

Little Tokyo Political Tour 1

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Why did you choose this community for your political tour?

There are a multitude of reasons why the students in the Saturday group wanted to go on a political tour of Little Tokyo. For some of us, we already had the knowledge and experience of going to the various other Asian enclaves around Los Angeles. During the summer, a few members of our group visited Little Saigon in Westminster and toured the Asian Garden Mall with Professor Vu Pham and found it very surprising how it is one of the largest jewelry centers in Southern California. Others have also been to P-town and K-town and learned a lot about those communities from their peers, and just recently several group members participated in the Chinese Historical Society's tour of Chinatown. Despite living in Los Angeles and attending UCLA, many in our group have never really had the opportunity to explore Little Tokyo, which is why they chose it for their political tour. There were also those in the tour that did their comic book based on the Little Tokyo Recreation Center and the grapefruit tree, which sparked their interest to learn more about other areas of Little Tokyo.

As Asian American majors, there were many in the tour that chose Little Tokyo because

they recently heard about the new development that is beginning to transpire in the Downtown area and wanted to know how it would affect Little Tokyo. As frequent visitors to Little Tokyo and Downtown, part of the reason why some of us chose Little Tokyo was because it was located close to the areas where there was planned development. Those group members already saw the negative effects of redevelopment on other ethnic communities such as Koreatown, and wanted to learn how the new Downtown developments would also affect the Little Tokyo community. Going on the Little Tokyo tour provided us with political insights into the community that we previously lacked. Conducting research and listening to our peer's presentations also broadened our knowledge of the various issues that exist between ethnic communities and city politics. We wanted to understand how an ethnic community, and more specifically an Asian American community, is affected by new waves of development. Thus, as a group we chose this community to learn more about its long history of political activism and link that history to the contemporary struggles that are occurring right in our backyard.

Regardless of our previous exposure to Little Tokyo, many of the individuals in our group had little understanding of the political significance of places in the community. It therefore helped us to utilize our class resources. We knew that some group members were heavily involved in Little Tokyo and we knew that they could give a valuable perspective through an insider's view. This helped us ground our research and guide us as we implemented the tour. This also made us confident in our collective ability to conduct independent research, learn about, and teach others some of the political aspects of this community.

What have you learned in your previous Asian American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and related classes (e.g., Sociology, Labor Studies, Anthropology, etc.) about this community?

In previous Asian American Studies classes, UCLA students learned that the community of Little Tokyo has been shaped by the dedicated involvement of Japanese Americans in the past and the present. Little Tokyo is an ethnic enclave for Japanese Americans, but the story of the town goes beyond cultural festivities, businesses, and food. It is about preserving a past that has been ingrained United States history and yet regrettably absent for history textbooks.

We also learned that from the late nineteenth century until World War II, Japanese Americans created a “complex ethnic economy” in Little Tokyo - one made of networks and businesses that developed as a means of surviving within a racially segregated society. However, the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II proved a major turning point for the community. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II has been a part of United States history, but portrayals of the incident have been skewed throughout the use of propaganda by the U.S. government. Japanese Americans went through a dramatic loss when they had their homes, businesses, and lives confiscated with Executive Order 9066. Misrepresentations in war movies (which were controlled by the government as well) showed that the Japanese Americans were willingly and happily moving into concentration camps with the help of voiceovers narrating the "new journey" for them.

During this time, Little Tokyo was also drastically reduced in size and upon returning from “camp” the Japanese American residents dispersed. But Little Tokyo still remains the center of activity for Japanese Americans in Southern California. The heart of Little Tokyo as a survival mechanism and the center of activity are still evident with examples such as J-leagues

and Buddhist churches that originated to simultaneously challenge mainstream ideals while surviving in a racist society. For instance, J-leagues began as basketball leagues for Japanese American youth who were not accepted into other youth leagues, while Buddhist temples were called “churches” so that individuals could escape persecution while still keeping their faith.

Due to these survival techniques, Japanese Americans are often seen as the most “Americanized” Asian American community since the largely third, fourth, and fifth generation descendants who make up the majority of the community have lost touch with many aspects of the Japanese culture and language. However, they are still an integral part of the Asian American community since many of these “Americanized” Sansei (third generation) were active in the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that continue to benefit many communities of color today.

Asian American Studies classes teach students to delve into the reclamation of their histories with the suggested and insightful concept of oral histories. History can be reclaimed as the preponderance of resources have been within reach. Museums, monuments, exhibits, walking tours, and other community events give students the opportunity to learn and interpret their own and others' histories. This political tour was thus our opportunity to experience something that we only learned about in classes.

How did you prepare for your political tour? For example, what did you find out about the history of the 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 our Little Tokyo Political Tour, Kio and Melissa created a sign up sheet and distributed it during class to find out who was interested in going to Little Tokyo. After getting everyone's names and emails, they decided that there should be two different political tours due to the number of interested people. The first political tour was scheduled for February 17, before the Day of Remembrance event at the Japanese American National Museum. The second political tour was scheduled for the following Wednesday, February 21. The organizers thought that the Saturday tour would be especially convenient for those who wanted to go to the Day of Remembrance event for their community project. But they also realized that going on a weekday would allow the group to actually talk with members of the community that worked throughout Little Tokyo.

We utilized our resources and were able to get a ton of information through Kio's contacts at the Little Tokyo Service Center regarding political tours that were previously done in Little Tokyo. We had many different packets of information regarding the various places in Little Tokyo including businesses, historical district, memorials, art pieces, etc. We also had packets from the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations and the J-Town Voice, two groups that had both organized Political Tours in Little Tokyo aimed at educating Nikkei youth. Kio and Melissa met up ahead of time to plan a route through Little Tokyo and pick different sites that would fit for this assignment. They then created a list of the tour stops to hand out to the group during the tour.

As the tour was being organized it also seemed like a perfect way to practice the Shared Leadership we learned about in class. To do this, everyone interested in the tour was asked to do something to contribute. To expedite the process, Kio and Melissa assigned group members to the different sites to do research on and find out its political significance to the community. The assignment was then to write a paragraph or two about the information they found and present the information to their peers during the tour. To get students invested in the process, it was thought that it would be nice if everyone got a chance to speak, research, and learn about Little Tokyo on their own. The group members began by using information Kio and Melissa received from Little Tokyo contacts. In addition, we again used our resources at the Little Tokyo Service Center and six staff members: Jenni Kuida, Mike Murase, Kei Nagao, Takao Suzuki, Thomas Yee, & Evelyn Yoshimura who graciously gave us their emails so that our group members could contact people involved in the community about questions they may have about their section of the Little Tokyo Political Tour. For more information, students were also encouraged to visit the following websites: www.ltsc.org, www.janm.org, www.discovernikkei.org, www.rafu.com. Finally, the Saturday group was also encouraged to collaborate with students from the Wednesday group who were researching the same stops on the tour. The following is a brief summary of the information that the Saturday group prepared and presented for the political tour. The information is listed in the same order presented on the tour.

Historical Businesses (Bert and Linda L.)

In 1885, the first business opened in what is now Little Tokyo. Through the next 18 years, only about 16 more businesses opened. In 1903, over 2,000 Japanese came from San Francisco

in search of work and settled in the East First Street district and in the Sixth and Olive area where Japanese employment agencies existed. At this time Little Tokyo began to be called Little Tokyo. The Exclusion Act of 1924 halted further immigration from Japan and Japanese living in Los Angeles County were concentrated into seven or eight compact communities. Almost all Japanese lived within a three-mile radius of the corner of First and San Pedro Streets.

In Little Tokyo, the National Historical Landmark is a stretch of 13 buildings along and near East First Street. It is the nation's 2,147th formal historical landmark. This prestige enables the property to be eligible for more restoration grants and loans. The sidewalk in the Historical District holds historic quotes and a timeline about the businesses that operated along the street between the 1890's and 1940's. Some of the historical businesses that stand today at the Far East Cafe and Fugetsu Do. The Far East Cafe was opened in 1935 and still holds the same essence that it did over 70 years ago. The Café has been historically preserved from the furnishings to the menu (minus the new additions). Fugetsu Do is a family owned and operated confectionary store opened in 1903. Once owned by Seiichi Kito, Brian Kito, his grandson, now operates it. When Executive Order 9066 was issued, the Kitos had to liquidate their assets. After their internment, they worked hard to rebuild and were able to reopen in 1946. Brian Kito realizes that many Japanese have a sentimental attachment to his store and puts off on remodeling.

Union Center for the Arts/Old Union Church (Angelo & Grace S.)

Before the Union Center for the Arts, the building was a Japanese Union Church built in 1922. With the signing of the Executive Order 9066, Japanese Americans were subject to internment and the church was used as a processing center for Japanese Americans awaiting

internment. The anti-Japanese sentiment was detrimental not only to the well-being and safety of Japanese Americans, but also their properties while they were away at camp. Many homes and businesses were demolished or vandalized, leaving many returning internees with nothing to come back to. The building became a National Historic Landmark in 1995, paying tribute to all the residents of Little Tokyo who was interned. There are engravings on the floor, one which read “Families awaiting detention here.” It was disheartening, yet at the same time, I was able to appreciate the fact that we can come so close to witnessing the remnants of the evacuation.

Today, the Union Center for the Arts building is shared by the East West Players, which is the first Asian American theatre, which is also written and performed by Asian American artists. Along with East West Players is Visual Communications, which is the oldest Asian American media arts organization in the world. With such history and the efforts of rebuilding, this Union Center for the Arts can continue to grow and provide Asian Americans with opportunities for arts and culture

New Otani Hotel (Doug & Quyen)

In 1976, the development of the New Otani Hotel created much controversy in the Japanese community. In order to construct the new building, the Sun Hotel, which provided affordable shelter for many Japanese Americans, had to be demolished. Many groups were formed to protest against the eviction of the residence living in the Sun Hotel. The main group facilitating the anti-eviction campaign was the Little Tokyo’s People’s Rights Organization (LTPRO). Their efforts were not enough to stop the construction of the New Otani Hotel. Unfortunately, of the sixty-two families residing in the Sun Hotel, only nine were qualified to be

relocated into another home. Although many families were forced to leave their homes for another, the New Otani Hotel attracted other people to visit Little Tokyo. The New Otani Hotel became a tourist attraction, which brought in more traffic into the Japanese community. With more people entering Little Tokyo, neighboring businesses are able to thrive.

Little Tokyo Redevelopment (Linda X.)

At the beginning of Little Tokyo Redevelopment, the program demolished the entire northwest section of Little Tokyo in an effort to expand and revitalize areas of Los Angeles. Instead, it led to the displacement of over 1,000 Japanese American residents of Little Tokyo and created economic and social problems within the community. It knocked down businesses such as Mikawayama confectionary and landmarks such as the Olympic Hotel and Tokyo Hotel. In such an event, urban renewal projects sometimes destroyed the district and the old community with some historical heritages, and sometimes influenced the environmental conditions and lives of residents of the neighborhood community. For instance, today's urban regeneration programs have again ensured the same issues as those experienced by the residents in the community due to past redevelopment prerogatives. Currently, the developments of high-end condos have replaced community housing that was for senior citizens and low-income families. Once again, the development led to the displacement of more Japanese American residents. In this community, there is now a need for affordable houses and a recreation center for senior citizens. It is also apparent considering Little Tokyo's redevelopment results in the prior forty years that further community developments does not improve those areas, but it destroys good and precious stock of urban life, as well as it demolish significant, political, and historical sites within the community.

Affordable Housing (Iris)

As a result of urban renewal projects in downtown Los Angeles in the 1980s, the need for affordable housing projects became apparent. With the help of the Little Tokyo Service Center, the first affordable housing project in Little Tokyo was the San Pedro Firm Building. Originally slated for destruction in 1974, the San Pedro Firm Building is a 42 unit historically designated building which houses very low-income residents. In 1987, the community and the students came together in the “Save the San Pedro Firm Building” campaign to renovate the crumbling building. Approximately 75% of the residents are senior citizens. The second major affordable housing project in Little Tokyo is Casa Heiwa. Casa Heiwa means “House of Harmony” and is a 100 unit complex. Finished in 1996, Casa Heiwa represents the first new low income housing built in Little Tokyo in 50 years. There are various types of rooms, ranging from smaller 1 bedroom apartments, to large 4 bedroom apartments for large families. Casa Heiwa offers many different programs such as a computer learning center, recreational classes, childcare, and social programs. This type of housing is for low-income families, senior citizens, developmentally disabled persons, and downtown workers in Little Tokyo. Affordable housing in Little Tokyo provides a way to protect the displacement of many low income families in an area where housing is becoming quite expensive.

Little Tokyo Recreation Center (YooJin)

Almost 30 years ago in 1972, the idea of a recreation center in Little Tokyo with a gym was brought up, to provide for a cultural and community complex. However, a world-famous sculpture Isamu Noguchi was selected to produce a sculpture and proposed to remove the gym to

make room for an open plaza to display his work. Unfortunately this idea was accepted, with a shift in emphasis from the “community” to the “cultural” aspects of the complex. Since then, various groups have continued to speak for the creation of a gym. Even young college and high school students stood up in the City of LA’s Community Redevelopment Agency with hand-drawn pictures of basketball courts in hopes that it would bring them one step closer to a community center. The Little Tokyo Service Center-CDC (LTSC-CDC) is currently working hard to obtain funding and a site for the center. Despite widespread support, it is often very difficult to deal with local politics as well as to obtain enough funding for the creation of a community center. Currently, they are negotiating with the city of Los Angeles for a long term ground lease/air rights for property south of the Little Tokyo Library. The lease would provide for the construction of the recreation center atop a city parking garage. The agreement at some level is dependent upon the availability and political will of city staff and Councilwoman Jan Perry. It is complicated by the fact that the properties in question are also tied to development of a new LAPD headquarter, and those facilities are taking priority over the community center. The center is to serve not only as a center for recreation limited to the Japanese community, but will consist of youth and adults of all ethnicities. The local population living in and around Little Tokyo is very diverse, and this community center hopes to provide a place that will address their needs.

Visual Communications (Grace C. & YoungMi)

The mission of Visual Communications has been to promote intercultural understanding through the production, presentation, and preservation on honest and sensitive stories about

Asian American people. Thus, the driving purpose of Visual Communications is to encourage multicultural learning about Asian Pacific Americans. Visual Communications has been around since 1970 and is considered a top Asian Pacific media arts center in the U.S. Through the deployment of media sources, they help in facilitating community awareness and education about Asian Pacific culture in efforts to propagate a more harmonious and civil society. Serving the Asian Pacific community which is comprised of 24 different cultures and languages, Visual Communications offers a broad array of quality programs and services in media art resources. Some services include historical photographic and moving image collections, independent and community production, program packaging and distribution, exhibition, media artist support, training and workshops, and employment consultation services and resource sharing. Through Visual Communications, the APA community is given opportunities to advance in media related fields. This is a reputable organization as it is highly acclaimed by film festivals and has been supported by many other organizational associations and entities.

What did you learn from your political tour? If you have previously visited this community either as a tourist or through a community tour, what new things did you learn from your political tour? How can you share this expanded awareness with others, such as other UCLA students?

Our political tour group varied in terms of experience and familiarity with the Little Tokyo community. While some members of our group were more familiar because they work closely with the community as a volunteer, we all came to the conclusion that the political tour

was different in that we learned an extensive amount about the political aspects of the community. As we wanted to promote shared leadership, we decided that each member would be responsible in the researching behind the political aspects of a certain area within Little Tokyo. Then, as we walked around Little Tokyo, each member would explain some of the political significance. We were all surprised that each area of Little Tokyo had a political background behind it, and that the community is always struggling with a political factor that makes it difficult to satisfy the entire community.

For example, the Recreation Center has been involved with a thirty-year struggle, where political reasons have prevented its construction. The political struggles largely surrounded obtaining a site, and facing obstacles both within the Little Tokyo community (with the building of the Noguchi plaza at JACCC and the idea for the Art Park near JANM), and outside of the Little Tokyo community with the need to obtain permission and signatures from LAPD and politicians such as Councilwoman Jan Perry. Other issues we learned about surrounded funding and community organizing with events like the local San Tai San (three-on-three) basketball tournament.

Not only did we learn that the Little Tokyo community struggled for thirty years with Los Angeles politics for a rec center, but we also learned how local politics directly influenced the residents of the community. For example, we learned the Sun Hotel provided affordable housing for families. However, due to the development of the New Otani Hotel, only a handful of families were relocated and the rest were evicted with no place to live. This incident clearly reveals how the decisions of local politics directly influence the lifestyle of the residents within the community. Prior to this political tour, it never occurred to us that the politics are intertwined to every aspect of the community. Even today, the struggle for affordable housing is clear within

the Little Tokyo community. Currently there are several complexes serving to meet the need for affordable housing. However, there is still the struggle with local politics as many want to see more market-rate condos sold in these areas.

However, the most significant thing that we learned through this tour was the power that the members of the community have to influence local politics. Although it may often be difficult, we were able to see that the community always perseveres in order to get their voices heard. For example, the community did not give up for thirty years in hopes of constructing the Little Tokyo Recreation Center. Despite a long time period struggling to see its creation, the community is constantly working to influence the local politics. Even for the New Otani Hotel, an anti-eviction campaign was created, called the Little Tokyo's People's Rights Organization (LTPRO). This group was created solely for the purpose of looking out for the interests of the families, and hoping to persuade the local politics. Although their efforts were not enough to stop the construction of the New Otani Hotel, their cohesive unit serves as a model example for the Little Tokyo community. It reveals how the Little Tokyo community works together, looking out for the interests of the residents, the businesses, and hoping that collaboration can override these political issues.

This expanded awareness can be shared with the UCLA community through a variety of methods. For example, we can start with our very own classrooms. As students, we will be taking different classes that may or may not pertain to our majors. This should not prevent us from spreading this awareness. Because Little Tokyo and Chinatown is so close to our campus, it would not be very difficult in getting together a group and leading a tour. The same method of shared leadership can be incorporated with our newly formulated groups. Each member of the tour group can be do a little background research and lead a small portion of the tour. Therefore,

not only will we be learning about our cultural communities, but we can fuel our leadership skills. It is also possible to provide our gathered information to Asian American classes as well as Labor and Workplace Studies classes. Because we have invested a tremendous amount of research and time in learning more about the community, any information will be of aid to classes. Such transparency of information can also raise awareness of the critical issues facing our local communities. With a heightened awareness level, perhaps the UCLA community can help gather support in helping the residents of communities such as Little Tokyo, in hopes of influencing local politics. The UCLA students can work in collaboration with the ethnic communities and help gather money for a new Recreation Center, or work to save the current housing projects aimed for affordable housing. Now that we are fully aware of the issues that the community faces, it is our duty to follow up with more support to work in conjunction with the Little Tokyo community. As different groups went on different political tours, it is also possible to share this information to the class as well as to alternate different communities. Our group believes that our efforts will go beyond our one political tour of Little Tokyo; we will each strive to become an active member within and past our UCLA campus.

What are ways that you will continue to increase your understanding of this particular community?

In our political tour, we toured Little Tokyo which is the local Japanese American ethnic enclave. In order to increase our understanding of Little Tokyo, we will visit Little Tokyo more often and try to learn more about Japanese American culture, history, and its influence in

America especially in Little Tokyo. While we continue Little Tokyo political tours, we will be aware of the many different things that create Little Tokyo and its history. We will also take many pictures of the places in Little Tokyo including the plaques and statues that commemorate a certain historical figure or event. This way, we will be able to link our experiences with visual aids that promote a better understanding of Little Tokyo. As we did for this political tour, we will also do research on the internet to find out information that is not attainable through visits to Little Tokyo. We want to understand more about Little Tokyo's history including how it came into being, what is the purpose of having a Japanese Town, and how Little Tokyo has impacted the Japanese American and other ethnic communities in Los Angeles. Because a lot of Little Tokyo is premised upon Japanese culture, we want to analyze the things we see in Little Tokyo and make connections about how they are associated with Japanese and Japanese American culture.

In order to increase our understanding of Little Tokyo, first we must have an open mind and heart and then we must take initiative. UCLA is a university that offers a wide variety of classes that can enhance our knowledge of the Japanese American community. It is up to us if we want to take the initiative to enhance our knowledge and to widen our understanding of an ethnic community. We think that awareness is prevention. Therefore, we will try to teach our peers about issues facing the Little Tokyo community. Hopefully after listening to us, our friends will be more aware of what is going on. We are not aiming to persuade everyone in the community to stand up and take action, but we want to enhance knowledge so that we can educate people and motivate them to lend their support to those who want to take action. However, before teaching other people we must be well grounded with the community itself. There are many classes offered at UCLA in the Asian American Studies Department that address and raise issue in

ethnic communities such as the Japanese American one that we could take. We can also take other classes like this one that may not be focus on the Japanese American community but allow us to be critical of the issues in ethnic communities that we could then apply to Little Tokyo. Thus, taking courses in the Asian American Studies Department and being willing to get involved in community events such as Day of Remembrance and the Lt. Ehren Watada rallies will help us understand more about this community.

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

Some of the highlights that were discussed in the tour were the history of Little Tokyo and a number of facts that remain unknown to the general public. Each building adds a unique significance and history to the community. Selected sidewalks are paved with quotes from the people who resided in the past as a remembrance of their experience in the community. Before participating in the Little Tokyo tour, Little Tokyo seemed to be another ordinary community without much history. But many group members found this tour to be very insightful, and after experiencing it, we are confident that many of us could lead our own tours of Little Tokyo in the future, and present it as not just another ordinary community, but rather an extraordinary community with a rich history and a vibrant present.

This entire community has become a protected historical landmark. Although Little Tokyo has been minimized to roughly four city blocks due to the expansion of Downtown Los Angeles, there are still many buildings that have remained standing for nearly a century. The

Japanese Union Church still stands and has served many purposes throughout the years. Originally, the building was created for religious reasons then eventually became a center to help relocate Japanese American residents to internment camps during WWII. After the war, the church returned to its original state of preaching Christianity. And now, it houses two of the oldest Asian American performing and media arts organizations

During the WWII, since the Japanese were forced to internment camps, we learned that the African community occupied Little Tokyo. During that time, Little Tokyo adopted the name, Bronzeville, and when Japanese Americans returned home after the war, most of the original residents relocated to different parts of the city. Later, in the 1970s, major redevelopments occurred in the community. Many buildings were demolished to raise modern buildings and Japanese Americans were once again forcibly removed from Little Tokyo. The buildings that were scheduled for demolition housed many older generation Japanese Americans who needed affordable housing. The New Otani Hotel project created a large controversy during its production because in order to construct the new hotel, the original building, the Sun Hotel, was to be razed. These are some of the many sacrifices the community faced that is not often revealed to the general public.

We also learned that there are a number of items that were invented in Little Tokyo that are often forgotten. A popular dessert, mochi ice cream, was invented in Mikawaya, a small shop that moved to the Japanese Village Plaza due to the New Otani construction. The fortune cookie also originated in Little Tokyo where a Japanese herbalist invented it in the early 1900s. His herbal shop is now a sweet shop, Fugetsudo, which still exists on historic First Street is currently owned and operated by his grandson, Brian Kito. Such contributions from Little Tokyo are now distributed internationally for everyone to taste and experience. Since there are many sites to

visit in Little Tokyo, the group can further enhance their experience by sampling these snacks from the local businesses. For instance to experience this history, our group bought some mochi ice cream from Mikawaya while enjoying a nice pit stop in the Japanese Village Plaza.

Before this political tour, most of this information was unknown to many of the people in our group. However, what made the experience worthwhile was that each person in the group was assigned to research and explain about a landmark. This created more interaction within the group and the allowed a more even distribution of the tasks for the tour group. It worked well enough that by the end of the tour everyone in our group knew each other's names. This is a model we could use to lead future tours. By researching and leading at least one part this political tour, each member of the group knows how to conduct the research, who to contact for more information, and where to go to experience these facts.

Begin to envision an expanded role for students in our communities. Based on your political tour, what can this expanded role be?

By going on this political tour of Little Tokyo, we now see the significance in students needing to change the political, economical, and social environment of our communities. We encountered many problems that necessitate student activism in order to create a wholesome community. One such problem is the New Otani/Kajima hotel. As mentioned earlier, during the redevelopment of Little Tokyo in the 1970s, many Issei (first generation Japanese Americans) were evicted from the Sun hotel, and students came to protest and help the elderly members of their community. Today, this gentrification continues with the reduction of low-income housing

availability. As Little Tokyo flourishes, corporations expand and high-rises are built, leading to displacement of older generations and lower-income families face due to their inability to afford this new lifestyle. Because of problems such as these, there is a great need for students to take matters into their hands and help make a change by learning from our predecessors in the 1970s and adopting an expanded role in the community.

Students, however, must first educate themselves on the problems in the community. As learners, we must develop awareness and be open to multiple perspectives. To acquire general knowledge on the community and its problems, students may partake in Asian American Studies courses. They may take courses directed towards the immediate planning and improvement of Asian American communities, such as AAS M108 (Policy, Planning, and Community) or AAS 131 (Japanese American Experience). To find out about specific community problems, students should go directly to the leaders, activists, and organizers and ask them how the community is being negatively affected. For instance, students may arrange a meeting with Mike Murase, Director of Service Programs, or Dean Matsubayashi, Director of Community Economic Development of the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) if they are interested in some of the enrichment needs of Little Tokyo.

After educating oneself, the next step is to organize groups, itineraries, and goals. The best way to bring together a group with the common interest in helping a community is through their classmates. After all, there must be a particular interest in that area if they are majoring or minoring in Asian American Studies. Another way to gather a group of people is through the community itself. If a resident has enough pride to want to identify with the Little Tokyo community, then he or she should want to maintain its stability or improve its condition. Agencies, such as LTSC, already have a group of people who want to contribute to the

betterment of the community, and collectively working with them through shared leadership will produce greater results than acting alone. Upon organizing a group, students should also organize a plan with a common goal. The plan, however, should be directed towards a specific goal. The general result, though, will be the advancement of the community. For instance, instead of trying to take on all the problems in the community, one group of students should first tackle one problem at a time, such as the New Otani/Kajima hotel.

After becoming educated on the issue, organizing a group, and settling on a plan, it is time to execute the plan to transform the community. The ideal way to transform a community is first to open the minds of the inhabitants to get their consideration and approval. There are many ways to acknowledge the importance of an issue, some of which are protesting, rallying, discussions, meetings, flyers, and publicity. For instance, students may protest against the New Otani/Kajima hotel and highlight their inequality and inhumanity in the community. Students may also rally for new and affordable housing opportunities for the older generations and low-income families. Through collective action of organizations, students will be able to cause a change in their communities. We must decolonize our minds by showing others that regardless of social interests, we are one in the community, and we must help by joining community development projects to establish recreation centers, to preserve historical remnants, and to protect the community from both external and internal pressures.

Little Tokyo Political Tour 2

Wednesday, February 21, 2007

By Scott Chan, Jamie Lui, Crystal Macaraeg, Eric Murata, Melissa Nishimura, Grace Oh, Alma Riego, Candice Shikai, Kio Tong-Ishikawa, Eleanor Ung, and David Wei

1. Why did you choose this community for your political tour?

We chose the Little Tokyo political event because it is a vibrant community with a rich historical background, also me personally being from northern California I have never been to Little Tokyo as well. Visiting Little Tokyo for the first time I was amazed by the rich history that has enriched that community for so many years, I am sure the other members of the group felt the same way. Before coming to Little Tokyo I had no idea what to expect, because in northern California there is only a very small Japanese community. We were shocked to discover the rich history of Southern California's Japanese community.

I also wanted to go to this community event because there was no one that I knew in the group. I figured it would be a good way to meet the other people in the class, and people that I did not know. The group also chose this political event because I have always wanted to learn more about the Japanese community. Our group was well organized and we saw many of the sites that we talked about in class, including the Grapefruit Tree, we also learned about Little Tokyo's lack of a community recreation center, and the many events the community has planned to appeal to city. The Japanese community is one of the first Asian ethnic groups to immigrate (and assimilate) into the United States and may have faced the most discrimination out of all the ethnic Asians to immigrate to the United

States. Therefore we believe by studying their struggles with discrimination we could educate our community and further our understanding of each other.

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

UCLA is lucky enough to be located in the same city as numerous ethnic enclaves where students and professors can easily access their resources and generate a better understanding of these communities. Little Tokyo in particular has very deep roots in the Japanese and Japanese American community. From previous Asian American Studies courses, we were able to gather the reasoning for their migration to America from Japan to begin such an enclave. Through the Asian American History, we were taught about the chain migration and the want for a better life only found in America. But once the Japanese community settled in America for many years, they were suddenly betrayed by their country. American military sent all Japanese and Japanese Americans to internment camps during WWII. Although a majority of these individuals sent to the camps never touched base with Japan itself, it still became huge threat to the United States. During the tour, it was very shocking to see the timeline on the gray concrete, showcasing where individuals lined up to board the busses to these camps.

But, once the war died down, the Japanese still, to this very day, seek redress from the maltreatment by America during WWII. Though the community is still mending its tears after returning from the camps, they still continued to thrive in communities like Little Tokyo. During the Asian America Ethno communications course, we were able to view

video on the popularity of basketball in the JA community. With many leagues going on which are now becoming not just JA, but more inclusive of other ethnicities, basketball has been a staple for the JA community. From the tour, we were able to bridge this connection Little Tokyo's 'san tai san' or 'three-on-three' basketball tournaments. These tournaments are now meant to help raise awareness and economic support towards Little Tokyo's efforts of building a Recreation Center.

- 3. How did you prepare for your political tour? For example, what did you find out about the history of the 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 our Little Tokyo Political Tour, Kio and Melissa created a sign up sheet and distributed it during class to find out who was interested in going to Little Tokyo. After getting everyone's names and emails, they decided that there should be two different political tours due to the number of interested people. The first political tour was scheduled for February 17, before the Day of Remembrance event at the Japanese American National Museum. The second political tour was scheduled for the following Wednesday, February 21. Kio and Melissa thought that the Saturday tour would be especially convenient for those who wanted to go to the Day of Remembrance event for their community project. But they also realized that going on a weekday would allow the group to actually talk with members of the community that worked throughout Little Tokyo.

Kio was able to get a ton of information through his contacts at the Little Tokyo Service Center regarding political tours that were previously done in Little Tokyo. We had many different packets of information regarding the various places in Little Tokyo including businesses, historical district, memorials, art pieces, etc. We also had packets from the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations and the J-Town Voice, two groups that had both organized Political Tours in Little Tokyo aimed at educating Nikkei youth. Kio and Melissa met up ahead of time to plan a route through Little Tokyo and pick different sites that would fit for this assignment. They then created a list of the tour stops to hand out to the group during the tour that also included a map. After that, they had to coordinate rides and make sure that everyone got to Little Tokyo on the day that they wanted to go.

As organizers, Kio and Melissa also thought that the political tour would be a perfect way to practice the Shared Leadership we learned in class. To do this, they asked everyone interested in the tour to do something to contribute. To expedite the process, group members were assigned to the different sites to do research on and find out their political significance to the community. The assignment was to write a paragraph or two about the information they found and present the information to their peers during the tour. To get students invested in the process, it was thought that it would be nice if everyone got a chance to speak, research, and learn about Little Tokyo on their own. Using the information Kio and Melissa had received from Little Tokyo contacts, we were able to write up some background information about the sites and email it out to our group members so they had a little something to work off of. In addition, Kio was able to talk to his fellow colleagues at the Little Tokyo Center who graciously gave us their emails so

that our group members can contact people involved in the community about questions they may have about their part of the Little Tokyo Political Tour. For more information, students were also encouraged to visit the following websites: www.ltsc.org, www.janm.org, www.discovernikkei.org, www.rafu.com. Students were also encouraged to collaborate with students who were researching the same spots from the other group. The final preparation came in coordinating with Evelyn Yoshimura and Thomas Yee of the Little Tokyo Service Center to introduce us to some staff members at Visual Communications and give us additional insights and anecdotes, as we walked in some of the buildings like Union Center for the Arts and the San Pedro Firm Building, and stood near the Little Tokyo Mural on First and Central and stopped by the future site of the Little Tokyo Recreation Center.

The following is a brief summary of the information that the Wednesday group prepared and presented for the political tour.

Union Church (Eleanor Ung & Candice Shikai)

The Union Church of Los Angeles, established February 7, 1918, served as a place of worship and community for the Japanese Americans who lived in that area during that time. When they were interned during WWII, the African American population temporarily used the Union Center as their own community center, and later relocated after internment was over. This building was renovated in 1998 with the help of the Little Tokyo Service Center. Historically, it housed groups that were in need of certain services, whether religious or community-based; to this day the historical Union Church continues

this purpose, as the Union Center for the Arts where it is currently the home of East-West players, Visual Communications, and LA Artcore.

Visual Communications (Alma Riego)

Visual Communications is located in the basement of the old Union Church. It is significant to both Little Tokyo and the rest of the API community because it has helped to bring the community to where it is now. Through its mission of preserving, educating, advocating, and empowering the API community, it has played an integral role with surfacing API issues to the rest of the larger community. Without such an organization, the greater community will have no real outlet to showcase its issues and its art to the society. We would remain a homogenized community, lacking any true identity and respect for our own cultures, and our fellow API community members. It was important to visit such a place in order to acknowledge the efforts that individuals are making for our own progression and future.

Redevelopment (Scott Chan & Crystal Macaraeg)

With redevelopment, it has always been the case of preservation. Many big businesses, such as Office Depot and Starbucks, have tried to take over land in Little Tokyo. While this may not seem to be a big deal, it actually is. Little Tokyo is only so big, and when you let big businesses take over smaller Japanese American stores, you are letting part of the Japanese American culture get swept away. By the 1960's, leaders in the Japanese American community became alarmed by new plans to widen First Street through the district's historic core and to extend the Civic Center deeper into Little Tokyo. Reacting

to these immediate threats as well as to the problem of long-term decay, the community sponsored a variety of redevelopment proposals, each combining urban renewal with preserving Little Tokyo as a residential, commercial, retail and cultural center. As a result of this effort, the Mayor's Little Tokyo Community Development Advisory Committee was formed in 1969 and the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project was established the following year under the management of the Community Redevelopment Agency.

In the 1970's the redevelopment movement continued as Japanese corporations expanded overseas operations. Many new shopping plazas and hotels opened and corporations wanted to transform Little Tokyo into a tourist center for big businesses. During the development of the New Otani Hotel and the Weller Court many Issei/Nisei and Mexican residents were forced to leave in order to make room for luxury suits. Furthermore, the creation of the Weller Court diminished a strip of family-owned businesses. Because of redevelopment many warehouses and new condominiums east of Little Tokyo were once residential areas of the district. In addition the Los Angeles Police Department headquarters was once the place of the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple.

Skid Row (Grace Oh)

Residents and business owners in the Arts District and Little Tokyo have complained about increased numbers of criminals and homeless individuals shifting to those districts in the wake of LAPD's efforts in Skid Row. Skid row is only a few blocks away from Little Tokyo. As the number of homeless people grows, the homeless become more and more visible outside of Skid Row. This creates a problem, as the homeless have become more prevalent in adjacent blocks such as Little Tokyo. Also, the relatively small ranks of

police officers helps explain why LAPD's recently stepped-up efforts in Skid Row--as well as portions of Broadway--have pushed some criminal activity to neighboring areas such as Little Tokyo.

Little Tokyo Recreation Center (Jamie Lui)

Almost 30 years ago in 1972, the idea of a recreation center in Little Tokyo with a gym was brought up, to provide for a cultural and community complex. However, a world-famous sculpture Isamu Noguchi was selected to produce a sculpture and proposed to remove the gym to make room for an open plaza to display his work. Unfortunately this idea was accepted, with a shift in emphasis from the "community" to the "cultural" aspects of the complex. Since then, various groups have continued to speak for the creation of a gym. Even young college and high school students stood up in the City of LA's Community Redevelopment Agency with hand-drawn pictures of basketball courts in hopes that it would bring them one step closer to a community center. A task force was assigned in 1995 to help aid with this process, and today the task force includes local businesses and staff from the Little Tokyo Service Center-CDC as well as representatives from community basketball, volleyball, martial arts, and senior citizen's organizations. The LTSC-CDC is currently working hard to obtain funding and a site for the Recreation Center. Despite widespread support, it is often very difficult to deal with local politics as well as to obtain enough funding for the creation of a community center. Hopefully the infamous San Tai San Basketball Tournament will soon be able to change their slogan "till there's a rec center, we're taking it to the streets", showing that the Recreation Center has been built to make Little Tokyo a better community than it already is.

Affordable Housing (Eric Murata)

As a result of urban renewal projects in downtown Los Angeles in the 1980s, the need for affordable housing projects became apparent. With the help of the Little Tokyo Service Center, the first affordable housing project in Little Tokyo was the San Pedro Firm Building. Originally slated for destruction in 1974, the San Pedro Firm Building is a 42 unit historically designated building which houses very low- income residents. In 1987, the community and the students came together in the “Save the San Pedro Firm Building” campaign to renovate the crumbling building. The second major affordable housing project in Little Tokyo is Casa Heiwa. Casa Heiwa means “House of Harmony” and is a 100 unit complex. Finished in 1996, Casa Heiwa represents the first new low income housing built in Little Tokyo in 50 years. There are various types of rooms, ranging from smaller 1 bedroom apartments, to large 4 bedroom apartments for large families. Casa Heiwa offers many different programs such as a computer learning center, recreational classes, childcare, and social programs. This type of housing is for low-income families, senior citizens, developmentally disabled persons, and downtown workers in Little Tokyo. Affordable housing in Little Tokyo provides a way to protect the displacement of many low income families in an area where housing is becoming quite expensive.

Historic First Street (David Wei)

First Street downtown is one of the most recognizable and historical areas of Little Tokyo, and one of the first streets established as part of the Little Tokyo community. First Street was also the only block to survive massive redevelopment during the 1970’s and 1980’s. Little Tokyo’s history is also engraved in bronze in the pavement. First

Street was also the location of Japanese American National Museum as well as the Koyasan Buddhist Temple. Many of the regions first shops were restaurants along First Street, however this golden age of Little Tokyo came to an abrupt end during Japanese internment in WWII.

New Otani Hotel (Michelle Teng)

The reconstruction of New Otani Hotel had raised a great deal of debates among the Japanese American society in the late 1960s. The Sensei activists charged that the reconstruction of New Otani Hotel and Garden would turn Little Tokyo into a tourist trap and also the problem of relocating tenants in New Otani Hotel. The Sensei activists think that New Otani Hotel would become a label of imperialism “land-grabbers”. They then went on to the City Hall to protest against the construction of New Otani Hotel. The opposite point of view was made by those businessmen who believe the construction of New Otani Hotel would definitely bring in for business thus benefiting the whole community. The development of New Otani Hotel stress on the neutrality of Japanese and American, try to find a balance between Western and eastern cultures. Some people expect the construction of New Otani Hotel would spur the business in little Tokyo while the others are weary about the undesirable location of hotel might not promote business greatly.

- 4. What did you learn from your political tour? If you have previously visited this community either as a tourist or through a community tour, what new things did you learn from your political tour? How can you share this expanded awareness with others, such as other UCLA students?*

Prior to the political tour, only a small portion of the group had ever visited Little Tokyo. For the few who did visit this town, very little was known. In the 1970's the redevelopment movement aimed to transform Little Tokyo into a center of tourism for big businesses rather than a cultural center for Japanese families to congregate and feel at home. Fortunately, the political tour enabled our group to uncover the history and lesser known details that this town holds.

The Union Church was designed in 1922 as a community center that housed movies, plays, classrooms, and the gym. To an ordinary passer by, the church might be seen as just that, however, the Union Church was actually the place where Japanese awaited internment. In addition it was a community center for Negro newcomers in the beginning of the War. A closer examination of the Union Church reveals that there is Visual Communications section of the church located in the basement. Workers at the Visual Communications publish and air issues on television that are relevant to their community. Currently, the Visual and Communications center is in need of preserving the few remaining videotapes and other such media forms that depict the struggles of the people who came here before us. Our ancestors struggled so that we could live comfortably.

In addition, the development of the Otani Hotel and the Weller Court forced the eviction of many Issei/Nisei and Mexican residents in order to make room for luxury suits. A strip of family-owned businesses was diminished and residential areas that once existed in the east of Little Tokyo were replaced by the development of many warehouses and

condominiums. Additionally, the Los Angeles Police Department headquarters was once the place of the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist temple.

Another pressing issue that Little Tokyo continues to face is the building of a recreational center. The recreational center has the potential of bringing youth back to the community. However, the recreation center has continued to exist only in theory. In its place is a parking lot. According to the guest speaker at the political tour, three on three tournaments in which a street is closed off and basketball courts are put up will continue to occur until the recreational center is built. The speaker compared the building of the recreation center to that of the Staples Center. The speaker commented on how fast the Staples Centers was made in comparison to the recreation center. He noted that the unlike the Staples Center, the recreation center is not popular and that could be a reason to its overdue creation.

The political tour of Little Tokyo opened our eyes and allowed us to realize that there is history everywhere we just have to look for it. Furthermore, it allowed us to come to the realization that the type of treatment that Japanese immigrants faced in Little Tokyo occurred and continues to occur in many ethnic enclaves. Many of the issues that Japanese immigrants faced in the Little Tokyo are similar to that of the struggle of Filipino immigrants in Manila Town in San Francisco. It is as though these big corporations and the government are trying to erase our history and heritage by destroying our buildings, that once housed our ancestors and by demolishing residential areas that are important to these communities. We can share our expanded awareness of Little Tokyo by simply retelling stories we have learned and by keeping our history alive

by encouraging others to talk to their grandparents and parents about the struggles they went through.

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

There are various ways to increase one's understanding of Little Tokyo. Students are privileged to have the time and resources in school to recognize the issues that the city is facing today. However, the only shortcoming here is where to find the information and take the actions to do so. Being involved with UCLA's Asian Pacific Coalition (APC) and Nikkei Student Union (NSU) are just two of the many organizations that bring awareness and conduct activism for the community. UCLA's Asian Americans Department is also a great reference: it provides opportunities to volunteer and intern and offers courses that relates to the community such as Japanese American Experience and Asian American History.

The city of Little Tokyo itself has a full spectrum of resources, ranging from newsletters and community landmarks. Little Tokyo Recreation Center sends a quarterly newsletter containing updates, announcements, and news. The Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) and the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) present a place to view the history and culture of Japanese Americans. Another option is to lead a political tour of Little Tokyo is since one will need to learn the latest inclination of Little Tokyo. Given the many ways to increase one's understanding, a student should now take the initiative to learn and help the community.

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

Our group could definitely lead a political tour for other students in the future. In organizing this tour, each group member researched and spoke about a key point of interest in Little Tokyo, and so each person contributed to the creation of the tour. Since everyone not only participated in the tour, but helped create our political tour of Little Tokyo we could lead this tour again for other students. By listening to the research done by each member in our group and also seeing the sites by participating the tour, we definitely have become more knowledgeable and familiar with Little Tokyo and is the reason why we could each lead a political tour.

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

For one, the recreation center campaign has been taking a long time; it has been about 30 years or so, and the Little Tokyo community still has been unable to get the necessary approval to build a recreation center. Students can help more directly with the campaign; rather than just participating in San-tai-san, perhaps there should be more rallies, more protests, more politicized youth gatherings to show the city and the administration responsible for the slow campaign how important a recreation center is for the neighborhood. If the youth get more involved in strategizing and pushing for this campaign, perhaps the campaign will acquire a new kind of momentum that can come

from a dynamic group of passionate youths. Students need to take a greater part in the JA community anyway – with members of JA community orgs like JACL or NCRR growing older and not acquiring too many younger members, the youth could really use their potential to revive not just Little Tokyo, but any other JA communities that are in need.

Another way students can expand on their role in Little Tokyo is by getting more involved with responses to redevelopment. While the previous generation has fought against big companies that have wanted to come in to Little Tokyo, such as Office Depot and Starbucks, this fight will not end today or tomorrow. Our generation one day will have to step up and take on this task. Walking the streets during the tour, we could get a sense for how small Little Tokyo is, and how important it is to maintain this piece of history. If our generation were to allow big corporations to come in and buy out the land, we would be losing a piece of history. So by our generation going out and making noise, whether by picketing or getting signatures, we can help with preservation.

Question 1 submitted by: David Wei

Question 2 submitted by: Alma Riego

Question 3 submitted by: Melissa Nishimura/Kio Tong-Ishikawa

Question 4 submitted by: Crystal Macaraeg

Question 5 submitted by: Eleanor Ung

Question 6 submitted by: Eric Murata

Question 7 submitted by: Candice Shikai/Scott Chan

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