

A History of Los Angeles Chinatown in the 1930s and 1940s

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Watch Genie Moon's film on Asian American artist Tyrus Wong

The *Chinatown Remembered Project* tells the story of a generation of Chinese Americans who came of age in Los Angeles during the 1930s and 1940s. Like others in their generation, young Chinese American men and women lived through the Depression and then served their country valiantly in World War II. Yet unlike other Angelinos their age, these Chinese American youth had to deal not only with conflict abroad, but also with the constant threat of displacement here at home. The construction of the new Union Train station brought with it profound changes to the landscape of the local Chinese American community, beginning in the early 1930s with the destruction of much of Old Chinatown and continuing on with the development of two new Chinese American communities: China City and New Chinatown. For all Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, but especially for the youth, the 1930s and 1940s represent a pivotal moment of change and development.

Those local residents who agreed to share their memories with our volunteers are part of this generational shift that occurred in the Chinese American community in the decades prior to the outbreak of World War II. Nationally, between 1900 and 1940, the percentage of Chinese Americans born in the United States grew from 10% to 50%. Thus for the first time, cities like Los Angeles had a sizable population of native-born Chinese Americans. These young people attended local high schools such as Belmont, Lincoln, and Polytechnic. They joined extracurricular activities such as the Mei Wah Drum Corp and Wah Kue athletic club. After school, they worked in their parents' stores and attended local Chinese schools. In short, they developed a culture that was uniquely Chinese *American*.

For the most part, local Chinese Americans in the period prior to 1938 grew up in one of two areas: Old Chinatown and the communities in the vicinity of the Old Plaza, or the City Market Chinatown and the neighboring community of East Adams. Whereas the housing in Old Chinatown was mostly multi-unit flats, those Chinese who worked in the vicinity of the City Market often lived in single-family homes. Indeed, the community of East Adams developed as a bedroom community for people working in the City Market. In contrast, many of the roads in Old Chinatown were unpaved. There were few street lamps and much of the housing was overcrowded. While the number

of families was limited, those youth who did grow up in Old Chinatown would play together in the local playground near the old horse stables. A friendly rivalry developed between the youth of these two different Chinese American communities, as Chinese American sports teams, like the Guardsmen and the Wah Kues, were created in their respective communities. This friendly rivalry would continue even after the building of New Chinatown.

Most of our project participants were quite young when the destruction of Old Chinatown began in 1933. As Old Chinatown was dismantled to make room for Union Station, most Chinese American families relocated to the existing 9th Street area or further west to East Adams and San Pedro Street. Meanwhile, two separate competing visions of Chinatown—China City and New Chinatown—were proposed to take the place of the old one. While these young people were not involved in the design of these new communities, almost all of the youth of Old Chinatown were forced to move from their original homes in Old Chinatown to new homes elsewhere. As young teens, many would hold jobs working in their parents' businesses in New Chinatown and China City. Most have fond memories of both communities.

As the decade wore on, international events would affect the lives of nearly everyone in Chinatown. In 1937, Japanese imperial aggression cast China into war. Locally and across the country, Chinese Americans came together in the late 1930s and early 1940s to raise funds for war relief. As children and teens, the participants in our project took part in events which raised money for the war effort, such as moon festivals, China Nite, and the visit of Madame Chiang Kai-shek to Los Angeles. While many had never been to China, these youth raised money to help relatives or family friends who were affected by the war.

As 1941 came to a close, the United States found itself dragged into a war it had long hoped to avoid. Like others their age, Chinese Americans in Los Angeles served the United States both in the armed services and on the home front. Some were drafted, others volunteered, and, still others volunteered to be drafted. For many of these young men and women, service to their country, whether abroad or on the home front, was a life-changing experience. They entered World War II as teenagers and left the war as young adults. For many returning Chinese American veterans, the GI Bill would provide the means for them to enter USC, UCLA, and other American colleges.

The *Chinatown Remembered Project* tells the story of this generation of Chinese Americans from Los Angeles who came of age during the Great Depression, who served their country during World War II, and who, through the creation of clubs and

other extra-curricular activities, forged an identity quite distinct from that of their immigrant parents. While the 1930s and 1940s were decade of change for all Americans, for many local Chinese American youth, this period proved to be the zeitgeist that defined their generation.

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