



# Open Space Needs in Chicago's Chinatown Area<sup>1</sup>

Tingwei Zhang<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Chicago's Chinatown community lies along the South Branch of the Chicago River just southwest of downtown Chicago (Figure 7.1). Chinatown is home to nearly half of all Chinese Americans living in the City of Chicago, and its unique cultural identity attracts tourists from throughout the metropolitan region. But although there are many interesting restaurants and shops to visit, park and open space amenities for Chinatown residents and tourists are sparse. Currently, the only public park in the core Chinatown area is the ½-acre Sun Yat-Sen Playground. A 1990 Chicago Park District study found the Chinatown area among those communities in "greatest need" of additional park space. In recognizing this deficiency, the Chicago Park District has proposed creating a new park on vacant industrial land along the South Branch of Chicago River. The recently purchased 12-acre parcel just north of Chinatown is awaiting plans and funding for development.

This study was conducted to better understand the ethnically based leisure needs and preferences of Chinese Americans living in Chinatown and to determine how the new river park could be designed to serve the needs of the community who would be its major users. The study provides important additional information to ChicagoRivers in that it focuses on one of the major new open space development projects in the corridor, and shows how river planning can address the needs and preferences of particular groups. The objectives of the study were:

- 1) To characterize leisure patterns of the Chinese American community in Chicago's Chinatown in terms of activities, frequency, and location;
- 2) To understand preferences and problems relative to leisure and recreation, in general and in relation to new park and open space development;
- 3) To identify variations in leisure activities and open space preferences as a function of age, gender, generational status, and other factors.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Face-to-face interviews (n= 203) were conducted with a representative sample of Chinese Americans ages 13 and over. Respondents were contacted in homes, stores, and community centers in the core Chinatown area. Closed- and open-ended questions provided information on respondents' current

outdoor activities, locations where they participate in these activities, frequency of participation, size of group in which they participate for stated activities, and problems encountered when engaging in or attempting to engage in activities. Other questions focused on activity and environmental preferences, in general and as they related to the proposed new Chinatown park. Two group discussions were also conducted with children 6-12 years of age (n = 39) to obtain information from a group who would be important users of the new park. The children were asked a brief set of questions about outdoor activities they liked and locations where they played. They were also asked to draw pictures and describe in words what their "ideal park space" would be like if one were built in their community.

## FINDINGS

### CURRENT USE PATTERNS AND ACTIVITIES

Findings on activity preferences showed that for many Chinese Americans living in Chicago's Chinatown, outdoor recreation activity has strong cultural meaning and significance. These cultural ties are not only evident in participation in and preferences for traditional activities such as taiji, but may underlie activities that are also popular within mainstream Anglo American culture. "Relaxing" was one such activity. In contrast to most surveys of Anglo leisure, many respondents in this survey found it hard to define relaxing in terms of discrete leisure activities or separate it from the non-leisure part of their daily lives. "Swimming," another popular activity, has strong cultural ties to the Guangdong (Canton) province of China from where more than 90 percent of current Chinatown residents originated. Older, first-generation respondents were more likely to mention cultural ties with such activities, while younger adults and children were more likely to have adopted the leisure activities and patterns of their Anglo American peers.

### BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Top barriers to participation included lack of "availability of nearby open space" and "availability of facilities," two problems that might be reduced by the proposed new park along the South Branch. However, additional barriers such as the "quality of the natural environment," "safety," and "discrimination" could inhibit participation even when the new park is

# CHINESE AMERICAN RESIDENT INTERVIEWS

✱ Chinatown Area



**FIGURE 7.1**  
**Map of study reaches with location of Chinatown Area**

built. On the environmental quality issue, some residents of Chinatown were concerned that the land for the new park, as well as the river itself, might be too polluted to be safely used for recreation. This feeling may have a cultural dimension in that Chinese culture views a sound natural environment as an extension of a decent human life, and if a new park is developed on a river still perceived as seriously polluted, residents may not accept the park as a part of their community. On the issues of safety and discrimination, several respondents mentioned past incidents of crime and racial epithets aimed at Chinese Americans in neighborhoods surrounding Chinatown, and they were concerned that these problems might carry over into the new park.

## **PARK DEVELOPMENT PREFERENCES**

Despite these concerns, Chinatown residents were overwhelmingly positive about the prospects of a new park in their community. When asked what kinds of things they would like to see incorporated into the new park, respondents in the face-to-face interviews said they would most like to see natural and built amenities for passive use and appreciation, including landscaping (trees and flowers), seating areas, walking paths, and an attractive river edge treatment. Other desired facilities included a swimming pool and courts for various ball games such as basketball, volleyball, and tennis. In the children's group discussions, each child was asked to draw a picture of an ideal park. The drawings most often showed facilities for playgrounds (e.g., see saws, slides, swings) and picnics (e.g., picnic tables). Secondly, the children's drawings frequently included elements of nature—trees, flowers, grass, rivers, pools, red suns, white clouds, blue skies, and birds—in their images of an ideal park.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study examined the leisure preferences and open space needs within a discrete, homogeneous ethnic community located along the Chicago River Corridor: the Chinese Americans of Chicago's Chinatown. Individual and group interviews with Chinatown adults and children provided a detailed look at ethnically based leisure preferences, in general and as they relate to a proposed new park along the South Branch of the Chicago River. Findings show that although some popular activities are no different from what might be expected for the mainstream Anglo American population, the meaning and significance of those activities have clear and unique ties to Chinese culture. Preferences for the new Chinatown park development mirror activity preferences, emphasizing facilities that enhance the natural environment for passive activities. Notable differences in activity preferences were found within the sample of respondents according to age, generational status, and other factors. The study deepens our understanding of how people perceive and interact with the Chicago River and provides a case study of how cultural and community needs can be assessed and incorporated into local corridor planning.

## **NOTES**

1. This study was funded in part through Cooperative Research Agreement 23-93-26 between the USDA Forest Service North Central Forest Experiment Station and the University of Illinois at Chicago. For a more complete account of this study, see: Zhang, T. (1994). *Open Space Needs in Chicago's Chinatown Area*. Chicago, IL: Center for Urban Economic Development, The University of Illinois at Chicago; Zhang, T., and Gobster, P.H. (in press). Leisure preferences and open space needs in an urban Chinese American community, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*.
2. Additional information may be obtained by writing directly to Tingwei Zhang at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Urban Planning and Policy (M/C 348), 412 S. Peoria, Chicago, IL 60607.