Disobedience In Walmart History Leads To More Than 50 Arrests," *Huffington Post*, November 8, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/08/walmart-arrests\\_n\\_4227411.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/08/walmart-arrests_n_4227411.html).

<sup>82</sup> Phoebe Unterman and Ted Chen, "Chinatown Advocates Unhappy With Walmart Announcement," *NBC Los Angeles*, February 29, 2012, <http://www.nbclangeles.com/news/business/Chinatown-Advocates-Unhappy-with-Walmart-Announcement-140649013.html>.

Overall, the media outlets reported on the decisions and announcements from the legal and administrative appeals and closely documented the highly visible actions and demonstrations organized by Walmart opponents in Chinatown. Outside of these processes, however, the grassroots organizing and community mobilizations perhaps fell beyond the scope of the media outlets. It is in these extra-media processes that more perspectives might be revealed.

### *Los Angeles Chinatown as a Food Desert*

Based on Restivo's claims that Walmart in Chinatown would address the need for affordable, healthy groceries, Walmart's messaging around Los Angeles Chinatown seemed to position the neighborhood as a food desert—a neighborhood that lacks access to healthy food sources.<sup>84</sup> The claim that Chinatown was a food desert had emerged from Walmart representatives and business advocacy organizations in the months leading up to the City Council vote on the ICO in March 2012. As Walmart media representative Rachel Wall explained to Sukjong Hong of *Open City Magazine*, “We use the word, ‘underserved.’ There is no traditional full-service grocery store in downtown, according to the LA Chamber of Commerce.”<sup>85</sup> In this narrative, Chinatown was cast as a place to be rescued by the world's largest neoliberal corporate retailer. The “exception” of Chinatown as a food desert needing to be

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<sup>83</sup> Phoebe Unterman and Ted Chen, “Chinatown Advocates Unhappy With Walmart Announcement,” *NBC Los Angeles*, February 29, 2012, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/business/Chinatown-Advocates-Unhappy-with-Walmart-Announcement-140649013.html>.

<sup>84</sup> “Definitions,” Food Access Research Atlas, United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, updated March 11, 2015, accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/documentation.aspx#definitions>.

<sup>85</sup> Rachel Wall, Walmart media representative, quoted in Sukjong Hong, “Wal-Mart in Los Angeles Chinatown,” *Open City*, August 29, 2012, <http://opencitymag.com/the-united-states-of-walmart-vs-los-angeles-chinatown/>.



rescued in the liberal narrative of Walmart was not an exception in reality. Rather, Walmart has a track record—indeed, a normalized rule—of mobilizing food insecurity arguments to defend its decisions to move into rural and urban communities.<sup>86</sup> The food desert narrative quickly became one challenged by community activists in the neighborhood and the labor-community coalition that formed to fight the Chinatown Walmart Neighborhood Market.

By October 2012, amid a nation-wide strike (that started in Los Angeles) by Walmart workers dissatisfied with low wages and reduced hours, Walmart announced its plans to open more Neighborhood Market and Express stores.<sup>87</sup> The independent media outlets became a public site of contestation for the varying opinions around the Chinatown Walmart. In March 2012, Sue Laris—editor and publisher of the *Los Angeles Downtown News*—supported the City’s decision to grant Walmart a building permit.<sup>88</sup> As Laris explained,

Chinatown is a complete community with residential, retail, schools, library, hospital, Chamber of Commerce, even a long history of independence. It happens to reside inside the city of Los Angeles, but if Chiinatown [sic] wants a Wal-Mart there, it should have it. And Chinatown does want it, specifically where a grocery store has long been planned, on the ground floor of a housing development at 701 W. Cesar Chavez.

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<sup>86</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 50. Thank you to Clem Lai for this particular insight and potential for analysis in a conversation with the author on April 1, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Tiffany Hsu, “Wal-Mart to Ramp Up Small Stores Amid Employee Strikes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/oct/10/business/la-fi-mo-walmart-small-stores-strike-20121010>.

<sup>88</sup> Sue Laris, “Wal-Mart – Chinatown Should Get What Chinatown Wants,” *Los Angeles Downtown News*, March 23, 2012, [http://www.ladowntownnews.com/blogs/wal-mart---chinatown-should-get-what-chinatown-wants/article\\_d0a47c8a-7530-11e1-9637-001871e3ce6c.html](http://www.ladowntownnews.com/blogs/wal-mart---chinatown-should-get-what-chinatown-wants/article_d0a47c8a-7530-11e1-9637-001871e3ce6c.html).

For a frame of reference, this is not my macro position on Wal-Mart, which I generally oppose. But this is specific to Chinatown or any other community with a distinct character.

I grew up in Ferndale, California, a Victorian village on the National Register of Historic Places, which has banned all chain stores. No chain grocery store, no Starbucks, no chain pharmacy. No stoplight, for that matter, but that's another story.

Then there's Healdsburg, in Sonoma County, California, which has also banned chain stores of any description to preserve its charming small-town character as a tourist draw. Towns that prohibit chain stores are all over America.

In short, if Chinatown had wanted to keep its local character, I would have enthusiastically supported that stance. But they don't. They want to grow like a real town, not just a tourist town. City Hall should respect that, City Council should respect that.

[The Department of] Building and Safety did respect that and approved the final building permit about 15 hours before the City Council was to discuss the matter.

Laris' argument in favor of the Department of Building and Safety's decision to approve the final building permit for the Chinatown Walmart appears to be predicated on the basis of the desires of a monolithic Chinatown community. That is, Laris believes that "[t]hey want to grow like a real town, not just a tourist town."<sup>89</sup> According to Laris, the neighborhood should be left to make its own decision about Walmart, and "if Chinatown had wanted to keep its local character, [Laris] would have enthusiastically supported that stance."<sup>90</sup> Laris concludes—perhaps based on the opinions and stances put forth by the Chinatown business elite who claimed to represent the Chinatown community—that Chinatown does indeed welcome the opportunity for growth. In

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

presuming a unified Chinatown (“they”) that supported “real town” economic growth, however, Laris’ editorial raises the question of who represents and constitutes the “Chinatown” that Laris writes about. The anti-Walmart activists and residents in Chinatown sought to provide counternarratives to the prevailing story that Walmart was good for business in Chinatown; in challenging the dominant narrative of the business elite who claimed to represent the entirety of Chinatown, these activists and residents troubled the authority of the ethnic elite in Los Angeles Chinatown and highlighted the heterogeneous, complex realities of the neighborhood.

### *The ‘Clap Back’*<sup>91</sup>

The narratives and arguments constructed by the various mainstream and independent media outlets did not remain unanswered. Community activists and organizations that were strategizing against Walmart recognized the need to control the media narrative early in the campaign. Accordingly, they attempted to respond in mainstream news coverage and to mobilize independent news outlets and online publications to make their arguments more visible. Aiha Nguyen, then a researcher at the worker advocacy organization Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), published an online article through *Capital and Main*—a progressive-leaning online publication that “explores the economic and social faultlines of contemporary California”—the same day that news of the Chinatown Walmart became public.<sup>92</sup> In it, Nguyen upheld the significance of “quality of life” considerations in Chinatown, criticized Walmart’s

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<sup>91</sup> I use *clap back* here to refer collectively to the various responses to Walmart’s arguments and narrative for moving into Chinatown. For more on a contextual usage and commonly-cited source of the term “clap back,” which is generally defined as a sort of return dis, see the now-popularized Ja Rule track, “Clap Back,” from the hip hop artist’s 2003 album, *Blood in my Eye*. For the music video, see Ja Rule, “Clap Back,” YouTube video, 5:33, posted by JaRuleVEVO, June 16, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb117j9KIcM>.

<sup>92</sup> “About,” *Capital and Main*, accessed July 03, 2016, <http://capitalandmain.com/about/>.



labor practices, and underscored the role of Los Angeles city officials in responsible development:

Nearly 25 years ago, when this project was first being considered, homeowners and residents were already concerned about the project's potential impact on the quality of life of the neighborhood; the fact that a Walmart wants to occupy the retail space creates a more adverse impact. The site, developed in cooperation with the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), received over \$3 million in subsidies as well as other benefits.

Even though the CRA is no longer around, the city is still responsible for ensuring that public dollars are well spent. The city should ensure this project generates good jobs for local residents, that the operations of the business do not create hardship for local businesses and residents, and that the character of this historic neighborhood is not dramatically harmed. The city of L.A. can't afford to simply believe Walmart's unsubstantiated promises of jobs and food at the risk of the community's existing residents and businesses. It is a dishonor to Chinatown, one of our most vital and cultural neighborhoods, to allow Walmart to come in without putting safeguards in place to ensure that the needs of the community are met first.<sup>93</sup>

In Nguyen's article, the beginnings of a counter-narrative to the one that Restivo sought to construct can be seen. This counter-narrative is not only specific to the needs and composition of Chinatown, it also draws city-wide implications regarding the closure of the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), which was dissolved by Governor Jerry Brown in 2011, and attempts to hold city officials accountable for its public spending in the years that the CRA was

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<sup>93</sup> Aiha Nguyen, "Walmart in Chinatown: There Goes the Neighborhood," February 24, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/latest-news/issues/labor-and-economy/walmart-in-chinatown-there-goes-the-neighborhood/>.

around.<sup>94</sup> Specifically, Nguyen speaks to the intended mission of the CRA to improve communities with an eye toward responsible community economic development. Additionally, Nguyen speaks to the many small businesses in Chinatown that stand to be hurt by the entry of a Walmart into the neighborhood.

### *Life After Walmart: An Epilogue*

On January 15, 2016, Walmart announced that it would close 269 stores, including over 150 stores throughout the United States. The nine stores in California that were slated for closure included the Chinatown Walmart, which was scheduled to close in two days' time.<sup>95</sup> Despite Walmart's claim that it was committed to addressing food insecurity in Chinatown and other

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<sup>94</sup> For more on the dissolution of municipal redevelopment agencies throughout California, see "Redevelopment Dissolution," <http://redevelopmentdissolution.lacounty.gov/wps/portal/rdd>; "CRA's Demise Puts Downtown Properties in Limbo," Los Angeles Downtown News, January 16, 2012, [http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/cra-s-demise-puts-downtown-properties-in-limbo/article\\_48bead16-3e37-11e1-8438-0019bb2963f4.html](http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/cra-s-demise-puts-downtown-properties-in-limbo/article_48bead16-3e37-11e1-8438-0019bb2963f4.html); David Zahniser and Jessica Garrison, "L.A. assesses costs of shuttering redevelopment agency," Los Angeles Times, January 11, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/11/local/la-me-redevelop-20120111>; and Casey Blount, Wendy Ip, Ikuo Nakano, and Elaine Ng, "Redevelopment Agencies in California: History, Benefits, Excesses, and Closure," Economic Market Analysis working paper series, Working Paper No. EMAD-2014-01, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, January 2014, accessed July 3, 2016, [https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/redevelopment\\_whitepaper.pdf](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/redevelopment_whitepaper.pdf). The California Supreme Court upheld the dissolution in *California Redevelopment Association v. Matosantos*, 53 Cal. 4th 231, 267 P.3d 580, 135 Cal. Rptr. 3d 683 (2011). Following the elimination of these redevelopment agencies, the need for public spending to facilitate economic development and affordable housing construction remained, as seen by Governor Jerry Brown's decision in 2015 to sign into law Assembly Bill 2, which created redevelopment agency-like entities called Community Revitalization Investment Authorities. See "California Redevelopment Agencies, The Sequel," Los Angeles Times, September 22, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/22/opinion/la-ed-redevelopment-20130922>; and Melanie Mason and Patrick McGreevy, "Gov. Brown approves new plan to target blight in California," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/local/political/la-me-pc-brown-signs-anti-blight-measures-20150922-story.html>. See also Brandon Powell, "The Fall of California's Redevelopment Agencies and the Rise of Sustainable Communities Investment Authorities: How SB 1 Can Maximize Fairness and Economic Growth," *Western State University Law Review* 42, no. 1 (September 2014): 61-83.

<sup>95</sup> Samantha Masunaga, "Wal-Mart to close 269 stores, including 154 in the U.S. and 9 in California," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-walmart-closing-stores-20160115-story.html>.

places where it had opened stores, the store closures raised again the specter of food insecurity in rural regions and highlighted the lack of community accountability on the part of Walmart.<sup>96</sup>

All of the arguments captured in the media emerged over time in the media outlets. Over the period of the campaign, the anti-Walmart coalition refined its communications strategy to challenge certain dominant narratives that emerged around Chinatown and the controversy and to produce narratives that focused on Chinatown small business owners and residents.

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<sup>96</sup> “Walmart store closures are leaving ‘food deserts’ in small town America,” *Dateline NBC*, January 28, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/dateline/video/walmart-store-closures-are-leaving-food-deserts-in-small-town-america-610533955557>

## Chapter Two

### Examining the City and Legal Archives in the “No Walmart in Chinatown” Campaign

Borderlands historian Emma Perez encourages us to challenge the exclusion of racialized sexualities and the dominant historical narratives that have ‘chosen to ignore or negate the populations who are on the margins, outside of normative behavior.’ Perez’s self-conscious approach meshes queering with borderlands analysis by encouraging the mining and reinterpreting of the borderlands legal archive for lost and silenced heterogeneities. By casting a queer and critical borderlands perspective on the state’s records, Perez advocates reassembling alternative histories embedded in the legal archive of normalization.<sup>97</sup>

—Nayan Shah

How do we think about state-constructed archives as principal authoritative evidence? In this chapter, I argue that, much like the mainstream media narratives, the ways in which the city and courts constructed and archived the anti-Walmart campaign demonstrate further attempts at “privatizing,” or individualizing, the Chinatown Walmart conflict and “dumping spatial scale.”<sup>98</sup> That is, the city and courts produced justifications and explanations for the Chinatown Walmart that focused on smaller (sometimes more contained) spatial scales while simultaneously working to “ensure the accumulation of capital at ever larger scales,” in the words of geographer Clement Lai.<sup>99</sup> In this case, the accumulation of capital refers to the processes of accumulation being driven by Walmart in its labor practices and in its cost-cutting decisions in the supply chain. Additionally, I argue that various labor and community groups involved in the campaign against the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown—inclusive of Chinatown Community for

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<sup>97</sup> Nayan Shah, “Between Oriental Depravity and ‘Natural Degenerates’: Spatial Borderlands and the Making of Ordinary Americans,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 721; the quotation that Shah is incorporating in this epigraph comes from Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>98</sup> Joseph Nevins, “Contesting the Boundaries of International Justice: State Counter-Mapping and Offshore Resource Struggles Between East Timor and Australia,” *Economic Geography* 40, no. 1 (2004): 13; Lai, “Between ‘Blight’ and a New World,” 3.

<sup>99</sup> Lai, “Between ‘Blight’ and a New World,” 3.

Equitable Development (CCED)—grounded their strategy partially in legal and planning terms, as well as the bureaucratic decision-making of the state apparatus. In doing so, they launched a legal fight with the state that revealed on some levels the limitations of trafficking in the legal and technical language of the state. Moreover, the legal fight against Walmart shed light on the complex ways in which the state is changing and remaking itself—potentially in the service of private, corporate-driven development in the Los Angeles Chinatown area specifically and the downtown Los Angeles area more broadly.<sup>100</sup> In focusing on the ways in which the legal and state apparatuses are made visible in the campaign against Walmart, this chapter tracks the state in the documents of the Office of the City Clerk in the Los Angeles City Archives. At the same time, I also read for absences in these texts, noting specifically those actions and stories that are not held up as authoritative evidence or testimony. This chapter therefore demonstrates the limitations of relying solely on these official planning documents as texts with which to understand the campaign against Walmart in Chinatown.

Drawing inspiration from Jodi Kim’s and Nayan Shah’s re-imagining of what sources might constitute a legitimate archive and what texts might be read as official, I focus on three sets of state documents: (1) the official log of City Council materials concerning the fight to pass an interim control ordinance (ICO) that would prevent large retailers from opening up shop in Los Angeles; (2) the appeal to the Los Angeles City Department of Building and Safety challenging the city’s issuance of building permits to Walmart, an appeal by opposition groups led by Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance – Los Angeles (APALA-LA); and (3) selected

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<sup>100</sup> For more on state rebuilding and the complexity of various state institutions in activist struggles, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, “Restating the Obvious,” in *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Routledge, 2008), 141-162. Gilmore and Gilmore are writing of the state’s “anti-state state-building” project of prison expansion, though I am extending their analysis to consider the ways in which the state’s ongoing restructuring process might lend itself to permitting the private developer- and corporate-driven reconfiguration of the city in the current wave of gentrification.

legal documents from the lawsuit that the Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA) and APALA-LA filed against the City of Los Angeles in April 2013.<sup>101</sup>

This chapter analyzes these three sets of documents because they make up the primary content of the conversations and debates around Chinatown Walmart that were happening in relation to the city and the courts. By examining at the log of official documents from the Office of the City Clerk in the Los Angeles City Archives, I was able to focus on a specific part of the early campaign that focused on the passage of an interim control ordinance to ban big-box retailers in Chinatown. Similarly, the appeal to city planning officials, which challenged the building permits acquired by Walmart, and the officials' response both relate to the specific action of the Department of Building and Safety in issuing building permits to Walmart in March 2012. And finally, the legal documents include the initial lawsuit as well as two briefs (both pro-Walmart in Chinatown) filed by Walmart and the successor to the Community Redevelopment Agency, the Designated Legal Authority. While these temporal parameters made the city archives more manageable, they also help to foreground particular mainstream perspectives of Los Angeles Chinatown as a contested space along dimensions of race, gender, and class. These perspectives emerged in the official city and legal documents.

### *The Interim Control Ordinance*

The debates around the interim control ordinance were constructed in terms of pro-labor and pro-business narratives from the moment the ordinance arose as a point of discussion in the

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<sup>101</sup> Jodi Kim and Nayan Shah separately think about public records and state archives in particularly interesting ways through their works. Through these readings of state archives as texts that can be mined for rich analysis, they open up possibilities for understanding state and public records in potentially new ways. For more, see Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), and Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

chambers of the City Council. On Friday, March 23, 2012, the Los Angeles City Council adopted a motion—presented by then Councilmember Ed Reyes and seconded by then Councilmember Eric Garcetti—for an interim control ordinance (ICO) that would temporarily prohibit permits for new formula retail uses (i.e., chain stores) that occupied spaces 20,000 square feet or larger in Los Angeles Chinatown.<sup>102</sup> In his introduction of the motion to the council, Councilmember Reyes raised concerns over the history and character of Chinatown, the impact on traffic that a Walmart might have on the area, and the review needed in the wake of a reduced city planning budget and a dissolved Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA).<sup>103</sup>

This proposal marked a momentary triumph for opponents of the Chinatown Walmart. In his written motion to the City Council for the interim control ordinance, Councilmember Ed Reyes appealed for Chinatown as an exception—that is, to portray Chinatown as a unique place worthy of preservation:

Chinatown is a focal point of commerce and culture for the Chinese population of Southern California with a unique and historical character.

There is a need to protect Chinatown’s historically significant resources, including its vibrant small business sector, which supports the needs of local residents and are compatible with the neighborhood; create a supportive environment for new small business innovations; and preserve and enhance existing neighborhood-serving retail uses and future opportunities for resident employment, and business ownership.

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<sup>102</sup> Formula retail uses are typically defined by standardized exterior features (e.g., logos). For more on the specific characteristics of formula retail uses, see “Chain Stores (Formula Retail Use),” City and County of San Francisco Planning Department, <http://sf-planning.org/chain-stores-formula-retail-use>.

<sup>103</sup> Ed Reyes, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=129&clip\\_id=10248](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=129&clip_id=10248).

As such, the City needs to pursue the necessary land use regulatory controls to protect Chinatown from the establishment of new *Formula Retail Uses*, characterized as those businesses that maintain two or more of the following features: a standardized array of merchandise, a standardized façade, a standardized décor and color scheme, a uniform apparel, standardized signage, a trademark or a servicemark.<sup>104</sup>

The interim control ordinance mentioned big-box retailers generally, though its arrival on the heels of Walmart’s announcement to open up a store in Chinatown suggests that Reyes’ motion may have implicitly had in mind the Walmart Neighborhood Market that was poised to enter Los Angeles Chinatown in 2012. Indeed, the *Los Angeles Times* and various media outlets noted that this ordinance had been drafted specifically as a response to Walmart’s efforts to open up the Chinatown Neighborhood Market.<sup>105</sup> In his comments to the press, Reyes reiterated his point about Chinatown as a “unique” case that distinctly merited the passage of the ordinance:

Chinatown is deserving of such protections [in this case, a ban on big-box retailers]. Chinatown is a community of unique historical significance to the city of Los Angeles. It is our intent to continue to work with the community to preserve its historic nature, and the balance and diversity of services there, while working closely with the local businesses.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> “Motion,” Council File No. 12-0382, March 16, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk, Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

<sup>105</sup> “Big-box ban targeting Chinatown Wal-Mart fails to get enough votes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/10/big-box-ban-targeting-chinatown-wal-mart-fails-to-get-enough-votes.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Then-councilmember Ed Reyes, quoted in Alice Walton, “Chinatown’s Big-Box Ban Headed to LA City Council Committee,” *Southern California Public Radio / 89.3 KPCC*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/news/2012/07/13/7054/chinatowns-big-box-ban-headed-planning-committee/>.



In order to emphasize the significance of the motion to ban big-box retailers in Los Angeles, Reyes felt compelled to traffic in the language of exception when speaking about Los Angeles Chinatown as a community of “unique historical significance” to the city—one that is particularly “deserving of such protections.”<sup>107</sup>

Some of the other members of the City Council expressed concern with the precedent that the ICO might be setting beyond Council District 1. While acknowledging that Walmart would be allowed to proceed, Krekorian expressed support for existing businesses and the “broader issue of the protection of Chinatown,” Krekorian also shared his concern that the ICO might set a precedent of “changing the rules on businesses at the last minute.”<sup>108</sup>

As far back as the laundry ordinance at the heart of the 1886 court case, *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, there have been policies and ordinances that include oblique references to the entities and people at which these laws are aimed at regulating, managing, and excluding.<sup>109</sup> In the case of the Chinatown Walmart, the roles appear to have been reversed, with the proposed ICO’s temporary prohibitions aimed at formula retail all but directly naming Walmart. Even in the discussions within City Council chambers around the ICO in March 2012, various councilmembers alluded to the Chinatown Walmart store without naming it. Councilmember

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Krekorian, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=129&clip\\_id=10248](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=129&clip_id=10248). At the March 23, 2012, City Council meeting, General Manager Robert “Bud” Ovrom of the Department of Building Safety announced that, a day earlier, the department had already issued building permits to Walmart to move forward with construction at the Chinatown location.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Victor Bascara, “‘In the Future to Any Third Power’: ‘Most Favored Nations,’ Personhood, and an Emergent World Order in *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* [1886],” *Asian American Law Journal* 21, no. 1 (2014): 177-208.

Krekorian, for instance, noted that much of the public comment addressed “one particular retailer going into one particular location.”<sup>110</sup>

While the councilmembers appeared reluctant to name the retailer that could not be named in the course of the discussion, the public did not hesitate.<sup>111</sup> The testimony and public comment offered to the Los Angeles City Council often appeared to take a stance on either side of the Walmart controversy. The center of gravity of the debate had always been the Walmart, something that became clear in the testimony; the conversation as a whole became less about the passage of the ICO and more about the support and opposition of Walmart. The public comments at the March 23, 2012, City Council meeting conveyed a general sense of where the pro-Walmart and anti-Walmart stakeholders stood on the passage of the ICO.

On the one hand, organized labor, labor advocacy groups, and their progressive allies came out in support for the ICO motion. These supporters included the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), a labor and economic justice advocacy organization; Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), an interfaith advocacy organization; and various Chinatown small businesses and residents. James Elmendorf from LAANE spoke in favor of developing the language for the ICO, noting the presence of four full-service grocery stores and other small businesses in Chinatown that could potentially be hurt by the entry of a Walmart

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<sup>110</sup> Paul Krekorian, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=129&clip\\_id=10248](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=129&clip_id=10248).

<sup>111</sup> The councilmembers may have been reluctant to name Walmart in the discussion on the ICO because the ICO did not target any one specific development, though the motion to draft an ICO was a clear response to news of the Chinatown Walmart. At one point during the March 23, 2012, City Council meeting, Kevin Keller from the City Planning Department responded to questions from Councilmember Dennis Zine (CD 3) regarding “the proposed development” (i.e., the Chinatown Walmart site): “The motion in front of us doesn’t mention a specific development...there may be other departments that can provide a status update on the permitting there [at Walmart’s proposed site in Chinatown].” The city attorney, responding to Krekorian, also made sure to avoid talking about Walmart specifically, and added the clarification, “This is about an interim control ordinance, not any one project.” Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

Neighborhood Market. While highlighting Walmart’s reputation for poor working standards and for crowding out small businesses, Elmendorf added in his remarks that “the government’s responsibility here is to ensure that economic development occurs in a way that benefits the community.”<sup>112</sup> One Walmart worker, Girshriela Green, offered public comment regarding Walmart’s mistreatment of workers and poor working standards. Green, a department manager at the Crenshaw Walmart location, shared her experience with a serious workplace injury and the lack of support she received from Walmart afterward.<sup>113</sup> Chris Cheung, a co-owner of the family-run Wonder Bakery in Central Plaza, voiced his concern about competition with the corporate retailer and potential increases in commercial rents in a post-Walmart Chinatown, concluding with his desire for “development that will support existing businesses, not chain stores.”<sup>114</sup> Other Chinatown-based small business owners, and in some cases their family members, voiced similar concerns about Walmart’s potential to negatively affect small businesses in the area. Likewise, Chinatown community residents spoke out against Walmart and in support of the motion to draft the ICO. Christilily Chiv, a 23-year-old Chinatown resident, presented letters of support from other Chinatown youth who expressed their opposition to Walmart.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> James Elmendorf, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

<sup>113</sup> Girshriela Green, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012. Walmart at the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza location—which opened amid some controversy in 2001—would be one of the two Los Angeles Walmart stores that closed on two days’ notice in January 2016, when Walmart announced the closure of 269 locations worldwide (154 of which were in the United States). “Wal-Mart Closes 2 Los Angeles Locations As Part of Global Store Closure,” *City News Service*, January 17, 2016, <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Wal-Mart-Closes-2-Los-Angeles-Locations-As-Part-of-Global-Store-Closure--365591291.html>; Samantha Masunaga, “Wal-Mart to close 269 stores, including 154 in the U.S. and 9 in California,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-walmart-closing-stores-20160115-story.html>; Abigail Goldman, “Wal-Mart Expected to Open at Crenshaw Plaza,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/feb/11/business/fi-63208>.

<sup>114</sup> Chris Cheung, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Christilily Chiv, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

On the other hand, the opponents of the ICO motion generally included Los Angeles and Chinatown area business advocacy organizations. The opponents to the ICO motion at the March 2012 City Council meeting included the Central City Association of Los Angeles, the California Grocers Association, the Valley Industry and Commerce Association, and the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce. Their representatives focused on the precedent that the ICO, if approved, would set for business owners throughout Los Angeles. In the words of Gary Toebben of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce:

The action you are considering today is a lot bigger than Walmart, and it's a lot bigger than Chinatown. This motion is about every business in Los Angeles, it's about every property owner in Los Angeles, and it's about every consumer in every neighborhood in Los Angeles. This motion will send a chilling—a *chilling*—message to all businesses, large and small, in Los Angeles. It doesn't make any difference where you are in your process and whether you have followed all the rules, somebody can yank it out from under you, even if you followed every single rule. That is not what built the economy of our nation. We need to allow businesses who follow the rules to join our community and invest in jobs and tax base [sic].<sup>116</sup>

In framing the ICO as an ordinance that would punish businesses “who follow the rules,” Toebben and other business representatives with similar concerns alluded to Walmart’s process of securing the Chinatown location per the existing city planning processes.

The opposition also included representatives of what might be understood to be the primarily entrepreneurial “ethnic elite” of Los Angeles Chinatown—that is, a class of Chinese American business owners and community leaders who not only control resources but also hold

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<sup>116</sup> Gary Toebben, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

considerable political influence.<sup>117</sup> Larry Jung, speaking against the motion for the ICO on behalf of the Los Angeles Chinatown Corporation—which owns and operates the Central Plaza in Los Angeles Chinatown—invoked an “insider/outsider” dichotomy:

I am displeased with all the outside interference. I believe that Councilman Reyes has our best interests. I believe that Chinatown should determine their own destiny [sic]. We, the people of Chinatown, that live there, that work there, that own property there, should decide who comes into Chinatown. I object to all these outside interferences [sic]. Where were they when Chinatown needed help? Councilman Reyes was there. The BID [the Chinatown Business Improvement District], Councilman Reyes, and the community should decide who comes into Chinatown. Otherwise, we will lose Chinatown like we did eighty years ago.<sup>118</sup>

By situating the opposition to the Walmart in Chinatown collectively as “outside interference,” Jung positioned himself as an insider and a representative of the Chinatown “community” who ought to have the final say over “who comes into Chinatown.”<sup>119</sup> Using similar rhetoric, Nicki Ung, executive director of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles, expressed her support for Walmart and the potential draw it might create for major retailers in Chinatown, while reinforcing the “insider/outsider” dichotomy in her concluding remark: “Please hear the voice of the community directly affected by this, and not the outsiders. The loudest voice, as I’ve

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<sup>117</sup> In using the term “ethnic elite” here in the distinct context of Los Angeles Chinatown, I borrow from the similar way that sociologist Angie Chung conceives of an “ethnic elite” in Los Angeles Koreatown. In Chung’s analysis of Koreatown and the Korean American community in Los Angeles, “the ethnic elite primarily consists of immigrant business owners, church leaders, and Seoul-linked immigrant organizations, who control access to critical community resources and wield significant political influence over the immigrant-dominated population.” Angie Chung, *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 20.

<sup>118</sup> Larry Jung, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

told Councilmember Garcetti—the loudest voice is not the voice of the majority.”<sup>120</sup> In addition, George Yu, speaking on behalf of Far East Plaza, defended the proposed arrival of Walmart and added his own remark about the “outside” opposition: “We never wanted to make Chinatown the battleground, and all of the outside interests, and the special interests that’s [sic] making it this way is [sic] creating real difficulties for all of us.”<sup>121</sup> Notably, Kim Benjamin, who at the time was president of the Historic and Cultural Neighborhood Council (HCNC) and president of the Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID), shared both organizations’ backing of the ICO motion. Of note, too, were the pro-Walmart remarks from a group of seniors from the Grand Plaza Senior Apartments, which was part of the building that the Chinatown Walmart would occupy. The seniors, speaking on behalf of the senior association in their building, talked about the convenience of having a Walmart in the immediate vicinity.<sup>122</sup>

In the written letters sent in from the public, the conversation around the ICO appeared to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of Walmart entering Los Angeles Chinatown as well. For example, Xiayi (Shirley) Zhang wrote in an email about the benefits of Walmart. Alluding to the interim control ordinance but never directly referencing it, she disclosed:

As a resident of Victor Heights, I was ecstatic about Walmart opening up shop just down the street from me.

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<sup>120</sup> Nicki Ung, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

<sup>121</sup> George Yu, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012. George Yu, the vice president and executive director of the Chinatown Business Improvement District (BID), played a central role in bringing new restaurants and businesses to Far East Plaza in the years following Walmart’s entry in Chinatown. Betty Hallock, “George Yu hungers to bring new restaurants to Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 2013, <http://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-chinatown-george-yu-20130824-story.html>; Eddie Kim, “How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven,” *Los Angeles Downtown News*, March 28, 2016, [http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/how-an-aging-chinatown-mall-became-a-hipster-food-haven/article\\_b407e372-f2c3-11e5-a794-e70f2ee0afe3.html](http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/how-an-aging-chinatown-mall-became-a-hipster-food-haven/article_b407e372-f2c3-11e5-a794-e70f2ee0afe3.html).

<sup>122</sup> Grand Plaza Senior Apartments association, Los Angeles City Council meeting, March 23, 2012.

I work a part-time job and go to school. When I come home at 7 or 8 in the evening, there are NO options for me to do my grocery shopping in my neighborhood. I do try to support local small business and have done my shopping there when I can, but the merchants in the Chinatown/Victor Heights area simply do not fulfill my needs on my schedule.

There is a concern that big box stores may negatively impact business for smaller grocers, however, any stroll through Chinatown's streets and you will find that its [sic] most of its merchant's [sic] offerings will never find their way into a mainstream American store. Until the day that Walmart starts selling live chickens, Ralph's starts carrying durian, or Vons offers galanga, there will not be direct competition between large retailers and small business. Major grocers and our local merchants have always catered to different audiences.

I believe that additional amenities to the community improve quality of life for its residents. Having the option of going to a large grocery store with mainstream products or going to an ethnic market with specialized products should be a choice that we as consumers have the option to make. I hope that by having Walmart or any large, mainstream retailer establish a presence in the community, Chinatown and its neighboring communities will become more desirable and more convenient neighborhoods to live in.<sup>123</sup>

In this passage, Zhang first establishes her Chinatown residency for credibility, and then introduces her organized talking points. She constructs a dichotomy between Walmart and the local Chinatown merchants, explaining that the contrast in the products carried by smaller stores

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<sup>123</sup> Xiayi Zhang, "Concerned Resident Regarding Proposed ICO in Chinatown," email dated October 23, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

(e.g., live chickens, durian, or galangal) and those provided by Walmart is large enough that they will not be in direct competition with each other. Zhang concludes the letter with the hope that Walmart—“or any large mainstream retailer”—would increase the desirability (and convenience) of Chinatown and its surrounding neighborhoods.

Similarly, the support for the ICO was reduced to Walmart’s economic blast radius. In a letter written by the owners of a small business in Chinatown, Jenny Mai Fast Food described the circumstances of the small business they operated:

I am a business owner, and I have run a restaurant / fast food since 2011 in Chinatown. My parents have had business here since 2004 in Chinatown. This store supports my parents and my siblings. This store enables my family to pay for rent, college, and to sustain a living. If Walmart drives away my store’s business and my store has to close down eventually, I will have to retire our business and my family will be without stability. It will be hard for my family to sustain a living. Please consider Chinatown and its people.<sup>124</sup>

Though the testimony offered by the small business owner was offered in the context of the ICO, the owner’s request for the Council to “consider Chinatown and its people” attempted to broaden the scope of the ICO debate. In speaking directly to their family’s livelihood, the writer situated the ICO against the larger context of the people living and working in Los Angeles Chinatown. Furthermore, in presenting Chinatown as a neighborhood—with real people living and working in it—the small business owner contributed to a counter-narrative that focused on the stories of the people who would bear the brunt of Walmart’s entry into Chinatown and the concomitant changes that symbolic arrival might augur. Finally, the letter from the owner of Jenny Mai Fast

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<sup>124</sup> Letter submitted by Terry Mai of Jenny Mai Fast Food, dated August 02, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.



Food also marked a shift away from the rhetoric of desirability and a grounding of their story in one based on economic necessity and perhaps vulnerability.

### *Nonprofit Industrial Complex & Walmart Funding*

Notably, various Asian American nonprofit organizations in the greater Los Angeles area submitted written letters and testimony in opposition to the ICO over the next several months. Letters of opposition to the ICO came from nonprofit organizations that had received Walmart corporate contributions, including the Asian Business Association (ABA); Asian Pacific Community Fund (APCF); California Asian (Cal Asian) Chamber of Commerce; Korean Churches for Community Development (KCCD); Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc. (LEAP); and Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA).<sup>125</sup> Importantly, longtime business leaders in the Chinatown community—some of whom came from families that had helped establish New Chinatown in the 1930s—submitted letters of opposition, too. Letters of opposition were submitted by Wilson Gee and Al Soo-Hoo, for instance, both of whom came from families that had helped establish the Los Angeles Chinatown Corporation that had created the Central Plaza in New Chinatown in the 1930s. At the city level, pro-business groups like the Los Angeles County Business Federation also opposed the ICO.<sup>126</sup>

In one letter, Michael Chee and Debra Fong of the Asian Pacific Community Fund (APCF) wrote that the ICO might “potentially create negative consequences for the future

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<sup>125</sup> Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

<sup>126</sup> “Anti-Business ICO Fails at LA City Council—But Your Voice Needed for Final Steps,” *BizFed Action Alert*, Los Angeles County Business Federation, October 24, 2012, <http://www.bizfed.net/action-alerts/anti-business-ico-fails-la-city-council-your-voice-needed-final-steps>.

positive development of Chinatown that cannot be foreseen.”<sup>127</sup> Arguing that large retailers provide underserved communities with access to goods, Chee and Fong expressed their support against the “special interests backing this ICO [who] are not concerned with long term issues or the vital funding, jobs and economic revitalization they can create.”<sup>128</sup> Chee and Fong went on to discuss Walmart’s corporate contributions to their organization:

APCF commends our corporate partners for their contributions to our agency’s efforts. Walmart, for example, recently provided a significant grant of \$75,000 to help fund our API Benefits Bank program which will help 67 families in the Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and Korean communities gain access to government and other benefits and subsidies. Verizon has provided our organization with \$25,000 in scholarships for API students who are pursuing higher education in the science, technology, engineering and math related fields. Without major contributions and partnerships like these, our organization cannot have the vital impact we need to raise those less fortunate to a higher standard of living.<sup>129</sup>

The letter from APCF highlighted the various dimensions of controversy that the Chinatown Walmart brought up in Los Angeles, including tensions that emerged in the Asian American nonprofit community in Los Angeles. Pro-business organizations as well as organizations that had accepted Walmart corporate contributions vocally supported Walmart and opposed the ICO. In one letter, the California Asian (Cal Asian) Chamber of Commerce stated that

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<sup>127</sup> Letter submitted on behalf of Asian Pacific Community Fund to Los Angeles City Council by Michael Chee (“Chairman of the Board”) and Debra Fong (“Executive Director”), dated October 22, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

the proposed ICO would create unnecessary layers and processes to ultimately ban investment in the Chinatown area of Los Angeles...there are immense opportunities for economic growth in Los Angeles; an ICO would only stifle investments and economic opportunity for businesses willing to invest in Chinatown. Furthermore, this ICO sets a poor precedent for economic development for other communities in Los Angeles.<sup>130</sup>

The pro-business stance that the Cal Asian Chamber of Commerce took resounded with the pro-business community throughout Los Angeles, with city-wide organizations like the Los Angeles Business Federation, which also came out in opposition to the proposed ICO. In yet another defense of Walmart's corporate contributions to local nonprofit efforts, Wilson Gee made it clear that they supported the programmatic funding support from corporations like Walmart:

[W]e need more corporate partners to help wit the necessary funding of our local programs, contribute to tax revenue and offer job opportunities to our residents. We need these partnerships so we can grow Chinatown into a vibrant economic community.

The proposed Interim Control Ordinance would negatively impact the economic development of Chinatown, and sets a bad precedent to others who want to do business in our community. For many years, Chinatown has wanted to revitalize our economy with more mainstream businesses operating here. With the recent economic downturn, that progress has stalled, but we see an optimistic future as the economy bounces back. Please

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<sup>130</sup> Letter submitted on behalf of California Asian (Cal Asian) Chamber of Commerce by Pat Fong Kushida ("President/CEO"), dated October 22, 2012, dated October 22, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

do not add unnecessary processes and procedures to an already tough Los Angeles business environment.<sup>131</sup>

These written comments from the public sometimes featured sweeping, emphatic statements that suggested that these letters were less important for what they said and more important for who was saying it. In one instance, Dennis Huang, executive director of the Asian Business Association (ABA), wrote that the “vast majority of Chinatown residents and businesses do not support this ordinance and urge that it not be adopted.”<sup>132</sup> The support of the “vast majority” of residents and businesses for the ICO was questionable for a number of reasons, including issues of language access to a majority community with limited English proficiency and the fact that the majority of responses from small businesses in Chinatown—reflected in the official log of documents—were in favor of the ICO.

The written communications and testimony from the public provided in support of and opposition to the ICO adhered to narrow talking points—the impact on small businesses, the economic revitalization of Chinatown, the effects of a Walmart Neighborhood Market in and around Chinatown, and the potential economic impacts and precedent of the proposed ban on large retailers. Circumscribed by the vocabulary of the state and appeals to a market-oriented economic “common sense,” these arguments debated the ICO and the Chinatown Walmart on strictly economic terms. In turning out community residents, small business owners, and other supporters of the ICO to various hearings and City Council meetings, activists were able to engage the city processes and Walmart on the terms of the state. The strategy to turn out

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<sup>131</sup> Letter submitted to City Council by Wilson Gee and family, dated October 22, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

<sup>132</sup> Letter submitted to City Council by Dennis Huang, dated October 22, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

hundreds of supporters and to submit more letters of support for the ICO engaged the state apparatus in a certain kind of way that was necessarily circumscribed by state practices but was still important to increasing visibility and to getting the testimony recorded as “official” evidence in the city archives. In doing so, activists adopted a communication style and messaging strategy that made themselves legible to the state—in some cases, literally, as Chinese terms needed to be translated.<sup>133</sup>

The divisions in the Asian American nonprofit landscape that reveal themselves in the official city archives, particularly around the interim control ordinance hearings, came up in conversations with anti-Walmart groups and individuals who expressed disappointment in Walmart’s effectiveness in deploying divide-and-conquer tactics. As one CCED member discussed in an interview:

What Walmart did was that they spent a lot of money giving to different nonprofits and other community groups, which helped to either neutralize their voice or actually [encourage them to] give support. So at the interim control ordinance hearing, there were a lot of groups which historically wouldn’t say anything, and they actually came and supported Walmart. So that shows you how money can help change things.<sup>134</sup>

Walmart’s corporate contributions to various community-based nonprofit organizations served not only to censure their criticism but also to encourage their vocal support of the Chinatown Walmart location at various hearings for the interim control ordinance and in everyday

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<sup>133</sup> The issue of language access also highlights the uneven nature of the debates over the ICO, and who could even participate in them in the first place. In the log of official documents regarding the ICO in Chinatown, seven letters written in Chinese—all opposed to the ICO—appear among the public comments. The burden of translation—at least for the official record—fell on volunteers in CCED who were also going from small business to small business, talking to owners about the ICO and Walmart. Some of these letters were translated into English before being submitted into the official record, though some do not appear to have English translations.

<sup>134</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with the author, May 11, 2016, Los Angeles, CA.

conversations. The funding strategy of Walmart in this case aligns with Daniel’s observation about “how money can help change things.”<sup>135</sup> Moreover, the tactics here summon the specter of the nonprofit industrial complex in Los Angeles.<sup>136</sup>

The dynamics of the nonprofit industrial complex play a prominent role in thinking through the campaign against Walmart in Los Angeles Chinatown, as it provides a lens through which to consider the roles of Walmart, the various community and labor organizations, and the state in contributing to the nonprofit industrial complex. In the essay, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” Dylan Rodriguez explores the close relationship between the emergence of the US prison industrial complex (PIC) and the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), which he defines as “the industrialized incorporation of pro-state liberal and progressive campaigns and movements into a spectrum of government-proctored non-profit organizations.”<sup>137</sup> Rodriguez argues that the emergence of a racialized carceral regime and the consolidation of an NPIC have shaped US-based resistance struggles within the constraints of manufactured, industrialized fear.<sup>138</sup> More specifically, Rodriguez argues that the left/progressive NPIC’s investment in the “essential political logic of civil society” ultimately maintains, upholds, and even reproduces or amplifies—rather than resists and opposes—processes of state-

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<sup>135</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with the author, May 11, 2016, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>136</sup> For more on the nonprofit industrial complex, see Dylan Rodriguez, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), 21-40; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “In the Shadow of the Shadow State,” in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), 41-52; and Eric Tang, “Non-Profits and the Autonomous Grassroots,” in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), 215-225.

<sup>137</sup> Rodriguez, “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” 21.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

sanctioned violence and co-optation of dissent.<sup>139</sup> From the emergence of the state repression apparatus of COINTELPRO to the rise of foundations like the Mellon, Soros, and Ford Foundations, Rodriguez tracks the ways in which radical dissent were marginalized and incorporated into larger structures of domination.<sup>140</sup> In the NPIC, Rodriguez writes, “the US state has found...a far less spectacular, generally demilitarized, and still highly effective apparatus of political discipline and repression that (to this point) has not provoked a significant critical mass of opposition or political outrage.”<sup>141</sup> Rodriguez invokes Jennifer Wolch’s notion of a “shadow state” to characterize the ways in which the state continues to regulate non-profit and volunteer organizations from afar.<sup>142</sup>

In the case of the Walmart in Chinatown, the role of the state is less clearly that of the regulator of the nonprofit industrial complex. For example, the state’s role in issuing building permits might be indirectly interpreted to support private corporate actors like Walmart. What is clear are the more prominent roles that private actors like Walmart are taking in reinforcing the NPIC. These private actors are managing—or perhaps more insidiously, manipulating—the community organizations seeking funding streams within the NPIC.

#### “Let Wal-Mart Have Chinatown”

On August 12, 2012, the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial in support of Walmart and in opposition of the ICO. In the piece, titled “Let Wal-Mart Have Chinatown,” the *Los*

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 30. Jennifer R. Wolch, *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition* (New York: The Foundation Center, 1990), 15.

*Angeles Times* criticized the proposed ICO as “the latest iteration of a phenomenon that is crippling to the rational development of Los Angeles and its ability to create and sustain jobs.”<sup>143</sup>

Furthermore, the *Times* criticized the City Council for its interventions:

Rather than produce plans and then live by them, the City Council instead regularly intervenes to write special rules depending on the political circumstances. In the case of this project, the space at the intersection of Cesar E. Chavez and Grand avenues has been zoned for a grocery store for more than 20 years. It sits vacant today, and Wal-Mart proposes merely to comply with what the local zoning rules call for — a grocery store, one of about 33,000 square feet.<sup>144</sup>

In invoking the notion of “the rational development of Los Angeles” and job creation, the editorial makes an appeal to a “commonsense” economic logic that solely considers the narrow scope of the debate around city zoning and whether Walmart complied with the rules that it needed to open up in Chinatown. In other words, the perceived rationality of a trajectory of development not only invoked a supposed linear progressive temporality to the city, it also categorized a certain mode of economic revitalization via corporate-driven business development as the commonsense path to addressing a long historical past of disinvestment in Chinatown. In the context of this argument, a “non-commonsense” approach would be one characterized by government intervention—one in which “the City Council...intervenes to write special rules depending on the political circumstances,” as the editorial reads. Furthermore, the *Los Angeles Times* extended its logic to govern what was “reasonable” to debate in this context:

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<sup>143</sup> “Let Wal-Mart Have Chinatown,” Editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/12/opinion/la-ed-walmart-chinatown-los-angeles-20120812>.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.



The real issue behind this debate is organized labor's antipathy toward the giant retailer. That too is understandable, as Wal-Mart has faced global criticism of its workplace practices and the demands it makes on its suppliers. But its treatment of Third World suppliers is tangential to the Chinatown proposal. As for the low wages and mediocre benefits it reportedly offers, those are issues to be taken up in another forum and in a manner that would affect all companies rather than just Wal-Mart.<sup>145</sup>

In framing the scope of the debate to be solely about Chinatown, and in situating other considerations like exploitation in Walmart's global supply chain as "tangential," the editorial in the *Times* narrowed the discussion to Los Angeles. By setting the terms of "the real issues," the fight over the Chinatown Walmart was contained domestically by the media in a manner similar to the messaging of the various people and groups that opposed the ICO. Mainstream media did not take seriously Walmart's labor violations in the Global South. The labor and community groups mobilizing against the Chinatown Walmart would make these global connections.

### *The Council Vote on the ICO*

The formula retail ICO never saw the approval of the Los Angeles City Council. On October 23, 2012, the ordinance failed in a 10-4 vote in the council. Because the ICO was introduced as an emergency motion, it needed 12 votes to pass in the council.<sup>146</sup> By this time, Walmart had already received building permits from the Department of Building and Safety,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> "LA City Council to Vote Again On Chinatown Large-Retailer Ban," *ABC7*, October 23, 2012, <http://abc7.com/archive/8856940/>.

begun construction, and started the hiring process.<sup>147</sup> In fact, the Department of Building Safety had already approved building permits in March 2012 on the eve of the City Council’s discussion and vote on drafting the ICO. On November 7, 2012, the City Council referred the item back to the Planning and Land Use Management committee; the ICO would be sent back to the committee before the council file expired due to inaction in February 2015.<sup>148</sup>

Even before the October vote, the ICO had to make it through the Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) Committee. On July 12, 2012, the City Planning Commission voted 5-2 to disapprove the ICO.<sup>149</sup> On August 14, 2012, the PLUM committee considered the draft ICO that would ban formula retail in Chinatown and listened to public comment from community members.<sup>150</sup> On August 21, 2012, the PLUM committee—led by Councilmember Ed Reyes (CD 1)—voted 2-1 to approve the ICO. The two “yes” votes came from Councilmembers Reyes (CD 1) and José Huizar (CD 14); the “no” vote came from Councilmember Mitchell Englander (CD 12).<sup>151</sup> This 2-1 vote approved the ICO and allowed it to move onto the City Council for a vote by the entire Council.

In the months leading up to the vote on October 23, 2012, the anti-Walmart campaign coalition identified several elected officials who were on the fence about the ICO: City

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<sup>147</sup> “Big-box ban targeting Chinatown Wal-Mart fails to get enough votes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/10/big-box-ban-targeting-chinatown-wal-mart-fails-to-get-enough-votes.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Case No. DIR 2012-1353(BSA), page 18.

<sup>149</sup> For a video of some of the public comments offered at the hearing on July 12, 2012, see Jenny Lin, “The Stories told at City Hall,” Vimeo video, 05:20, posted by Jenny Lin, August 14, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/47537667>.

<sup>150</sup> “ICO hearing at City Hall,” Storify, compiled by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, August 15, 2012, <https://storify.com/ccedLA/ico-hearing-at-city-hall-8-15>.

<sup>151</sup> “Planning and Land Use Management Committee approves formula retail ban in Chinatown,” Storify, compiled by Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, <https://storify.com/ccedLA/planning-and-land-use-management-committee-approve>.

Councilmembers Jan Perry (CD 9), Joe Buscaino (CD 15), and Paul Krekorian (CD 2).<sup>152</sup> The visibility of the anti-Walmart campaign, combined with the presence of organized labor in Los Angeles, compelled mayoral candidates to think twice about accepting campaign contributions from Walmart. In June 2012, Councilmember Eric Garcetti, City Controller Wendy Greuel, and Councilmember Jan Perry—all top contenders in the Los Angeles mayoral race—pledged they would not accept campaign contributions from Walmart.<sup>153</sup> In July, Garcetti came under pressure for accepting a \$100 campaign contribution from Javier Angulo, a senior-level Walmart executive, though his campaign staff was quick to make the distinction between corporate contributions from Walmart and individual contributions from its employees.<sup>154</sup>

In the 10-4 vote on October 23, 2012, the “yes” votes in favor of passing the ICO were submitted by Councilmembers Richard Alarcon (CD 7); José Huizar (CD 14); Eric Garcetti (CD 13); Paul Koretz (CD 5); Paul Krekorian (CD 2); Tom LaBonge (CD 4); Ed Reyes (CD 1); Bill Rosendahl (CD 11); Herb Wesson (CD 10); and Dennis Zine (CD 3). The “no” votes were submitted by Councilmembers Joe Buscaino (CD 15); Mitchell Englander (CD 12); Bernard C. Parks (CD 8); and Jan Perry (CD 9). Councilmember Tony Cardenas (CD 6) was absent.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> “Tweet-In for Chinatown @ Ciclaviva Against Walmart,” Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, Facebook event page, accessed August 26, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/events/485608798129709/>. On this Facebook event page, LAANE wrote of the “need to tweet and Facebook message Councilmembers who are on the fence about voting for the ICO moratorium on large chain retail in Chinatown,” and provided sample messages to send to the social media accounts of Perry, Buscaino, Reyes, and Krekorian. Ed Reyes was likely included in this tweet-in less so because he was on the fence on the ICO and more because the Chinatown Walmart was in his council district (CD 1).

<sup>153</sup> “Eric Garcetti, Wendy Greuel each raise \$2.2 million, Jan Perry brings in \$1.2 million in L.A. mayor’s race,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 31, 2012, <http://www.dailynews.com/article/ZZ/20120731/NEWS/120739915>.

<sup>154</sup> David Zahniser, “Eric Garcetti says donations don’t break anti-Wal-Mart pledge,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/27/local/la-me-garcetti-walmart-20120727>.

<sup>155</sup> “Council Vote Information,” Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

Prior to the vote, Councilmember Alarcon (CD 7) voiced his support for the ICO and the opportunity it would provide for more information to be gathered about the potential impact of large retailers in Los Angeles Chinatown:

You cannot tell me that you can place a Walmart in the middle of Chinatown, or at the gateway, as I said, and not impact the small businesses... We can prove that with a study. I think that we moved too quickly on the approvals of the Walmart originally and the entitlements—‘we’ meaning the city’s process, not us as a group. And I think sometimes, it takes leadership to take a time out and study things beyond what the process has been able to evaluate. And that’s what we’re doing here. An ICO will give us the opportunity to assess whether or not it’s going to have a negative impact on local businesses in the community.<sup>156</sup>

Alarcon’s use of “we” to collectively refer to the city’s actors who granted the original permit approvals to Walmart—actors that were ostensibly distinct from the City Council deciding on the ICO—highlights the various actors that constitute the state. In the words of political economist Béatrice Hibou, the state is a complex, changing formation made up of various actors:

Above all, the state is not univocal: the relations between state power, which is in a constant process of formation, and actors, social groups, and local communities are highly diverse and complex. Not only is it always possible for private actors to invent ways to circumvent obstacles; in addition, the use of intermediaries and collusion between public and private interests are not synonymous with harmonious and symbiotic relations: they do not prevent tense and conflictual relations among the parties. Indeed, I

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<sup>156</sup> Richard Alarcon, Los Angeles City Council meeting, October 23, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=17&clip\\_id=10983](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=17&clip_id=10983).

have stressed how such conflictual relations and uncertainties are at the very heart of these arrangements.<sup>157</sup>

Though Councilmember Alarcon in his comments expressed disagreement with the actions of the Department of Building and Safety in approving and issuing building permits to Walmart, his identification with city officials as a collective “we” served to highlight the diversity and complexity of the various people and groups that made up the “state” in the context of the decision-making processes behind the Chinatown Walmart. In addition, Alarcon’s comments, and the remarks of other members of the council who were generally in favor of the ICO, reflected voices that were not necessarily in “harmonious” agreement with Walmart’s entry into Chinatown but that demonstrated the “conflictual relations” that necessarily emerge here.<sup>158</sup>

Councilmember Garcetti also spoke in favor of passing the ICO, clarifying in his remarks that the debates around the ICO had set up a false dichotomy in pitting supporters of the ICO as “anti-business” and opponents of the ICO as “pro-business.”<sup>159</sup> Garcetti grounded his support for the ICO in support for Councilmember Reyes and in trust of his ability to know the community’s issues best in his council district. He also clarified that the broader conversation about investing in infrastructure and economic growth is one that needed to happen separately from this debate around Walmart: “One store coming into one neighborhood that moves jobs from one place to

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<sup>157</sup> Béatrice Hibou, “From Privatizing the Economy to Privatizing the State: An Analysis of the Continual Formation of the State,” in *Privatizing the State*, ed. Béatrice Hibou (New York: Columbia University Press), 1-46.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Eric Garcetti, Los Angeles City Council meeting, October 23, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=17&clip\\_id=10983](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=17&clip_id=10983).

the next—and that most likely are going to be lower wage jobs with fewer benefits—is not a conversation about economic growth in this city.”<sup>160</sup>

The opposing votes came from Councilmembers Perry, Englander, Parks, and Buscaino. Councilmembers Perry and Buscaino did not make any remarks at the October 23, 2012 meeting. Councilmember Englander cited “serious financial risk to the city as a whole” as a potential area of concern for the ICO. Englander also used the City Planning Commission’s findings to voice several questions and concerns about what the ICO might mean for business owners in Los Angeles generally and also for the City if it decided to revoke Walmart’s building permits at some future date.<sup>161</sup> Councilmember Parks—one of the four councilmembers who voted against the measure—attributed the lack of grocery stores in his district (which included western portions of South Central Los Angeles) to efforts targeting big-box, non-union retailers like Walmart.<sup>162</sup> As Parks said in his remarks during the meeting, “We are being held hostage over these philosophical views, and particularly, this age-old discussion about high benefits, high wages,” speaking specifically of the pro-labor views and sentiments—held by the anti-Walmart forces—against large non-union retailers.<sup>163</sup> Parks, a former Los Angeles Police Department chief who had fought the police union, had established himself as a strong voice against the pull

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Mitchell Englander, Los Angeles City Council meeting, October 23, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=17&clip\\_id=10983](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=17&clip_id=10983).

<sup>162</sup> “Big-box ban targeting Chinatown Wal-Mart fails to get enough votes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/10/big-box-ban-targeting-chinatown-wal-mart-fails-to-get-enough-votes.html>.

<sup>163</sup> “Big-box ban targeting Chinatown Wal-Mart fails to get enough votes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2012; Alice Walton, “Ordinance blocking big retailers in Chinatown fails,” 89.3 KPCC, October 23, 2012, <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/news/2012/10/23/10657/ordinance-blocking-big-retailers-chinatown-fail/>.

of organized labor in the city since his election to the City Council in 2003.<sup>164</sup> In 2004, when Walmart was at the center of the debates around new city ordinances designed to prohibit Walmart Supercenters from opening up within Los Angeles' city limits, Parks emerged as a vocal opponent to the bans and encouraged the entry of Walmart and other willing businesses into his district.<sup>165</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* noted that the 2004 city ordinance—which aimed to “prohibit stores with more than 100,000 square feet that devote more than 10% of their inventory to nontaxable food and drugs in areas of the city designated as economic assistance zones, which cover about 60% of the city”—was designed to effectively prohibit Walmart's Supercenters from coming into Los Angeles.<sup>166</sup> The 2004 ordinance to proscribe these superstores was drafted by Councilmembers Eric Garcetti and Ed Reyes, who later backed the motion to introduce the formula retail ICO in March 2012 and voted in favor of the ICO in October 2012.<sup>167</sup> In the discussion leading up to the vote, Parks emphasized the importance of focusing on jobs and access to healthy food:

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<sup>164</sup> Emily Alpert Reyes and David Zahniser, “L.A. Councilman Bernard Parks finds himself in political wilderness,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/local/cityhall/la-me-parks-isolation-20140921-story.html>; Hillel Aron, “L.A. City Council Won't Have Bernard Parks to Kick Them Around Anymore,” *LA Weekly*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/la-city-council-wont-have-bernard-parks-to-kick-them-around-anymore-5720077>. For much of Parks' tenure on the City Council from 2003 to 2015, the relationship between Parks and organized labor in Los Angeles had been one characterized Organized labor in Los Angeles helped back Mark Ridley-Thomas against Parks in a race for a seat on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 2008.

<sup>165</sup> Jessica Garrison and Sara Lin, “Wal-Mart vs. Inglewood a Warm-Up for L.A. Fight,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 2004, <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/apr/02/local/me-walmart2>.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

The issue is, there's groceries that are needed. It's [Chinatown's] a food desert. There's businesses needed, there's taxes that will be paid, or do we benefit by having that vacant store for another thirty years while we quibble about what brand goes on the door?<sup>168</sup>

In his remarks at the City Council meeting, Parks seemed to draw from the messaging promoted by proponents of the Chinatown Walmart, which characterized Chinatown as a food desert with little to no access to healthy and affordable groceries.

The claim that Chinatown was a food desert had emerged from Walmart representatives and business advocacy organizations in the months leading up to the City Council vote on the ICO in March 2012. When asked about the food desert rhetoric, Walmart media representative Rachel Wall explained to Sukjong Hong of *Open City Magazine*, "We use the word, 'underserved.' There is no traditional full-service grocery store in downtown, according to the LA Chamber of Commerce."<sup>169</sup> As I previously discussed, the food desert narrative quickly became one challenged by community activists in the neighborhood and the labor-community coalition that formed to fight the Chinatown Walmart Neighborhood Market. In fact, according to a map developed according to the definition of "food desert" from the United States Department of Agriculture, Los Angeles Chinatown was not a food desert.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Alice Walton, "Ordinance Blocking Big Retailers in Chinatown Fails," 89.3 KPCC, October 23, 2012, <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/news/2012/10/23/10657/ordinance-blocking-big-retailers-chinatown-fail/>.

<sup>169</sup> Rachel Wall, Walmart media representative, quoted in Sukjong Hong, "Wal-Mart in Los Angeles Chinatown," *Open City*, August 29, 2012, <http://opencitymag.com/the-united-states-of-walmart-vs-los-angeles-chinatown/>.

<sup>170</sup> Rick Paulas, "Where are L.A.'s Food Deserts?" *KCET*, March 15, 2013, <https://www.kcet.org/food/where-are-las-food-deserts>.



When the proposed ICO did not garner the necessary votes for approval at the City Council meeting on October 23, 2012, the council voted to reconsider the ICO at a future date.<sup>171</sup> The next day, on October 24, 2012, Councilmember Reyes asked to “withhold unanimous consent” on the ordinance, which functionally tabled the vote on the ICO for one week.<sup>172</sup> One week later, on October 31, 2012, the agenda item was continued for another week. On November 7, 2012, Councilmember Reyes requested a referral back to the Planning and Land Use Management Committee; after the City Council referred the ICO back to the committee, the ordinance never made it back to the council for a second vote.<sup>173</sup>

*The Building and Safety Appeal — Case No. DIR 2012-1353 (BSA)*

On March 22, 2012—one day before the City Council was set to vote on whether to proceed with the ICO motion—the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety (LADBS) issued building permits for Walmart to begin construction at the Chinatown location.<sup>174</sup> On March 29, 2012, the Los Angeles chapter of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA-LA) filed an appeal to the city, claiming that the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety had wrongly issued building permits for Walmart to proceed with construction in

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<sup>171</sup> “Council Vote Information,” Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

<sup>172</sup> Ed Reyes, Los Angeles City Council meeting, October 24, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=17&clip\\_id=10996](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=17&clip_id=10996). For more on councilmembers’ option to withhold unanimous consent, see Council Rule 39 in *Rules of the Los Angeles City Council as Adopted on December 19, 1986, as Amended (August 2012)*, “Council Rules,” City of Los Angeles, [http://clerk.lacity.org/stellent/groups/departments/@clerk\\_cps\\_contributor/documents/contributor\\_web\\_content/lacityp\\_026042.pdf](http://clerk.lacity.org/stellent/groups/departments/@clerk_cps_contributor/documents/contributor_web_content/lacityp_026042.pdf).

<sup>173</sup> Los Angeles City Council meeting, November 7, 2012, [http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view\\_id=17&clip\\_id=11027](http://lacity.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=17&clip_id=11027).

<sup>174</sup> Case No. DIR 2012-1353(BSA), page 6, report by Maya Zeitzovsky, Associate Zoning Administrator, December 29, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

Chinatown. On December 20, 2012, city zoning administrator Maya Zaitzevsky released a city report denying the appeal and finding that the Department of Building and Safety correctly issued building permits to Walmart to begin work on the Chinatown store location on Cesar Chavez Avenue.<sup>175</sup>

In the body of the appeal, the three reasons that APALA-LA cited were (1) the proposed Walmart did not comply with prior zoning and redevelopment conditions for the Chinatown location; (2) the City needed to review prior zoning and redevelopment approvals prior to the issuing of the building permits; and (3) given new, unanalyzed impacts and information, supplemental environmental review was needed. An analysis of the city documents upholding the city's issuance of building permits and Walmart's construction at the Chinatown store location reveals the ways in which the logics and grammars of city planning decisions are often narrowly limited in scope, often by the technical, rules-oriented dimensions of highly precise complaints and grievances. Though these technical, legal complaints occurred in the context of much larger debates around the entry of Walmart into Chinatown, the reduced, limited scope of the complaints like the appeal against the Department of Building and Safety limited the ground on which labor and community activists could wage their campaign against Walmart. Despite all of this, activists recognized the importance of fighting on multiple fronts, and they took Walmart to task where they could in the legal and city planning arenas.

According to the December 2012 report by Zeitzevsky, the city zoning administration delimited the decision they could make, and in doing so, narrowed the scope of their verdict:

The appeal is restricted to determining whether the Department of Building and Safety acted within the scope of its authority as provided in the applicable sections of the Los

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<sup>175</sup> Case No. DIR 2012-1353(BSA), page 6, report by Maya Zeitzevsky, Associate Zoning Administrator, December 29, 2012, Los Angeles City Archives, Office of the City Clerk. Los Angeles, CA, <https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=ccfi.viewrecord&cfnumber=12-0382>.

Angeles Municipal Code cited herein and that the Department did not commit an error or abuse of discretion in its determination to issue Building Permit Nos. 11016-10000-23202 and 11016-10000-23204, and not stopping the work for the proposed tenant improvements of the grocery store and pharmacy at the existing retail spaces located at 701 West Cesar Chavez Avenue, Suite Nos. 101 and 102.<sup>176</sup>

The decision of the zoning administrator defined the parameters to strictly consider the actions of the Department of Building and Safety. As the report noted, “no responses are required regarding the appellant’s contentions of error and abuse of discretion on behalf of CRA/LA or Designated Local Authority staff.”<sup>177</sup> In the report, the zoning administrator restricted the purview of the appeal decision to the building permits and whether they were properly issued to Walmart.

### *Legal Challenges to Walmart and the City of Los Angeles*

The legal strategy of the anti-Walmart campaign did not stop with the failure of the ICO. Though the ICO failed to stop Walmart’s construction on the Chinatown store and then failed to muster enough votes among the City Councilmembers to pass, labor and community groups opposed to the Chinatown Walmart did not stop the fight on the legal front.

On July 3, 2012, APALA and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Union Local 770 jointly filed a lawsuit against the City of Los Angeles, alleging that the Los Angeles City Department of Building and Safety “failed to notify the public of its decision to issue a Notice of Exemption (NOE), which allows Walmart to move forward on its Chinatown project

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<sup>176</sup> Case No. DIR 2012-1353(BSA), page 17.

<sup>177</sup> Case No. DIR 2012-1353(BSA), page 18.

without environmental review.”<sup>178</sup> The legal challenge—*Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*—also requested a restraining order on construction at the Chinatown location. On September 7, 2012, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge James Chalfant refused to grant a restraining order on construction.<sup>179</sup> On November 20, 2012, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge James Chalfant again refused to grant an injunction to stop construction on the Chinatown Walmart store; Chalfant found no evidence of irreparable environmental harm from the ongoing Walmart construction.<sup>180</sup>

The debate over whether the building permits were properly issued to Walmart to begin construction on the Chinatown store without a public hearing continued when, on April 4, 2013, SEACA and APALA filed a lawsuit against various Los Angeles City agencies. As the initial lawsuit reads,

By this action, Petitioners/Plaintiffs Southeast Asian Community Alliance and Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (collectively “Petitioners”) challenge the unlawful actions of the City of Los Angeles, its Departments and agencies (“City”), and its CRA/LA, a Designated Local Authority (“DLA”), in purporting to authorize building permits for a new Wal-Mart grocery store and pharmacy in Chinatown’s Grand Plaza,

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<sup>178</sup> Aiha Nguyen, “Lawsuit Challenges City’s Action on Walmart Chinatown Store,” *Capital and Main*, July 5, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/lawsuit-challenges-citys-actions-on-walmart-chinatown-store>. The case was *Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*, case number BS138164, in the Superior Court of the State of California, County of Los Angeles.

<sup>179</sup> Deborah Crowe, “Wal-Mart Opponents Seek to Stop Construction at Chinatown Store,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, September 5, 2012, <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2012/09/07/judge-denies-motion-to-halt-construction-on-chinatown-walmart/>; “Judge Denies Motion To Halt Construction On Chinatown Walmart,” *CBS LA*, September 7, 2012, <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2012/09/07/judge-denies-motion-to-halt-construction-on-chinatown-walmart/>.

<sup>180</sup> “Judge again refuses to block Wal-Mart construction in L.A. Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/11/judge-again-refuses-block-los-angeles-wal-mart-chinatown-construction.html>; Matthew Heller, “LA Judge Finds No Irreparable Harm From Chinatown Wal-Mart,” *Law360*, November 20, 2012, <http://www.law360.com/articles/395758/la-judge-finds-no-irreparable-harm-from-chinatown-wal-mart>.

without presenting said permits to the DLA Board or other City agency Board for approval before permit issuance as required by law, and without enforcing mitigation conditions necessary to protect the environment as required by the California Environment Quality Act (“CEQA”). In reliance on the improperly-issued permits, Real Party in Interest Wal-Mart has almost completed construction of its proposed grocery store, and is on the verge of opening as soon as the City issues a Certificate of Occupancy. If the City does so and the new store opens, Petitioners, the community, and the public will be permanently deprived, *inter alia*, of their lawful right to have their concerns about the permits presented to and considered at a duly-noticed public meeting before permit issuance.<sup>181</sup>

The lawsuit, *Southeast Asian Community Alliance et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*, was a legal challenge using a petition for a writ of administrative mandate—that is, it asked for the Superior Court to review and reverse the administrative decision of the City of Los Angeles to issue building permits to Walmart to begin construction at the Chinatown store. The primary argument in the legal challenge centered on the defendants’ failure to comply with the terms of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). At the time of this lawsuit, Gideon Kracov, the land use attorney representing the defendants, had already helped to file a similar legal challenge against a Walmart in Torrance; in 2012 and 2013, Kracov was concurrently engaged in a legal challenge to a proposed Walmart in Burbank, and he would later go on to work on a similar environmental lawsuit against a Walmart SuperCenter proposed for El Monte.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Southeast Asian Community Alliance, et al. v. City of Los Angeles et al.*, Case No. BS142450, Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles, Verified Petition for Writ of Mandate, page 2, filed April 4, 2013, <http://www.laane.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Lawsuit-4-4-13.pdf>

<sup>182</sup> Rebecca Kimitch, “Future El Monte Walmart faces legal obstacle from environmental lawsuit,” *San*

## *Conclusion*

Supporters and opponents to the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown fought to garner public support in terms of the battles arbitrated by city officials and the courts. Walmart proponents and business advocacy groups spoke out against the ICO in front of City Council, warning of the precedent it would set for businesses, and filed briefs defending the processes that Walmart went through to secure building permits. Labor and community organizations and activists opposed to the Chinatown Walmart recognized the need to respond on multiple fronts. Accordingly, the anti-Walmart coalition—which included a group of Chinatown-based activists who would eventually form Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED)—mobilized those residents and small business owners who did not support Walmart’s entry into Chinatown to sign letters and offer public comment in favor of the ICO and against Walmart. In addition, they used legal strategies to fight Walmart’s entry into Chinatown, appealing the issuance of building permits to Walmart and then filing a lawsuit against the city for authorizing those permits without proper review.

### Chapter Three

#### Walmart, Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, and Organizing in Los Angeles Chinatown

If you've been following media coverage of the battle over Walmart's proposed store in Chinatown, you probably have the impression that the fight is between the retail giant and labor. Chinatown leaders have been largely absent from press reports of the controversy, and to the extent they are mentioned one would think they want Walmart in their neighborhood. Thursday's hearing at the L.A. City Planning Commission should set the record straight — Chinatown doesn't want Walmart, and residents and business owners are loud and clear about it for anyone who is paying attention.<sup>183</sup>

—Aiha Nguyen

As Aiha Nguyen wrote in her online piece in *Capital and Main*, and as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, the campaign against Walmart cannot simply be reduced to a fight between the world's largest retailer and organized labor in Los Angeles—though the Walmart and the unions certainly engaged each other. Instead, the anti-Walmart campaign was one waged in various theaters and with a wide array of stakeholders in Chinatown and across Los Angeles. In addition to the coverage in the mainstream press, journalistic accounts of the Chinatown Walmart contestation appeared in online media. Additionally, with the emergence of a coalition of labor and community groups opposed to the Walmart, activists brought conversations around Walmart and its poor labor practices onto the streets of Chinatown. All of these discussions happening in different places around the Chinatown Walmart were amplified by the networks of organized labor in Los Angeles and also by workers themselves, including members from OUR Walmart, an organization of Walmart workers throughout Los Angeles County who were organizing to improve their working conditions.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Aiha Nguyen, "Walmart's Bureaucratic Victory Can't Mask Growing Opposition," *Capital and Main*, July 13, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/latest-news/issues/labor-and-economy/walmarts-bureaucratic-victory-cant-mask-growing-opposition/>.

<sup>184</sup> For a treatment of OUR Walmart's organizing work against Walmart, see David Rolf, assisted by Corrie Watterson Bryant, *The Fight for Fifteen: The Right Wage for a Working America* (New York: New Press, 2016), 87-90.

In this chapter, I first outline the chronology of the formation of Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) in response to the news of the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Chinatown. I then examine interviews with various CCED members who had been involved in the Chinatown Walmart campaign.<sup>185</sup> The study of CCED's role in the Walmart campaign is significant for several reasons. CCED dedicated themselves to grassroots organizing efforts. Limited in funding and resources, CCED creatively activated the people, energy, and skills of its members; mobilized existing connections in the Chinatown community and Los Angeles more broadly; and built new relationships to organize the Chinatown community against the Walmart Neighborhood Market.<sup>186</sup>

*Genealogies: Chinese Progressive Association – San Gabriel Valley and Earlier Formations*

While CCED appeared to have solely responded to the threat of Chinatown Walmart and to the advent of a corporate-led gentrification in the neighborhood, it fulfilled the desires of a

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<sup>185</sup> I would like to note here that the CCED members who served as my interlocutors in this chapter graciously reviewed a draft of this thesis and provided immensely useful feedback. Though I did my best to incorporate this feedback where possible, I want to acknowledge that the retelling of CCED's formation in this chapter provides only a partial retelling that is shaped by the distribution of interlocutors' voices. In its current form, this chapter is, in many ways, a re-narration "in becoming" of the formation of CCED—one that would benefit greatly from additional interviews with many of the other founding members of CCED and more consideration of the distribution of quotations and voices in such a re-telling. Interviews with these other founding members of CCED, many of whom were women, would not only provide a narrative that unfolds differently along gender lines, they would also likely reveal the heterogeneity that characterized the perspectives among CCED's founding membership. Notably, the narratives presented in this chapter reveals CCED to center primarily around a politics of Chinese-ness, though additional interviews would likely reveal a different analysis of Chinatown as multiracial and multiethnic; that is, CCED organizers had a complex analysis that envisioned organizing a Chinatown that was Cambodian, Latino, and Chinese. I hope that future iterations of the work in this chapter will be able to fill out this narrative along these not insignificant dimensions. Thank you to Preeti Sharma for this sharp insight and feedback.

<sup>186</sup> Similarly, Glen Ikuo Kitayama notes the grassroots organizing approach of the NCCR (at its founding, the Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress) as the distinguishing characteristic for the organization in his case study. See Glen Ikuo Kitayama, *Japanese Americans and the Movement for Redress: A Case Study of Grassroots Activism in the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations* (MA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993).



generation of younger activists who were looking to build with other left/progressive Chinese Americans. Far before Walmart announced its plans to open shop in Chinatown, young Chinese Americans in Los Angeles recognized the need for a left/progressive formation dedicated to building left/progressive spaces for Chinese Americans. Daniel Huynh, who came from a family of working-class ethnic Chinese Vietnamese boat refugees who had found their way to the United States, was born in Chinatown.<sup>187</sup> As Daniel Huynh noted in an interview,

There were two things that happened [to help with the creation of CCED]. One was that the Chinese Progressive Association of the San Gabriel Valley [CPA-SGV] closed its doors—or at least it was sun setting. There was another group, the Chinatown Collective for Community Action.<sup>188</sup> There was an ebb and flow of the creation of organizations.

There was also a study group that took place. Just for a while, people were trying to create this space for activists in Chinatown, and it was hard to make it happen.<sup>189</sup>

Indeed, various efforts to bring Chinese American progressive activists together in the Los Angeles area predated, and perhaps set the conditions for, the creation of CCED in March 2012.

As early as 2006, activists who had already been involved in different community organizations that engaged in affordable housing, labor rights, youth work, and other issues in Los Angeles came together to form an all-volunteer chapter of the Chinese Progressive Association in the San Gabriel Valley. Since its inception, the Chinese Progressive Association – San Gabriel Valley (CPA-SGV) sought to build a worker-led grassroots organization of low-wage Chinese workers in the San Gabriel Valley while also providing a space to build a network

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<sup>187</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>188</sup> The Chinatown Collective for Community Action preceded CPA-SGV by two or three years. Daniel Huynh, in discussion with the author, October 5, 2016.

<sup>189</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

of progressive Chinese Americans.<sup>190</sup> With the support and fiscal sponsorship of the Garment Worker Center, CPA-SGV chose to organize in the San Gabriel Valley “because of the large number of low-wage Chinese workers concentrated there and the lack of organizing from a political, class-based perspective.”<sup>191</sup> For the next five years, CPA-SGV remained an all-volunteer effort as it surveyed workers, hosted workers’ rights workshops, and regularly outreached to supermarket and restaurant workers. In 2011, CPA-SGV decided to end its Chinese worker organizing project due to limited capacity, citing as contributing factors a shortage of bilingual and bicultural organizers, a lack of accountability within an all-volunteer structure, inconsistent participation, and a dearth of organizers who consistently interacted with first-generation Chinese immigrants.

The decision to wrap up the worker organizing efforts of CPA-SGV did not diminish the desire among these and other activists to build a space for progressive Chinese Americans. In January 2012, a few months after CPA-SGV closed out its worker organizing project, two former members of CPA-SGV convened an informal gathering—a “Chinese progressives dumpling night”—of progressive Chinese Americans to discuss urgent political issues for Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, to assess the need for a progressive Chinese American organization, and to think about what a progressive Chinese American community would entail.<sup>192</sup> One month later, in February 2012, the same group planned a follow-up gathering—this time, a “Chinese

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<sup>190</sup> Chinese Progressive Association – San Gabriel Valley (CPA-SGV), “CPA San Gabriel Valley Ceases Low-Wage Worker Organizing,” *Azine: Asian American Movement Ezine*, August 8, 2011, accessed July 3, 2016, <http://apimboston.org/cpa-san-gabriel-valley-ceases-low-wage-worker-organizing>.

<sup>191</sup> CPA-SGV, “CPA San Gabriel Valley Ceases Low-Wage Worker Organizing,” *Azine: Asian American Movement Ezine*, August 8, 2011.

<sup>192</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

progressives potluck night.”<sup>193</sup> These informal meetings provided a scaffolding for Chinese Americans to come together to form CCED when news of the Chinatown Walmart came the same month. Daniel Huynh recalled these efforts, remembering that

We had brought people together in different ways. I remember one time, for Lunar New Year, we had invited a lot of Chinese American activists to come together and meet and talk shop and see what’s going on. At the same time, we heard that Walmart was trying to move into Chinatown. I think it helped us step on the gas to get things going.<sup>194</sup>

Though these early, informal Chinese American progressive gatherings did not, as Daniel mentioned, “have an active campaign” in mind, that would change soon enough. By the time Walmart’s plans to open a store in Chinatown were made public in late February 2012, these Chinese American activists had already been discussing the need for progressive Chinese American activist spaces.<sup>195</sup> The response to news of the Walmart Chinatown was swift from community activists, organizations, and media outlets alike.

### *CCED Origin Stories: Getting Together*

The various people who came together to form CCED had their own experiences and stakes in Los Angeles Chinatown, though a core of the people organizing knew each other from

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<sup>193</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>194</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>195</sup> News of Walmart’s plans to open up a Neighborhood Market location in Chinatown came out on February 24-25, 2012. See “Breaking News: Walmart Trying to Open First LA Grocery Store, Major Fight Looms,” *Capital and Main*, February 24, 2012, <http://capitalandmain.com/latest-news/issues/labor-and-economy/breaking-news-walmart-trying-to-open-first-la-grocery-store-major-fight-looms/>; “Wal-Mart plans to open grocery store in L.A.’s Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2012, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/02/wal-mart-chinatown-market.html>; and Jacquelyn Ryan, “Wal-Mart to Put Grocery in Downtown L.A.,” *Los Angeles Business Journal*, February 24, 2012, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.labusinessjournal.com/news/2012/feb/24/wal-mart-put-grocery-downtown-l/>.

their previous schooling or from their work in Los Angeles nonprofits and labor organizations. Preeti Sharma and Sophia Cheng, for example, had met through various organizational meetings in their prior organizing involvements with South Asian Network and Southeast Asian Community Alliance (SEACA), respectively.<sup>196</sup> Daniel Huynh, one of the co-founders of CCED, had studied urban planning at UCLA with Aiha Nguyen, who in 2012 was a veteran researcher at Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE).<sup>197</sup> King Cheung, a retired California State Deputy Labor Commissioner, arrived with ties to the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance and came with experience as a participant in the 1995 El Monte Thai garment worker raids. Additionally, Shiu-Ming Cheer, Craig Wong, and Linda Lam had been involved with CPA-SGV. Furthermore, many people had existing activist or progressive tendencies, and they often also had longtime stakes and investments in Los Angeles Chinatown.

The people who I interviewed for this thesis offer a representative array of the people who joined CCED over the course of the Walmart campaign. The interviews also demonstrated the varying stakes and relationships that CCED members had with Los Angeles Chinatown as a place. On the younger end of the CCED membership during the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign, for example, was Jenny Chhea. The daughter of a Chinese Cambodian refugee family, Jenny was an undergraduate student at UCLA at the time that she heard about and became involved in the anti-Walmart campaign. In Jenny’s words, “Knowing that Chinatown is where I shopped throughout my childhood, and knowing how a big retail store would affect Chinatown and the small mom-and-pop shops are what made me have passion for it.”<sup>198</sup> In another case, Jon

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<sup>196</sup> Preeti Sharma, interview with the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 19, 2016.

<sup>197</sup> At the time of the writing of this thesis, Aiha Nguyen is director of the Grocery and Retail Project at LAANE.

<sup>198</sup> Jenny Chhea, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 6, 2016.

Truong—who has Chinese Vietnamese roots—was an undergraduate at the University of Southern California when he first got involved with CPA – SGV; later, after graduating, he gravitated toward CCED, where he already knew several of the activists who had been a part of the earlier formation in San Gabriel Valley.<sup>199</sup> In yet another instance, Alice Tse was a recent graduate of UC Berkeley who had moved back to her hometown of Los Angeles (more specifically, Elysian Park) at the time that she got involved in the anti-Walmart campaign with a former high school classmate.<sup>200</sup> Sophat Phea, a Cambodian resident in Chinatown, was in his mid-twenties when he joined CCED in early 2012. He had been working with SEACA through the organization’s youth program, and his connections to many young people in Los Angeles Chinatown proved to be useful in the campaign’s mobilization efforts later on.<sup>201</sup>

In addition to the college students and recent graduates, the original formation of CCED also included a group of marginally older people, some of whom were professional organizers (i.e., with experience working with various left/progressive organizations, such as Restaurant Opportunities Center – Los Angeles or the UCLA Labor Center). For example, Sarah Tseng was a graduate student in urban planning at UCLA in early 2012 when CCED first formed; she was also living in Los Angeles Chinatown. Nat Lowe was also a graduate student in the urban planning master’s program at UCLA, and he attended his first CCED meeting when Sarah had invited him.<sup>202</sup> Sophia Cheng was a second year Asian American Studies master’s student at UCLA. Preeti Sharma was a graduate student at UCLA in gender studies in early 2012, and she

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<sup>199</sup> Jon Truong, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 7, 2016.

<sup>200</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

<sup>201</sup> Sophat Phea, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 10, 2016.

<sup>202</sup> Sarah Tseng, interview by the author, Google Hangouts, April 20, 2016.

had a background in left/progressive Asian American organizing in Los Angeles.<sup>203</sup> At the time of the founding of CCED in 2012, Daniel Huynh was a member of the Chinatown Kung Fu and Lion Dance Troupe.<sup>204</sup> Daniel was working with an affordable housing nonprofit at the time that CCED formed in early 2012, though he had had previous jobs working with youth in Chinatown through the Chinatown Service Center.<sup>205</sup> In fact, as a high school student, Alice had participated in a youth program facilitated by Daniel.<sup>206</sup> Though they were not interviewed for this thesis, Lucia Lin, Cathy Dang, and Sophia Cheng—all Chinese American woman organizers in Los Angeles at the time working with different organizations—actively helped in founding CCED.<sup>207</sup>

The older guard of CCED—consisting of people who had already retired or who were nearing retirement—had been involved in the Asian American Movement in Los Angeles in different capacities.<sup>208</sup> Diane Tan—a retired administrative law judge who has worked, visited, and volunteered in Chinatown during the past several decades—had been involved in organizing efforts in Los Angeles Chinatown as part of Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), a membership organization that emerged to address community concerns and issues in Chinatown during the Asian American Movement.<sup>209</sup> King Cheung, Diane’s husband and a retired deputy labor commissioner for the state of California by profession, had also been involved in AAFE, as

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<sup>203</sup> Preeti Sharma, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 19, 2016.

<sup>204</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.; Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

<sup>207</sup> Sarah Tseng, interview by the author, Google Hangouts, April 20, 2016.

<sup>208</sup> For more on the Asian American Movement, see Michael Liu, Kim Geron, and Tracy Lai, *The Snake Dance of Asian American Activism: Community, Vision, and Power* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), and Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>209</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016.

well as with community organizing efforts in the early 1970s to demand that Resthaven Community Mental Health Center—the only mental health facility in Chinatown—provide in-language and culturally competent services to residents in the community.<sup>210</sup> Phyllis Chiu was a retired elementary school teacher; she had taught at Castelar Elementary School in Chinatown and had also gotten involved in various organizing efforts during the Asian American Movement.<sup>211</sup> By the time she joined CCED, Phyllis—who had also been involved in AAFE in the 1970s—had already had many years’ experience of working with people in Chinatown around various community issues. She explained:

The late 70s was the time of the New Left movement, so a lot of people got into all the different New Left groups, and so the community work died down a little bit because people were into studying, political study, and doing all kinds of things—some people went into factories and did work organizing workers and stuff. I had always stayed at Castelar and always did things around the community... So after a while, everybody did New Left stuff, and that kind of dropped. But we were still doing work with parents in the school, and we had different things we needed to organize the parents around. So I stayed active, and we did a lot of stuff with our teachers’ union, UTLA, and then also issues where the parents needed support, like for getting Castelar off of year-round schools. And then, I didn’t do much for a while, and I retired. Then I get a call from King [Cheung], he said, there’s a group of young people who are really active now. I had seen on Facebook some of my former students had been posting things about Walmart, and I

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<sup>210</sup> For more on Resthaven, see Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 112; Jenny Cho and the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, *Chinatown in Los Angeles* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 105.

<sup>211</sup> Phyllis Chiu, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 13, 2016.

said, that's interesting, I heard about Walmart from some of my former students, and King said, yeah, you should come to one of these meetings. So I went to one at Alpine – and Sophia [Cheng] and Lucia [Lin] were chairing the meeting, and I think Daniel was there, and Linda Lam. And that's how I got to know people and how it all started.<sup>212</sup>

Other members came from Movement backgrounds not necessarily solely based in Los Angeles; for example, Craig Wong had been part of the CPA – SGV formation and had been active during the Asian American Movement in the International Hotel struggle in the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>213</sup> All of these more senior members of CCED brought past organizing experience to the early formation of CCED in 2012.

Many CCED members had existing relationships with Los Angeles Chinatown—as former and current residents, as previous organizers in Chinatown, or as people who recognized the need to serve the immigrant, people of color, and working-class communities there. For example, Jenny Chhea discussed her own connections to Chinatown:

Growing up, I remember shopping there and eating there. For me, I associated Chinatown with not so great memories because of our socioeconomic status. After I moved to Rosemead, Chinatown became the retail place for me to find cheap food. After I got to college, it's home to me in a different way now.<sup>214</sup>

Similarly, Daniel recalled his early memories of Chinatown as a vibrant community for working class Chinese immigrants:

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<sup>212</sup> Phyllis Chiu, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 13, 2016.

<sup>213</sup> Though I did not sit down for a formal interview with Craig, I am drawing from previous conversations that I have had with Craig in various contexts. Later on in the revision process of this thesis, Craig offered very helpful feedback on this chapter.

<sup>214</sup> Jenny Chhea, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 6, 2016.



I remember when the streets were so packed on Saturdays, you would pretty much go shoulder to shoulder. People getting their groceries, people who had to go to the doctor—it was a place in which a lot of Chinese found home...I still hold Chinatown dear to my heart as a port of entry for people to be able to sustain themselves in the United States.<sup>215</sup>

Alice felt similarly:

Even though I didn't live there [in Chinatown], I identified as one of the community members because I went there a lot growing up. I remember walking down the street with my dad, and we would go through the stores and people would recognize [my dad].<sup>216</sup>

Although she had grown up understanding Chinatown as a community of and for working-class Chinese immigrants, she also appreciated its role in providing resources for working class immigrants as with the diverse demographics of Latinos and Cambodians. Her mom had gotten her first job through the Chinatown Service Center, and so Alice understood Chinatown as a site with connections to job training, social services, and other resources for immigrants.<sup>217</sup> King Cheung mentioned his existing relationship with Los Angeles Chinatown at the time that he got involved in the anti-Walmart campaign:

So I got to know the people, I got to know the activists [in Chinatown], I met Diane [through AAFE during the 1970s]. It was like home for me for about ten years...Right now, I feel more like an outsider because I don't work here in Chinatown like in the old days. But at the same time, because of the previous experiences, I felt like that, even though I'm not working or residing in Chinatown, it's a place that I treasure. If it was just Monterey Park or some place like that, I don't have that kind of connection. Things

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<sup>215</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>216</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

<sup>217</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

happened here—my mom, Diane, friends—you know, a lot of the friends that I have in Chinatown.<sup>218</sup>

Speaking to his connections to the neighborhood—including his experiences of his mom living and working as a garment worker in Chinatown, meeting his future partner Diane in Chinatown, and organizing with residents through AAFE during the 1970s—King invoked a distinct sense of place and nostalgia that established his motivations to join the anti-Walmart campaign.

Though Walmart was ostensibly the huge catalyst that launched CCED, the concerns of the organization and the organizing work in Chinatown went beyond the issue of Walmart. As Alice mentioned in an interview, “[CCED] is not just a single-issue organization. [It] can build its base here and organize in Chinatown so that the next time something like this comes around, CCED will be ready and will have built relationships in the community.”<sup>219</sup> Even after the Walmart fight, CCED recognized that key community concerns, including affordable housing and good schools for the families in Chinatown, would require long-term organizing in the community. Daniel remembered the goals for sustainable, long-term change for Los Angeles Chinatown that CCED had articulated at the beginning of the campaign against Walmart in Chinatown. For Daniel, “[e]veryone envisioned that this is a community, and we need to somehow sustain that. That’s the identity we tried to upkeep.”<sup>220</sup>

Finally, the community and relationship building in CCED created not only a feeling of urgency around the social movement work but also cultivated belonging and a desire to work together with similar-minded people. As Preeti discussed,

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<sup>218</sup> King Cheung, interview by the author, Los Angeles, April 9, 2016.

<sup>219</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

<sup>220</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

We were meeting every week, maybe every other week...there was a lot of excitement in that room. Scott Chan brought particular skills. Daniel Huynh brought his own drive and passion. Sarah Tseng also brought her experience [in urban planning]. Sophia, having had her organizing with CPA in San Gabriel Valley [CPA-SGV], brought that with her.

Phyllis, who had been involved in organizing in Chinatown decades earlier, brought that with her. So that was really powerful to see people with skills particularly designed for organizing.<sup>221</sup>

Preeti's comments underscored the importance of the organizing skill sets that different people brought to CCED when it first coalesced around the proposed Walmart in Chinatown. Because some CCED members had had experience in door-to-door outreach and relational, one-on-one organizing, and others had a deep experiential understanding of community concerns and issues in Chinatown since the 1970s, CCED strategically mobilized its members' expertise and networks for varying purposes in the campaign against Walmart. Preeti noted that, in addition to bringing various skills to the organizing efforts, CCED members actively built meaningful social relationships with one another.<sup>222</sup> In a similar manner, Alice remembered the group as both welcoming and appealing with respect to their organizing models:

Even when I first went to the meetings, I felt like the people were hella cool and they're funny and smart too. The working style was very special. There was a good working dynamic and you can feel this when you enter into a room where people are energized and engaged. They're organized too — with a facilitator, timekeeper, notetaker. These

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<sup>221</sup> Preeti Sharma, interview with the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 19, 2016.

<sup>222</sup> Preeti Sharma, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 19, 2016.

are the signs of an effective, meaningful, and intentional meeting. We did a lot of community building too.<sup>223</sup>

The sense of family and community created across generations of activists was palpable. Some participants in CCED had been involved in the Asian American Movement and other social movement organizing, and they brought a depth of organizing experience to CCED from the beginning. Additionally, this sense of community facilitated an intergenerational learning exchange experience for both older and younger activists.

As Daniel recalled, “We’ve always been intergenerational, and we’ve always been a family, and I don’t think those values have changed that much. Though the composition has changed, people’s dedication and the resources has been so present.”<sup>224</sup> Speaking to the intergenerational dimension of CCED, King Cheung, Diane Tan, and Phyllis Chiu—some of the more senior organizers—commented on the power of younger and older people working together. “If it wasn’t for the younger people getting involved,” Diane Tan notes, “[building an increasingly visible and apparent opposition to Walmart in Chinatown] would have been harder.”<sup>225</sup>

### *Experimental Activisms: Reimagining Tactics and Organizing Creatively in CCED*

CCED’s work to organize Chinatown residents and small business owners against the Chinatown Walmart did not stop with the the interim control ordinance or the various legal

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<sup>223</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

<sup>224</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>225</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016. Diane provided feedback on the text in the bracketed portion so as to capture her precise thoughts.

challenges that groups filed in the Los Angeles County Superior Court.<sup>226</sup> Oftentimes, the organizing approach of CCED concentrated less on the legal and city-wide strategy and more on building relationships with small business owners and residents. Because this may have differed from the typical Alinsky-esque community organizing model that the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) and the unions frequently deployed, CCED's work took on a different, more organic, and grassroots character.<sup>227</sup> As Daniel mentioned, "we [CCED] were looking to sustain ourselves and create our identity separate from LAANE and other organizations."<sup>228</sup>

The local organizing efforts in the anti-Walmart campaign focused primarily on small businesses and secondarily on residents. The organizing also mobilized multi-pronged arguments that noted Walmart's poor labor practices and role in using suppliers. Additionally, many CCED members noted the organic and experimental quality that seemed to resonate throughout CCED's work in the anti-Walmart campaign. Early on in the "No Walmart in Chinatown" campaign, members of CCED organized various events as they thought of the ideas, and that experimental and creative energy seemed electric. As Daniel mentioned,

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<sup>226</sup> It's interesting to note how the mainstream media accounts (namely, in the *Los Angeles Times*) of CCED refer broadly to the "labor and community groups" opposed to Chinatown Walmart. One specific reference to CCED members came in August 2012 when the *Times* referred vaguely to CCED members as "community activists" who were "wearing red T-shirts." Catherine Saillant, "Foes, backers of Chinatown Wal-Mart face off again," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/14/local/la-me-big-box-ban-20120815>.

<sup>227</sup> Saul Alinsky is commonly credited for being the father of modern community organizing, which emerged in the United States after World War II. In this mode of organizing, Alinsky advocates for an emphasis on building a membership organization around winnable issue-based campaigns, as opposed to building a movement around an ideological focus. Put another way, the Alinsky model of organizing appears to focus more on organizing to win material concessions from power than on organizing to build a sense of empowerment and meaningful relationships among people. My argument is that, for CCED, one did not come at the expense of the other; both were key components of the organizational strategy. For more on the Alinsky model of community organizing, see Rinku Sen, *Stir It Up: Lessons in Community Organizing and Advocacy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), xlvi-xlvii; Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).

<sup>228</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview with the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

There were a lot of things that people weren't afraid to try, and that's kind of the spirit that I miss. I feel like we're more structured now. We had put together a CCED bike tour—which Nat [Lowe] put together actually—and we invited a lot of people to Chinatown who didn't know about the issues.<sup>229</sup>

The bike tour, which was a six to seven mile bike ride around Chinatown and the downtown Los Angeles area, began at Alpine Recreation Center and featured a community-led, political tour that focused on community issues in the Chinatown area.<sup>230</sup> Other creative, experimental tactics that emerged from CCED members during the anti-Walmart campaigns included the Friday night vigils, which were weekly Friday actions that took place on the corner of Cesar Chavez and Grand Avenues outside the proposed Walmart location in Chinatown. Diane remembered the engagement in these weekly actions:

The Friday night vigils were good in terms of encouraging more people to get involved and showing that it's important to voice objections in different ways. It also brought a lot more college and high school students to Chinatown, and more younger people started getting involved.<sup>231</sup>

CCED's organizing efforts also made their way to college and university campuses, where professors invited CCED members to share their work in Los Angeles Chinatown and recruit college students. For example, Glenn Omatsu invited CCED to do a presentation at UCLA, and professors at California State University, Los Angeles, did the same.<sup>232</sup> By doing so, more people

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<sup>229</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>230</sup> "Ride Against Walmart in Chinatown!" Facebook event page, August 18, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/events/342927942461423/>.

<sup>231</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016.

<sup>232</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016.

became aware of the problem and started joining CCED's efforts in Chinatown. The importance of the campaign appeared to resonate with students, as Diane noted. In her words, "[a] lot of it had to do with the people that became involved in CCED. They were connected to the college campuses" and mobilized support for these issues on those campuses.<sup>233</sup> Notably, too, the organizing efforts of the anti-Walmart coalition in Chinatown raised the visibility of the controversy and brought the discussion into the Chinese and Spanish language press.<sup>234</sup>

Daniel also mentioned planning for a CCED-driven "shop local" campaign designed to build the visibility of small businesses in Chinatown. CCED members wanted to encourage people to shop local and patronize the existing small businesses that might potentially be hurt in the wake of Walmart's entry into the neighborhood. The initiatives sought to build visibility of the small businesses that stood to be harmed by Walmart's entry into Los Angeles Chinatown. The ideas and projects came together quite fluidly; in Daniel's words, "A lot of that was organic, and it was obviously due to the Walmart that fueled this creativity."<sup>235</sup> While the issue of the Chinatown Walmart was the catalyst, these opportunities allowed for CCED to think creatively about building support in Chinatown—with small business owners and also with young people in Chinatown who supported CCED's mobilization efforts. Daniel also mentioned, "I remember people trying a lot of different things, and was hoping that something stuck."<sup>236</sup> One action designed to raise awareness of the small businesses, for example, was a Chinatown "shopping cart parade" action. Another CCED event that highlighted the small businesses in Chinatown

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<sup>233</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016.

<sup>234</sup> Craig Wong, in email correspondence to the author, October 6, 2016.

<sup>235</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>236</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

was the Chinatown Cash Mob event.<sup>237</sup> On December 9, 2012, CCED held a “cash mob” event in Chinatown; CCED members coordinated with small businesses in advance and brought groups of people to show up and buy items from their businesses for the holidays.<sup>238</sup>

Notably, as the campaign went on, CCED’s strategy in the Chinatown community shifted from the technical and legal fight to raising awareness about Walmart’s potential harm to existing small businesses, its unfair labor practices for its workers, and less-than-reputable role in global supply chains that exploited factory workers around the world. As Daniel, said, “We felt like, even if we couldn’t stop Walmart, we were changing the public opinion about Walmart in Chinatown.”<sup>239</sup> CCED members also made broad transnational connections between the Chinatown Walmart campaign and workers’ issues in other places. In one instance, CCED came together with South Asians for Justice – Los Angeles (SAJ - LA) to hold a vigil in solidarity with Bangladeshi garment workers in the wake of the April 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse, which left over 1,000 workers dead and many more injured.<sup>240</sup> Preeti explained how the motivations behind the solidarity action, which she co-organized and spoke at, emerged:

[We were] thinking about the connection to Walmart being the predominant purchaser of these types of goods, and the fact that, again, that this is the largest global retailer. And because there are these third party factories, you can’t trace it, but they’re the ones that

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<sup>237</sup> Phyllis Chiu, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 13, 2016; Diane Tan, in email correspondence to the author, October 6, 2016.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.; “Los Angeles Chinatown Cash Mob 12/9/12,” YouTube video, 1:57, posted by Canal de unsuburberd, December 31, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK3Vvx70hDw>.

<sup>239</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>240</sup> Julfikar Ali Manik and Jim Yardley, “Building Collapse in Bangladesh Leaves Scores Dead,” *New York Times*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/world/asia/bangladesh-building-collapse.html>. For video of the vigil, see Jenny Lin and Thuan Nguyen, “Solidarity Vigil,” Vimeo video, 13:04, posted by Jenny Lin, May 17, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/66427117>.



are the biggest perpetrators of this gap. So it's just very shady. This is the way global capital works. So it was very, very depressing, and so this activism, as much as it was about doing things, it was also about [the fact that] we have a place in calling these people out, and you can't just watch it. And I did to a certain extent. We watched the December one [another factory fire in Bangladesh]. We watched the January one. And then, when the Rana Plaza factory collapse happened, with the fire and the complete disregard to safety regulations of buildings, the lack of exits...it was just terrible, and it was again this moment where people were angry. People in CCED were angry. People in South Asians for Justice were angry. So we had gotten together and did a vigil on the street corner—the same street corner that we did the grocery action, the same street corner that we were doing the white boards. So it was a very familiar gathering place for a lot of us. It was important, and if an example could be made of a potential quick alliance or coalition between these volunteer groups, that was one.<sup>241</sup>

Making connections to the global supply chain in which Walmart was embedded, Preeti revealed the important transnational linkages that she and other members of CCED, as well as South Asians for Justice (SAJ – LA), were making to the Chinatown in Walmart.<sup>242</sup> For activists like Preeti, the issue of the Chinatown Walmart could not only be contained to the physical space of Chinatown. The struggle against Walmart in Chinatown was a complex one that necessarily included the struggles of workers in factories that supplied the goods that corporate retailers like Walmart then sold, and the political vision of CCED and SAJ – LA moved towards an analysis

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<sup>241</sup> Preeti Sharma, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 19, 2016.

<sup>242</sup> For a video of Preeti's comments at the solidarity vigil, see Jenny Lin, "Solidarity Vigil," Vimeo video, 13:05, posted by Jenny Lin, May 17, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/66427117>.

that captured these complex entanglements. Even at the regional and city scale, the Bangladeshi worker solidarity vigil held political significance. Preeti explained:

A lot of us [CCED members] were connected to people in the movement. Sophia knew people from the Food Chain Workers Alliance, and they were talking about the International Labour Organization, and so we had that connection. For me, for South Asians for Justice, it just sort of hit that that's what that space is for—these events that no non-profit would take on, or these critiques that no non-profit could take on—because to the non-profits in Los Angeles that provide South Asian community-based services, it's completely outside the parameters of what they do.<sup>243</sup>

The capacity to organize a solidarity vigil for the Bangladeshi factory workers symbolized not only a possible way in which left/progressive organizations outside of the NPIC could come together in coalition, it also meant that these organizations provided an important political space to take on a political position that other organizations could not necessarily publicly take.

Notably, another creative project that CCED members launched in the summer of 2013 was a photography exhibit, titled “The Streets Between Us: Snapshots of Chinatown,” which featured recorded interviews with and photography by various people who lived and worked in Los Angeles Chinatown.<sup>244</sup> Preeti Sharma and Stefanie Ritoper worked to conceive of the photography exhibit, which was designed to be participatory and inclusive of the heterogeneous perspectives of people who lived, worked, and played in Los Angeles Chinatown. The exhibit, which CCED launched at the Chinese American Museum (CAM) in July 2013, not only served as a way to publicize everyday stories of people in Chinatown but the program also helped

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<sup>243</sup> Preeti Sharma, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 19, 2016.

<sup>244</sup> Mary Uyematsu Kao, “CCED Opens Photography Exhibit at Chinese American Museum,” *Amerasia Journal* blog, July 23, 2013, <http://www.amerasiajournal.org/blog/?p=2195>. For audio recordings from “The Streets Between Us” project, please visit <http://vojo.co/en/groups/streets-between-us>.

CCED to strengthen its working relationship with other Chinatown institutions and organizations like CAM. Jenny Lin, one of the CCED members that Preeti and Stefanie recruited to help with the photography project and exhibit, explained the origins of the creative project:

We were talking about how to involve people in general and how they could participate. Traditionally, people just used data. We thought if people knew the percentage of small businesses that close when Walmart comes, people would be moved to action. But we also had to understand that what people actually cared about were stories, and that they wanted to share their stories. So to take a creative approach, we were thinking of all the ways youth talk about changes in Chinatown. Originally, one of the ideas was to have people take photos of what ‘their Chinatown’ looks like. We could then take those photos and repost them in public spaces, creating a physical map throughout the city that asked you to find, interact, and play with it. In that way, our goal was to change people's relationship to Chinatown.<sup>245</sup>

Art and culture became a way for CCED members to engage people in Chinatown and craft powerful alternatives to the stories about Chinatown that were being broadcast by the business elite of the community (e.g., the Chinatown BID). Diane also emphasized the importance of CCED's efforts to share these stories:

You have to be able to understand and relate to what the major interests and concerns are in the community, and that's by communicating with the residents and the small businesses. Basically, the ones that are underrepresented don't seem to have a voice, and it's important to give them a voice and make them feel that they are a part of this

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<sup>245</sup> Jenny Lin, phone interview by the author, April 17, 2016.

community too. It's not just the landowners or the developers. They're all here in the same community, and what they want to see in the community is just as important.<sup>246</sup>

Speaking of the photo exhibit, Diane noted it offered a visually compelling and powerful way of conveying the experiences of people who live and work in Chinatown. The photo exhibit telegraphed the message that CCED focused on organizing “not just actions,” in Diane’s words, but also focused on “the power of artistic and creative ways of representing the lives and stories of people in the community.”<sup>247</sup>

CCED also sought to build an electoral strategy. On February 21, 2013, CCED hosted a candidates forum in Chinatown featuring contenders for the Los Angeles City Council seat for Council District 1.<sup>248</sup> Working together with co-sponsors SEACA, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC), Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress (NCRR), Pilipino Workers Center (PWC), OCA – Greater Los Angeles, and Chinatown Service Center, CCED brought the candidates—Jose Gardea, Gil Cedillo, Jesse Rosas, and William Morrison—to Alpine Recreation Center in Chinatown to field questions that various community stakeholders had.<sup>249</sup>

*After Walmart: Sustaining Long-Term Activism and Movement/Power Building in Chinatown*

During the Walmart campaign, CCED rooted its strategy in a vision of a Chinatown community that could sustain itself and its activism long after the Walmart campaign was over.

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<sup>246</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> “Chinatown and Surrounding Asian Community Candidate’s Forum – Council District 1,” Facebook event page, February 21, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/events/129331497241481/>.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. For video of the event, see “LA City Council District 1 – Candidate’s Forum – Feb 21, 2013,” YouTube video, 01:25:17, posted by Advancing Justice LA, March 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zt2TfWKMgs8&sns=tw>.

As Alice discussed, the campaign against the Walmart sometimes appeared to be less about winning victories in the technocratic terms of, say, the Department of Building and Safety appeal, but rather about building power among the residents and small businesses in Chinatown:

We had multiple strategies going at once. We knew there would be no silver bullet because once the paperwork was turned in and the permits were approved, we were working to appeal and go against something that had already gone into motion.<sup>250</sup>

Alice's insightful observation suggested that, although the campaign against Walmart involved turning out people to offer public comments at the ICO-related hearings and legal challenges to the City's issuance of building permits, activists recognized it would be an uphill battle because Walmart had secured building permits and proceeded with construction on the Chinatown store even as the legal challenges were moving through the Superior Court. In addition to the bringing in community support around the ICO hearings and the legal challenges, CCED members began to imagine alternative ways to change the public perception of the Chinatown Walmart. In the complex calculus and analysis of CCED members like Alice, CCED recognized that "there would be no silver bullet" in the campaign against Walmart. Understanding the campaign as an urgent issue in and of itself, as well as an opportunity to organize in Chinatown, CCED activists engaged in "multiple strategies" of organizing and movement building in Los Angeles Chinatown that focused on the technical and legal battles and also emphasized building support in the Chinatown community. In this way, CCED members participated in imagining what historian Robin D. G. Kelley has called "freedom dreams"—that is, thinking of otherwise

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<sup>250</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

possibilities and the “alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change”—that often emerge in social movements.<sup>251</sup>

From the start, CCED focused on building the participatory leadership of its members, especially the younger members. This focus on building the capacity of young people to participate more fully in the organization helped expand CCED and its organizational capacity. As more young people began to pursue roles in CCED, the work took on a life of its own wherever the CCED members could devote their energy. For instance, Alice Tse had graduated in 2012 from UC Berkeley where she had become aware of left/progressive politics. Upon returning to Los Angeles in the months after CCED had formed, she joined the organization and found a new experience:

I was nervous about joining a new space and shortly before I found out about CCED, I ran into José [a former high school classmate] and we had both recently returned to Los Angeles and were looking for jobs and wanting to get involved. So we both joined CCED and we started with a day-long retreat in September.<sup>252</sup>

Discussing her facilitation skills and interests in learning more, Alice found in CCED a space to develop her skills and contribute in a specific role that suited her pace and capacity:

There were always opportunities to step up, contribute, and learn new things. Folks in CCED were also focused on nurturing young leaders and helping us get new experiences. They encouraged us to build our capacity so I joined the steering committee and co-

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<sup>251</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), ix.

<sup>252</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

facilitated general meetings, which was where I could contribute best since I worked weekends, when much of the organizing happened.<sup>253</sup>

The more senior organizers in CCED, especially those who had been involved in organizing in Los Angeles Chinatown, brought their experiences from the Asian American Movement to discussions about what kind of direction CCED should take as it developed as an organization after the anti-Walmart campaign. Phyllis and Diane both remarked on some of the differences between AAFE, the community organization they got involved with during the Movement, and CCED. Phyllis reflected on one key distinction between the two:

The Chinatown community organization that we formed then was called AAFE—Asian Americans for Equality. There had been one called Asian Americans for Equal Employment in New York, that was the Confucius Plaza struggle. We kind of grew out of that and took their name. We just called it Asian Americans for Equality. Through that organization, we did different kinds of work in Chinatown, but through that, we met Mrs. Mar, Mrs. Szeto. That was more of a community organization because even Mrs. Mar to this day says, ‘We were a part of that organization. But CCED, we’re the cheerleaders. It’s the young people who are in charge and doing the work.’ We held the meetings in Chinese and they felt they could be a part of that. So they actually ran the organization. So, our CCED working meetings, the equivalent would be, we would have them in the meeting and they would be making the decisions and we would have the meeting in Chinese.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> Alice Tse, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 5, 2016.

<sup>254</sup> Phyllis Chiu, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 13, 2016.

Supporting Phyllis' observation about the difference in the membership of AAFE and that of CCED, Diane noted the ways in which AAFE emerged more directly out of urgent issues that mobilized community residents more widely:

There were more community people involved in AAFE than in CCED. I think it's important to get more community people involved, but you have to have the types of programs that generate that interest in a sustainable way. In terms of people coming and going, CCED experiences the same thing that AAFE experienced of having different people come and go in terms of being involved. Somehow, AAFE started more with the residents. I think our fight to get traffic signals, those were all community people that wanted to do it, sort of like the Castelar campaign against the Metro charter school. It was community based, where people who had a personal interest in improving something in the community came together. So that's why we had all these community people involved in AAFE. And plus, we [AAFE] were working with the garment workers and the restaurant workers, and they lived in Chinatown.<sup>255</sup>

The locally grounded, personal stakes of issues like the traffic signal at an intersection where a child had been hit by a car, or the immediate issue of Castelar Elementary School ceding space to a charter school, more readily prompted local residents and parents to action. The issue of the Chinatown Walmart was less quick to mobilize residents, though it did prompt opposition from the small businesses who might potentially be hurt by Walmart's entry.

### *Building Coalitional Projects in the "No Walmart in Chinatown" Campaign*

While CCED represented the activist group that was organizing people in the Chinatown community, it was a member of a larger coalition that came together to fight the Walmart from

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<sup>255</sup> Diane Tan, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 21, 2016.



opening in Chinatown. The formation of CCED as a grassroots activist group in Chinatown created new possibilities and drew attention to limitations for coalition building, particularly in the context of the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign. In addition to the actual coalition of organizations that formed to oppose Walmart in Chinatown, the formation of CCED as a visible left/progressive political space also contributed to bolstering a left/progressive Asian American political center of gravity in the landscape of Los Angeles; in doing so, CCED presented a left/progressive politics grounded in grassroots community organizing that telegraphed key political possibilities within the nonprofit industrial complex as it took form in the Asian American community.

In understanding the role of the coalition and the anti-Walmart campaign, Daniel recalled how CCED was thinking of its sustainability even in the course of the campaign. In Daniel’s words, “[w]e all knew that their investment would taper off at a certain point, and we needed to carve out space for CCED to sustain itself.”<sup>256</sup> The unions and organized labor—given their commitments to their membership—focused on strategies at the city and regional level; CCED complemented that work by focusing energies on on-the-ground community organizing. Where the organizations’ work converged in the campaign against Walmart, the coalition concentrated its efforts. For example, at the time of the campaign, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 770 was working with the UFCW-supported OUR Walmart workers throughout Los Angeles, and the Chinatown Walmart offered a specific place to focus their organizing efforts. When it came to their relationship with CCED, the unions were able to dedicate their resources to the fight Walmart at the level of city politics (e.g., in the ICO hearings) while still supporting CCED with any resources it could provide.<sup>257</sup> For example, the

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<sup>256</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>257</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

labor unions provided financial and material resources in a support capacity for CCED (e.g., printing T-shirts, buttons, flyers, banners) and also turned out workers and union staff to various anti-Walmart actions, many of which took place in Chinatown during 2012 and 2013.<sup>258</sup> APALA contributed by mobilizing people at the intersections of labor and the Asian American progressive community.<sup>259</sup>

The coalition that came together around the issue of the Walmart Neighborhood Market experienced both successes and limitations. Reflecting on the unconventional convergence of both organized labor and community groups around the Chinatown Walmart, as well as the organizational dynamics within Los Angeles Chinatown, Daniel noted the challenges of creating coalitions:

This is one of the unique times when a lot of people joined forces, and at that time, I was thinking, it's just so hard to hold the fort down... Organizations like LAANE, the unions, and APALA applied resources to specific parts of the fight. That was expected. They did everything they were expected to do. However, when it came to the Walmart fight, we toiled on getting on the same page with SEACA [Southeast Asian Community Alliance].<sup>260</sup>

In his comparison of SEACA and CCED, Daniel noted that there had not been enough trust built between both organizations—both progressive Asian American organizations based in Chinatown—to sustain collaboration after the Walmart campaign.<sup>261</sup> Insofar as CCED formed primarily as a response to the Chinatown Walmart, the general perception in the Chinatown

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<sup>258</sup> King Cheung, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 9, 2016.

<sup>259</sup> Jan Tokumar, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 26, 2016.

<sup>260</sup> Daniel Huynh, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, May 11, 2016.

<sup>261</sup> “Our History,” Southeast Asian Community Alliance, <http://www.seaca-la.org/about-us/>.

community was that CCED represented the “new kid on the block.”<sup>262</sup> The perception could likely have been attributed to CCED’s relative age and its all volunteer membership. As a newly formed organization in Chinatown, CCED did not necessarily present a “track record,” so to speak, of accomplishments in the community that more veteran community organizations had established. Moreover, its all-volunteer membership likely could not match the consistency and labor-hours that paid staff provided established community organizations, a discrepancy that would have discouraged sustained organizational collaboration. Given this perception of CCED as a “new kid on the block,” the entry of CCED into the existing organizational and political landscape stirred up some organizational tension. These organizational dynamics arose in specific moments during the campaign against Walmart and after the formation of CCED. For example, in the planning for the Chinatown action on June 30, 2012, CCED was the Chinatown organization that the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and unions brought into the planning process, while SEACA was not.<sup>263</sup> This tension is likely attributable to the different organizational structures and priorities of SEACA and CCED as well as an allocation of capacity.<sup>264</sup> As an organization that had been around since 2002, SEACA had spent a decade in Chinatown in various organizing capacities. During the campaign against Walmart in Chinatown, SEACA was in the midst of its own campaign around the Cornfield Arroyo Seco Plan (CASP), a “specific plan” that offers a detailed city planning vision and guidelines for an area of Lincoln Heights, Cypress Park, and Chinatown located around the Los Angeles River.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> King Cheung, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 9, 2016.

<sup>263</sup> King Cheung, in discussion with the author, September 13, 2016.

<sup>264</sup> Diane Tan, in email correspondence to the author, October 6, 2016.

<sup>265</sup> Sissy Trinh, “Youth Group Helps to Create a Model of L.A. Planning,” *KCET Departures*, February 21, 2014, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/departures/youth-group-helps-to-create-a-model-of-la-planning>;

When it came to the anti-Walmart campaign, SEACA’s goals and organizational priorities may have differed from those of CCED, and, consequently, affected the nature of the role that SEACA played relative to CCED in the anti-Walmart coalition. Furthermore, SEACA’s nature as a “more traditional” nonprofit organization that relied on a top-down structure and funding from foundations differed from CCED’s position as “an organizing, advocacy organization built on community empowerment.”<sup>266</sup> In other words, the differences in the two organizations’ approaches to the Walmart campaign could be attributed to their respective organizational structures, accountability to funding sources, and organizing philosophies.<sup>267</sup> Ultimately, this commentary on the dynamic between SEACA and CCED does not mean that the two organizations did not work well together. In fact, there were informal exchanges and interpersonal relationships between the organizations in addition to the collaboration of the two organizations in the anti-Walmart coalition. Additionally, staff and youth participants in SEACA would often join CCED members in organizing efforts around the Walmart, including the Friday night vigils.<sup>268</sup>

The formation of CCED as a left/progressive grassroots activist space also had an impact on building a left/progressive Asian American network in Los Angeles. CCED’s role in the anti-Walmart campaign helped to bring the issue into the national spotlight when Lisa Lei brought an anti-Walmart stance to her internship in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2013. Lei had

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Carren Jao, “Cornfield Arroyo Seco Specific Plan Addresses Affordable Housing Concerns,” KCET, September 10, 2012, <https://www.kcet.org/confluence/cornfield-arroyo-seco-specific-plan-addresses-affordable-housing-concerns>.; Cheng, “Community Organizing in Los Angeles Chinatown: Historical Case Study of the Cornfields,” 49-50.

<sup>266</sup> Craig Wong, in correspondence with the author, October 6, 2016.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Jenny Lin, phone interview by the author, April 17, 2016.

supported CCED's organizing efforts in Chinatown as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Irvine, during the "No Walmart in Chinatown" campaign. During her internship for OCA, a prominent Asian American civil rights organization, Lei and two other interns shared a video on social media "of themselves making a rude gesture about Walmart."<sup>269</sup> When OCA staff learned of the video, they dismissed the three interns. The dismissal of the interns made national headlines and resurfaced concerns about the close relationships between established civil rights organizations and corporate interests including Walmart, Southwest, and Philip Morris.<sup>270</sup>

Comparably, CCED connected with workers and organizers around and outside of Los Angeles. The emergence of CCED in early 2012 coincided approximately with the emergence of the Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), an advocacy group composed of Walmart employees that was initially supported financially by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW).<sup>271</sup> In late 2012, OUR Walmart made headlines with the largest action it had coordinated to date at the time: a nation-wide coordination of anti-Walmart protests on Black Friday.<sup>272</sup> In 2012, CCED and OUR Walmart worked together for various

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<sup>269</sup> Lee Fang, "Interns at a Civil Rights Org Say They Were Fired for Disrespecting Walmart," *The Nation*, August 5, 2013, <https://www.thenation.com/article/interns-civil-rights-org-say-they-were-fired-disrespecting-walmart/>. It is important to note that Lei and the other interns were working through OCA National, and not the OCA – Greater Los Angeles chapter. The letters OCA do not stand for anything, though they are a reference to the organization's former moniker, the Organization for Chinese Americans. The Asian American civil rights organization is now known by its rebranded name, OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates. For more, see "About OCA," OCA, <http://www.oceanational.org/?page=AboutUs>.

<sup>270</sup> Fang, "Interns at a Civil Rights Org Say They Were Fired for Disrespecting Walmart."

<sup>271</sup> Rolf, *The Fight for Fifteen*, 87.

<sup>272</sup> Worker Center Watch, "OUR Walmart Founding," accessed September 10, 2016, <http://workercenterwatch.com/worker-centers/our-walmart/founding/>; Susan Berfield, "Walmart vs. Union-Backed OUR Walmart," *Bloomberg*, December 13, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-12-13/walmart-vs-dot-union-backed-our-walmart>.

organization efforts and actions. In October 2012, CCED members met with workers and organizers from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and one of their affiliates, South Africa Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), to discuss worker organizing against Walmart in South Africa.<sup>273</sup> In June 2013, CCED co-sponsored a worker solidarity panel and discussion at the UCLA Labor Center that featured representatives from the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, which was involved in organizing and supporting workers in Bangladesh, and providing support to workers in the wake of the April 2013 factory collapse and fire in Bangladesh.<sup>274</sup>

### *Conclusion*

CCED formed as an organization in 2012, but it by no means came about unexpectedly. In fact, the grassroots activist organization had its roots in the Asian American Movement organizing of the 1960s and 1970s, the activism of Asian American organizers who had already been thinking of ways to engage their communities in Los Angeles, and a new generation of college students and graduates who had been politicized through student organizing and ethnic studies curricula. From the beginning of the campaign against Walmart in Chinatown, CCED played an important role in building a broad base of support and mobilizing varying stakeholders, including small businesses, residents, college students, teachers, young people, and progressive allies, to voice opposition to the Walmart. In the campaign against Walmart,

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<sup>273</sup> Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/ccedla>. The caption for a group photo on October 10, 2012, reads, “CCED members met with Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and one of their affiliates, South Africa Commercial, Catering, and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU). They are workers and organizers from Walmarts in South Africa. We had a good conversation about Walmarts in America as well as drawing connections between the struggle in America with that in South Africa.”

<sup>274</sup> South Asians for Justice – Los Angeles (SAJ – LA), Facebook event page, June 9, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/events/633576826671375/>.

CCED's organic and experimental approach to organizing tactics and strategy became its signature trait: CCED as a grassroots volunteer organization unconstrained by 501(c)3 status could try what no other community organization dared. In doing so, and planning creative projects like the photography exhibit, CCED pushed the envelope for activism, so to speak.

## Conclusion

### Los Angeles Chinatown After & Beyond Walmart

From the beginning of its campaign against Wal-Mart, CCED members realized that it was not enough to mobilize people against oppression but to also help people envision an alternative Chinatown based on equity, justice, and respect for the rights of all people. Beginning with its campaign against Wal-Mart and continuing into its current work protecting tenant rights, CCED members are creating spaces in Chinatown where people's lives and human dignity matter more than corporate profits or property values.<sup>275</sup>

—Glenn Omatsu

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule.<sup>276</sup>

—Walter Benjamin

Writing of grassroots activist organizations like Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED), Glenn Omatsu noted that “today’s movements do not organize people to ‘demand more’ or focus on gaining material wealth to live comfortable lives, but are focused on building community and human relationships around values that reject the forces of militarism and materialism that dehumanize people and destroy communities.”<sup>277</sup> This research began with a question about the origin story of a grassroots Asian American activist organization in Los Angeles Chinatown. This origin story was one I wondered often about and only heard bits and pieces of, as I had joined Chinatown Community for Equitable Development (CCED) at the tail end of the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign in June 2013. In the last few months of the campaign, leading up to the date when the Chinatown Neighborhood Market officially opened, I met and learned from Chinatown residents and activists, young and old, who demonstrated a strong commitment to the community and neighborhood, and who conveyed a strong sense of

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<sup>275</sup> Glenn Omatsu, “Envisioning the Next Revolutions: How Today's Asian American Movements Connect to Worldwide Activism,” *CUNY Forum* 3, no. 1 (2015): 26.

<sup>276</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

<sup>277</sup> Omatsu, “Envisioning the Next Revolutions,” 29.



left/progressive politics, too. I learned what it was like to work in an intergenerational organization committed to building power. I also learned from activists who—to this day—embody the value that Glenn Omatsu has called militant humility.<sup>278</sup> Over time, I became increasingly curious about the ways in which the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign had informed the existing dynamics and relationships of the organization, both internally between members and externally with other people outside of CCED. I learned about the impressive activism and community-labor coalition that had come together partly as a response to the Chinatown Walmart, and partly in response to a desire to create a space for Chinese American activists. This MA thesis was intended to better understand some of the dimensions of the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign, and to draw lessons from this campaign that might potentially be applied in present and future work.

Chinatown existed before Walmart, and it continues to exist after Walmart. When Walmart shuttered its doors with two days’ notice in January 2016, two and a half years after it had opened in Chinatown, the announcement came relatively quickly and caught many people by surprise.<sup>279</sup> By then, some of the changes that activists and community members had been concerned about had already arrived: a new luxury apartment complex (Jia Apartments) had

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<sup>278</sup> Omatsu, “Envisioning the Next Revolutions,” 29-30. As Omatsu writes of militant humility in practice, “Practicing militant humility is not easy and requires ongoing ideological clarity. Community elders caution us to be militant towards those who oppress our communities but humble to those we serve.” See also Glenn Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 56-88.

<sup>279</sup> Jeff Wattenhofer, “Chinatown’s Much-Hated Walmart Closing After Just Two Years,” *Curbed Los Angeles*, January 19, 2016, <http://la.curbed.com/2016/1/19/10845470/chinatowns-controversial-walmart-neighborhood-market-is-no-more>; Josie Huang, “Wal-Mart leaves behind LA’s Chinatown – and mixed emotions,” *89.3 KPCC*, January 18, 2016, <http://www.scpr.org/news/2016/01/18/56912/wal-mart-leaves-behind-las-chinatown-and-mixed-emo/>.

already opened, and Far East Plaza was quickly taking on its reputation as home to trendy restaurants like Roy Choi's Chego! and Ramen Champ.<sup>280</sup>

Thinking back to the atmosphere of the anti-Walmart campaign and how CCED approached the fight, Alice remembered, "It felt like we had to hold the line because a Walmart opening would set a dangerous precedent and would lead to more challenges."<sup>281</sup> Even three years after the Walmart campaign concluded in the fall of 2013, at the time of the writing of this thesis, CCED has gone through many discussions around what kind of organization it wants to be. Since it first coalesced around the urgency of the proposed Walmart in Chinatown, CCED has developed by-laws and a committee structure that provides organization and permits participatory leadership from its volunteer members. Since the conclusion of the "No Walmart in Chinatown" campaign, CCED has shifted its work to focus on tenant organizing and housing rights work in and around Los Angeles Chinatown. Discussions and questions among CCED members regarding the direction of the organization, even as it expands and shifts its work priorities, arise periodically. As Phyllis astutely noted:

For CCED now, one of the big questions is going to be...what kind of organization should it be? Should it be an activist core, or a community mass organization? [AAFE] was a mass organization, meaning that half the members were community members and

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<sup>280</sup> Far East Plaza has continued to be an emerging hot spot for trendy restaurants. See Eddie Kim, "How an Aging Chinatown Mall Became a Hipster Food Haven," *Los Angeles Downtown News*, March 28, 2016, [http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/how-an-aging-chinatown-mall-became-a-hipster-food-haven/article\\_b407e372-f2c3-11e5-a794-e70f2ee0afe3.html](http://www.ladowntownnews.com/news/how-an-aging-chinatown-mall-became-a-hipster-food-haven/article_b407e372-f2c3-11e5-a794-e70f2ee0afe3.html); Jonathan Gold, "Chinatown emerging as L.A.'s hottest restaurant destination," *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-future-gold-20150117-story.html>; Pedro Moura, "Noodle Lovers, Get Ready for Ramen Champ at Chinatown's Far East Plaza," January 16, 2015, <http://www.laweekly.com/restaurants/noodle-lovers-get-ready-for-ramen-champ-at-chinatowns-far-east-plaza-5340577>; Jenn Harris, "There's finally a Nashville hot chicken restaurant in Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/food/dailydish/la-dd-nashville-hot-chicken-howlin-rays-20160421-story.html>.

<sup>281</sup> Alice Tse, interview with the author, April 5, 2016, Los Angeles, CA.

not active young people who could speak English and stuff. It'll be interesting where CCED goes, because we never have an issue getting people to come and participate in things. Most of the people we can get to stay on, activists. There's a lot of students who graduate, different life issues happen, people cycle in and out. I'm not sure about the future—that to me is a very interesting question. What will CCED actually become?<sup>282</sup>

Even as CCED has been grappling with a question of its organizational identity, it has also been focusing its efforts on organizing around various conditions in Chinatown. As Craig noted in an email, “We’ll have to see how our organizing goes and what conditions develop in Chinatown. It’s a grand experiment.”<sup>283</sup>

This thesis reflects on the various narratives in the campaign against the Walmart Neighborhood Market in Los Angeles Chinatown. The media narratives constructed during the “No Walmart in Chinatown” campaign focused on dominant portrayals of Chinatown as a food desert and interpreted the controversy as one between organized labor and big business. The anti-Walmart coalition responded with counter-narratives that centered existing small businesses in Chinatown and grounded the narrative in local terms. In addition, the city and legal archives documented limited narratives of the campaign that focused on the interim control ordinance and various legal challenges involving Walmart’s building permits. Finally, the formation and evolution of CCED built on the legacy of Asian American Movement activism in Los Angeles Chinatown and also created something new. Through their relationships, political vision, and organizing tactics, CCED members attempted to broaden their activism at the same time that they built grassroots power in Los Angeles Chinatown.

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<sup>282</sup> Phyllis Chiu, interview by the author, Los Angeles, CA, April 13, 2016.

<sup>283</sup> Craig Wong, in email correspondence to the author, October 6, 2016.

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