

## CHINESE AMERICAN HEROES

chineseamericanheroes.org

### **June 29, 1776 Chinatowns - commemorates the founding of San Francisco, home to the largest and oldest Chinatown in the United States.**

Chinatowns have always fascinated the American imagination. In the jazz standard song of 1910, "Chinatown, My Chinatown," the chorus expresses the hopes and dreams that some people always attach to some faraway, near mythical land, the Shangri-la of popular imagination.

Chinatown, my Chinatown,  
Where the lights are low,  
Hearts that know no other land,  
Drifting to and fro,  
Dreamy, dreamy Chinatown,  
Almond eyes of brown,  
Hearts seem light and life seem bright  
In dreamy Chinatown.

Chinatowns have also been seen as places of nightmares and shattered hopes, as in the 1931 song "Minnie the Moocher" sung by Cab Calloway where the title character goes to Chinatown to feed her drug habit or "kick the gong around" as the lyrics go. "Poor Min" ends up "where they put the crazies," where she dies abandoned by everyone.

Chinatown's hardly ever appear as the living, breathing communities that they are filled with real people living real lives. In the popular imagination the people and locations are indistinct, a stage upon which the Caucasian protagonists are just passing through on their way to somewhere else in their lives. The 1974 film, "Chinatown" that made Jack Nicholson such a star hardly featured Los Angeles Chinatown at all. "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown."

The first Chinatown in the United States was established soon after the city of Yerba Buena was renamed San Francisco in 1847. The California Gold Rush brought tens of thousands of Chinese workers among the waves of 49ers coming from all over the world. San Francisco was the main port of the West Coast so it was the natural point where Chinese concentrated and came back to on their way to or from China.

At first these immigrants were much like any other American immigrants, clustering together for mutual support and shared culture. As time passed though and boom times gave way to severe economic depression in the 1870s the

mood of the Western states changed and Chinese concentrated together in cities for mutual protection. Land laws were passed that restricted land ownership to US citizens, something that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act barred Chinese immigrants from becoming. Events such as the Rock Springs Massacre in Wyoming in 1885 where at least 28 Chinese miners were killed and 79 of their homes were burned down were widely publicized and led to pogroms across the Western states. This accelerated the process of concentration as Chinese retreated from remote regions of the country towards ethnic enclaves in major cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

“We never thought that the subjects of a nation entitled by treaty to the rights and privileges of the most favored nation could, in a country so highly civilized like this, so unexpectedly suffer the cruelty and wrong of being unjustly put to death, or of being wounded and left without the means of cure, or being abandoned to poverty, hunger, and cold, and without the means to betake themselves elsewhere.” - Memorial of Chinese Laborers, Resident at Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, to the Chinese Consul at New York (1885) <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5043/>

As the Chinese community withdrew in defense myths began to arise about their communities based upon the conditions forced upon them by the restrictive land laws and the ever present threat of violence. Chinatowns were filled with diseases such as plague, not very surprising when considering the poverty, overcrowded, and unsanitary conditions the residents of these new ethnic ghettos were now living in. Crime and drug use became rampant as well, all things that modern ghettos are all too familiar with today. The Chinatowns became filled in the American popular imagination with mysterious hatchet men fighting their tong wars and spending their time otherwise occupied in underground tunnels smoking opium and dabbling in white slavery and prostitution. Local San Francisco newspapers even kept count of the death toll from the gang wars as if they were presenting baseball scores for the amusement of the public. Wide-eyed white tourists swore they'd visited the secret underground tunnels and personally saw the opium dens and inmates while following well-paid tour guides through Chinatown. After 1906, when the Great San Francisco Earthquake had leveled the area, a thorough search of the ruins discovered absolutely no trace of any such underground tunnels. People saw what they wanted to see in Chinatown back then just as they do now.

Chinatowns were places of cultural refuge as well as physical. There were regular tours of Chinese musicians and opera going from city to city across the United States with Chinese communities from China. Bruce Lee was born in San Francisco when his parents came as part of a Hong Kong-based Cantonese opera troupe in 1940. Rich merchants and well educated Chinese formed their own literary clubs that wrote poetry and discussed the latest literature.

The social life of these places formed their own world but also co-existed with and adapted to the changing rhythms of America. Chinatown's formed their own American-style marching bands that emulated John Philip Sousa's along with the rest of America at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In New York, during the years of the Great Depression, white people went to Harlem to listen to African American music and dance away their troubles. African Americans went to Chinatown to do the same while listening to Chinese and other Asian American musicians. This is one reason why many popular songs of the 1930s by African Americans prominently mention Chinatown in their lyrics including the aforementioned "Minnie the Moocher." To many African Americans, the Chinatowns represented an unsegregated world in which they were just as accepted as whites.

The 1958 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, "Flower Drum Song" was based upon a 1957 novel about the Forbidden City nightclub in San Francisco's Chinatown. The nightclub featured big band music, vaudeville, burlesque, comedy, singing, and dancing from 1938 until the end of the 1950s. The performances, all in English and just as good as any white or African American acts, highlighted how Asian Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent were just as American as anyone else in the country.

Chinatowns were also places that encouraged patriotism among its residents. The percentage of young Chinese American men that joined the military during World War II was higher than for any other ethnic community in the United States. In part this was a reflection of the intense Americanism that was taught in public schools. In another way it was also a reflection of the eagerness with which young Chinese Americans wanted to prove that they were "real Americans" willing to give their lives for their country even though laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act made it clear that many Americans didn't consider them so.

Above all the old Chinatowns were living and breathing places in which kids were raised by the community and where everyone knew each other and everyone else's business. Hemmed in on all sides by land laws and threats each Chinatown was tremendously limited, islands that were shrinking as their populations aged and disappeared. This completely changed as the civil rights movement opened up new opportunities for minorities in employment and places to live starting in the 1950s. New immigration from China and the rest of Asia after 1965 brought new life to fading Chinatowns all across the country. The historical Chinatowns of San Francisco and New York today share just a few things in common with newer and more affluent Chinatowns such as Monterey Park in Southern California or the "planned strip-mall" Chinatown like the one built in Las Vegas in 1995. Each has a unique story forming part of the fabric of America and what it means to be a Chinese American.