

## Little Tokyo Political Tour

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### *1. Why did you choose the particular community for your political tours?*

There are several reasons why the students in this class wanted to go on a political tour of Little Tokyo. A lot of people can identify with the community in Little Tokyo, while others had prior connections with this community and wanted to learn more about its political history. There were also a handful of people without prior connections who were interested in getting to know the Little Tokyo. Some had been to the area previously, but only for shopping, dining, and/or entertainment purposes, and did not know about the controversial history of this area.

Some of us are connected to Little Tokyo through family, student organizations, and/or personal ties to the community. Specific involvements that connect students to Little Tokyo include the Nikkei Student Union (NSU) at UCLA, Manzanar Pilgrimage committee, Asian American Studies Majors and Minors, participants in the Little Tokyo Service Center and San Tai San children's basketball tournament for the Little Tokyo Recreation Center campaign. For others, Little Tokyo is one of many ethnic areas in the Los Angeles area. We come in and out of Little Tokyo as participants in events, visitors, and consumers, yet do not spend time learning about how the area has developed nor what struggles it currently faces.

Something that is common across the board for our group was the general interest in learning more about the political history of the community. With the rich history that the Japanese American and Japanese community has in Los Angeles, we did not want to miss out on a chance to get to know the community first hand. This included being able to take the political tour from those who work in Little Tokyo through the Little Tokyo Service Center, J-Town Voice, and Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress.

### *2. What have you learned in your previous Asian American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and related classes about this community?*

In Asian American Studies classes here at UCLA, we have learned about many issues relating to the Japanese American community due to its extensive history here in the United States. For instance, the most well-known Japanese American plight is that of internment. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, all persons of Japanese descent were scapegoats and consequently, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which forced 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans to relocate into the interior of the United States. This had large repercussions on Japanese ethnic

enclaves like Little Tokyo. It was in Little Tokyo that many of the interned Japanese were gathered before going to the internment camps. When the Japanese vacated Little Tokyo, it became Bronzeville, with mainly African American occupants, which changed not only the population, but also the ideals and perspectives of the community. Even today, Little Tokyo remains a diverse community where people of all ethnicities – mainly Latinos and African Americans – call home. For a long time, Japanese Americans fought for justice from the United States for the atrocities they suffered during internment, but the United States government would not recognize them. Finally, in 1988, President Carter recognized the injustice suffered by the Japanese Americans and granted reparations. Even after all this, the Japanese Americans still fight adamantly against current social injustices, such as Michelle Malkin and her atrocious book defending Japanese internment. We have had many great community heroes to look up to, such as Yuji Ichioko, who coined the term “Asian American” and focused attention away from the commodification and exoticism of Asian Americans through the use of “oriental.” In addition, Yuri Kochiyama spent her whole life advocating for all minority rights, not just Asian American, alongside great historical figures like Malcolm X.

Today, we as college students are taught the difference we can make in the community by taking examples from the past. We have united together under causes like Don Nakanishi’s Tenure fight and have kept our responsibility to educate others and raise awareness through Week of Remembrance and the Manzanar Pilgrimage. Right now, we are fighting for a recreation center in Little Tokyo so that we can bring the community together as a social and cultural network and to provide a safe environment for the children of the community. These are all things that we have learned as college students through Asian American studies and ethnic studies and as active members of our community, because this is not the history that is taught to us in high school. It is in college that we learn about a life that is not United States-centric and we learn about how we can work to better our community by advocating for changes to bring about awareness and understanding and to preserve the diverse history of our country by preserving our ethnic identity and culture.

*3. How did you prepare for your political tour? For example, what did you find out about the history of this community, size of population, other demographic characteristics, etc.? What are current issues facing low-income residents or immigrant workers in this neighborhood — e.g., housing, health care, education, police abuse, etc.? Where did you find information for your tour preparation?*

In preparation for this political tour, we as a group did not formally meet to discuss our knowledge of Los Angeles’s Little Tokyo. Much of this can be attributed to practical reasons, for our group was extremely large and coordinating schedules would have been difficult. However, a few of us did casually discuss our knowledge of the area on the day of the tour in a small group sharing what we had learned about the community’s history, current struggles, and demographics. Therefore, our preparation for this political tour was predominantly independent and varied according to the individual. For those of us that

did research the community, the majority of them used the Internet or tried to remember what they had learned about the community from previous classes.

Los Angeles's Little Tokyo currently is a diverse community that is home to an ethnically diverse population comprised of Latinos, African Americans, etc. However, it still remains home to "more than 200,000 Japanese-American residents." Little Tokyo began as an ethnic enclave for Japanese immigrants and was established by the earliest wave of Japanese immigrants. According to the Asian Biz Guide website "Little Tokyo began modestly in 1885 when an ex-seaman named Kame opened a small restaurant on the west side of Los Angeles Street, just below First Street. At the time, only about two dozen Japanese were living in Los Angeles. During the 1890s, Los Angeles total population doubled from 50,000 to 102,000 people due in part to the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad which opened the West to the rest of the United States." Coined Little Tokyo in 1930 by the *Rafu Shimpo* – a community newspaper that still is in existence – the community flourished until WWII when the Japanese American community was abruptly evacuated leaving Little Tokyo abandoned. During these years "more than 6,000 people who called Little Tokyo home were moved to U.S. Army detention camps." It is then that Little Tokyo became known as Bronzerville as the population became largely African American. Blacks began to move into California to work in the war industry and chose to settle in the recently emptied area. (<http://www.asianbizguide.com/town/town/japan.htm>)

After the war Japanese American internees moved back to the area but Little Tokyo was never able to fully reestablish the size and vitality that it experienced prior to WWII. During the 1970s, developers, looking to transform Little Tokyo to fit the needs of Japanese tourists and businessmen, alienated the Japanese American community. Currently "bounded by First and Third Streets from Main to Alameda Streets," Little Tokyo remains the heart of the Los Angeles Japanese American community, hosting public celebrations on major Japanese holidays and specifically Japanese American traditions such as Nikkei Week. (<http://www.janm.org/nrc/q-a.php#LittleTokyo> & <http://www.asianbizguide.com/town/town/japan.htm>).

Little Tokyo has been the home to many Japanese Americans for the last one hundred years. During Little Tokyo's redevelopment in the 1970s, corporations wanted to turn this community into a place of economics and tourist center for big business. While the New Otani Hotel and Weller Court were being built, many Issei/Nisei and Mexican residents, as well as a number of small business and community cultural groups were evicted to make room for luxury suits and upscale tourist boutiques. There were very few opportunities for local business to invest. Currently, the New Otani Hotel is Little Tokyo's largest employer, with 280 workers. Almost all are immigrants, and approximately 70% are Latino and 25% are Asian Pacific American (mostly Japanese and Pilipino). The hotel management has eliminated paid healthcare and an adequate lunch break period, as well as suppressing annual raise to only .03 to .15 cents and hour. With the help of Hotel Employees and Restaurants Employees (HERE) Local 11, these employees have tried to form a union. They would like to gain healthcare, adequate wages, and worker's security and pension plans. However, the Otani Hotel management

has waged an anti-union attack and harassed and intimidated those workers that are most active in the campaign. This issue of workers' rights continues to be a pressing issue in the community.

Because Little Tokyo is such an ethnically diverse community, they need culturally and linguistically sensitive social services to help monolingual residents gain health access as well as low-income housing. Because most of the low-income housing were torn down to build hotels, there are few places left in Little Tokyo. Casa Heiwa and Little Tokyo Towers are one of the few places left that offers low-income housing to families and seniors. Overall, Little Tokyo needs community development services to assist low-income residents, community revitalization and preservation of historical buildings and the culture.

\*This information was courtesy of Google. I used sites such as the Little Tokyo Service Center, and the Japanese American Network to find these current issues.

*4. What did you learn from your political tour? How can you share this expanded awareness with others, such as other UCLA students?*

We learned quite a few raw facts about Little Tokyo that would be easy to pass on to other people; even just driving by a fact can be brought up. For example, there is a lot of construction going on and it is easy to explain the state of construction because the government has always been shrinking Little Tokyo's borders by taking up the community's real estate and building things that do not give back to Little Tokyo or benefit the community at all.

One of the biggest needs and concerns of the community is the need for a recreation center. Community leaders and organizations have been working hard to get one built for over ten years. Unfortunately, due to politics and lack of available property, the recreation center is at a standstill. The rec-center would not only provide the community with much needed resources for residents and children, but would also bring more people into Little Tokyo, which would in turn bolster the local businesses. Little Tokyo plays host to many community events – such as the Chibi-K run and the San Tai San 3-on-3 Basketball Tournament – to drive awareness and support to the rec-center cause.

Visiting Fugetsu-Do can be very enlightening as it is the oldest business establishment in Little Tokyo. The owner of Fugetsu-Do is heavily involved in the rec-center campaign. Participating in such an event or publicizing for it is also a great way to dispelling knowledge.

Another major issue in Little Tokyo is the need for affordable housing. Organizations like the Little Tokyo Service Center Community Development Corporation have done wonders in obtaining old buildings and transforming them into housing projects for local elders and families. However, many of the newer developments are high-income, luxury apartments and studios. The low-income housing in Little Tokyo also shows that ethnic

enclaves are not always a bubble. There are other races and social classes and they are often not exclusive to other types of communities.

One part of Little Tokyo that is easy to talk about is the Weller Court Peace Knot. Weller Court has the history of being built by a non-community construction firm and on top of that the firm is owned by a World War II war criminal. This was not a part of the original negotiations and was upsetting to the community as well as the artist who made the peace knot sculpture.

**5. *What are ways that you will continue to increase your understanding of this particular community? Be specific.***

In order to continue to increase our understanding of the Japanese American community, we should first take advantage of the resources about us. UCLA's diverse curriculum and student body have much to offer. First, UCLA's Asian American Studies Department offers many courses that touch upon the Japanese American community, such as the Japanese American Experience, Asian American History, and Asian American Communities. Because Japanese Americans have held a presence in American society for so many years, their struggles, triumphs, and history are an integral part of many Asian American studies courses. Second, student organizations, such as Asian Pacific Coalition (APC), Concerned Asian Pacific Islander Students for Action (CAPSA), and Nikkei Student Union (NSU), provide opportunities to get involved through community awareness, activism, and education. Furthermore, NSU offers programs such as CHAMPS, the pilgrimage to Manzanar, Chibi-K Run, San Tai San, and its annual cultural night, which gives the students at UCLA a chance to share the Japanese American culture and issues with a large and diverse crowd of community members.

A large pool of information about the Japanese American community can also be found in the community itself. Little Tokyo is home to a large percentage of Japanese American residents, businesses, and organizations. The Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) and the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) are great places to visit if an interest in Japanese American culture and history arises, but there are volunteering and internship opportunities available as well. Japanese American community based news magazines, such as *Rodan*, *Gidra* and *Rafu Shimpo*, are good sources of current information on events that are going on in local Japanese American communities. Through these sources we can find out about the latest status on current campaigns, such as the high end apartment complex projects and the efforts to build a recreation center. Learning about the community can even be as simple as attending local events, such as the Tofu Festival, Obon, Day of Remembrance, and San Tai San. By attending these events, not only is there an opportunity to learn, but to play an active role in helping the community.

**6. *Do you feel that in the future you can lead a future political tour for other students? Why or why not?***

With the knowledge we have gained at UCLA and this political tour, it is very possible to conduct our own future political tours of Little Tokyo, as well as other Asian American communities. The majority of our class that did participate on the tour consisted of Asian American undergraduate and graduate AAS majors. With proper research and guidance, political tours could be given and more evolved by future AAS students. However, there are certain aspects of political tours given by political leaders and/or elders that students would not be able to replicate.

Having recently been on a political tour in historical Little Tokyo we saw unique aspects that made the tour very knowledgeable and interesting. In our particular tour, there were many guides who were older and had personal stories that were interjected during the excursion. This gave a legitimacy that could not be earned without direct experience.

Although we have no direct historical experience linked to certain ethnic enclaves, community involvement and knowledge may bypass the necessary personal historical experience to gain legitimacy. One of the other tours was given by a recent UCLA graduate. He is currently working with a political candidate and is required to have historical urban development knowledge in order to resolve intra-community conflicts. His thorough knowledge and experience working with these communities gives him legitimacy.

An overall main theme of the Little Tokyo tour consisted of redevelopment of community property. If your job requires historical and even contemporary knowledge for urban planning and development, this would give you the necessary credit in order to give a respectable political tour.

*7. Begin to envision an expanded role for students in our communities. Based on your political tour, what could this expanded role be? Be specific.*

Since students are a part of our communities they should take part in community activities as well. Though some students take part in community events and such, a great way for students to have an expanded role in the community would be leading community events. Since students do have university resources, it would make sense for a student to be able to develop a community event. One prime example of this expanded role in the community is the way the students in our Asian American Studies 116 class are running the carnivals for class credit. Giving the community a chance to have fun, as well as learn new things about their particular community and about the Asian American community in general, would be a great way for students to show their potential as community leaders. In the future it would be great to see students run more community events besides just carnivals, in order to expand their role in the community as leaders.

After taking the community political tour of Little Tokyo, we realized the biggest challenge facing Little Tokyo is not only protecting it from gentrification, but also helping Little Tokyo expand. Today's students can play a vital role in the future

development of Little Tokyo. We must educate ourselves on the history of Little Tokyo in order to understand these current threats. By understanding the causes and effects of issues, such as internment, assimilation, and suburbanization, students can help analyze and combat the causes of the decline of Little Tokyo. Student involvement with local organizations, such as the Little Tokyo Service Center, can help prevent further deterioration of the area and help with their current preservation programs. Events like the Chibi-K Run and San Tai San will help revive Little Tokyo and build a recreation center for the community to play in, learn about their culture, and invest in their history. Students can also help increase community awareness and become active in grassroots organizing. This seemed to be effective in preventing the construction of the police station, jail, and fire station in Little Tokyo. However, much more awareness and support will be needed in the future in order to revitalize Little Tokyo. By rallying the community behind preservation and expansion, Los Angeles politicians will have to address these issues and understand the importance of Little Tokyo.