Chinatown Highlights

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DC Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs
ONE CITY

A Brief History of Chinatown

The District's present day Chinatown is a small, historic neighborhood located east of downtown, and consists of many ethnic Chinese and Asian residents and small businesses along H St and I St between 5th St and 8th St in Northwest DC. The area is known for its annual Lunar Chinese New Year festival and parade and the Chinatown Friendship Archway, a Chinese gate built over H St at 7th St; however, its most prominent landmarks are the Verizon Center, a sports and entertainment arena, and the Old Patent Office Building, which houses two of the Smithsonian museums.

The history of Washington, DC's Chinatown closely aligns with the story of Chinese immigration into the United States in the 1850s, when thousands of Chinese people fled economic hardship in China to seek opportunities during the California Gold Rush. During their settlement in the United States, Chinese immigrants formed ethnic enclaves known as "Chinatowns" which served as close-knit communities separated from mainstream society. In these ethnic enclaves, residents and merchants communicated and conducted business in their native language and largely became

self-sufficient.

The first Chinese immigrant to Washington, DC arrived in 1851, and by 1884, the first Chinese community or "Chinatown" existed on Pennsylvania Avenue near 4 ½ St NW. Due to the Chinese Exclusion Laws that prevented women from immigrating, most early Chinatowns became bachelor societies bustling with drugstores, restaurants, and mercantile establishments. DC's Chinatown continued to expand rapidly until 1929, when Chinatown was relocated due to the Federal Triangle Project, which displaced many residents living in the ethnic enclave. Led by the On Leong Merchants Association, Chinese

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Director's Message

Dear readers,

The DC Mayor's Office on Asian Pacific Islander Affairs is proud to present "Chinatown Highlights," a quarterly newsletter that provides news and updates on programs and events occurring in the DC Chinatown area. We hope the newsletter will serve as a great resource for all to learn not only about Chinese culture, but to also gain insight on the Chinatown community and what it has to offer.

Warm Wishes,
Soohyun "Julie" Koo
Director, DC Mayor's Office on Asian Pacific Islander Affairs

"Adopt-a-Block"

On July 2nd, Chinatown became new and improved thanks to the volunteers from the Chinatown Community Cultural Center. OAPIA organized the cleaning day in partnership with the Office of the Clean City's "Adopt-a-Block" program. Participants took to the streets to beautify the neighborhood. In addition to cleaning, volunteers also went to participating businesses to provide free cleaning supplies so they could also participate. This project was possible due to the partnership with participating Chinatown business owners.

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A Brief History of Chinatown *continued*

residents relocated to the area between 5th St and 7th St and formed a new Chinatown. By 1926, 800 individuals, including 32 families, resided in Chinatown. At its peak, Chinatown ranged northward from G St to Massachusetts Ave and eastward from 9th St to 5th St. Chinese schools, clubs, and entertainment facilities were established to improve the residents' quality of life. Chinatown also had a number of community organizations including family associations to provide social services and support, district associations which settled disputes, and civic and merchant associations. Following WWII, Congress passed a series of legislation which normalized Chinese immigration and allowed women to legally enter the country for the first time, although the ratio discrepancy between men and women existed until the late 1960s. By 1970, there were approximately 3000 Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans living in the District's Chinatown. When the Washington Metro station opened in 1976, it was simply named Gallery Place. In 1986, it was renamed Gallery Place-Chinatown. To provide affordable housing for low income Chinese residents displaced from the location of the old Convention Center and to preserve what was left of Chinatown, Chinese community groups formed the Wah Luck Housing Project. Under this project, community groups and developers collaborated together to build an apartment complex to house Chinatown residents. Funding for the housing project was secured from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and in 1982, the 302 unit Wah Luck House was completed. In 1986, the city erected the Chinatown Friendship Archway, a traditional Chinese gate designed by architect Alfred H. Liu. The 48-foot-high, 75-foot-wide gateway is the nation's largest Chinese archway and serves as the gateway into Chinatown, and symbolizes lasting friendship between the District of Columbia and Beijing.

DA HSIN TRADING COMPANY

A well-known establishment in DC Chinatown, Da Hsin Trading Company was one of the first established businesses in the neighborhood and still remains standing today. The store is known for its myriad of goods, a place where one can find unique items ranging from glassware and trinkets to dried goods and traditional herbal remedies. Richard Chiang, the manager of the store, spoke about the significance of the family-owned establishment and its influence on his experiences growing up in Chinatown.

A Look Into Chinatown

How did your family end up in DC Chinatown?
A family friend recommended that we come to DC, and we came in the 1980s, back when the community was still really small compared to what it is today. We thought there was a better opportunity here, because there wasn't much of a Chinatown, really.

What was Chinatown like when you were growing up?
Back then there was not much "culture" in Chinatown, there were only a few families over at 6th Street – I had some friends there. Everyone was living in this community but there was really no association at that time that was well organized and served the Chinatown community.

Do you see a shift in the culture from then and now?
It's definitely a different culture from today, with all these businesses. Back then, Chinatown was just composed of humble people coming from China, just living in this area trying to make it here. It helped to have a community where they all speak the same language. It wasn't that isolated for them – that's why they chose to live in Chinatown, there was more Chinese people living there – a real sense of community. People chose to live in a Chinese community because they want to communicate. There are definitely a lot of changes from then and now.

What does Chinatown mean to you?
My store – we're here for the community. I've seen places close down, and Chinatown is different now, but we're here, and we kept our business because we're really here for the community. I like that they have the Chinatown centers here, a space for the elderly to hang out, for people in Chinatown to just come together and read, or do whatever they want.

"Adopt-a-Block"

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"Adopt-a-Block," was launched in July as a volunteer-based program that welcomes local businesses to help keep the community clean. With a commitment to two community cleanups per year for two years, the participants will each "adopt" and clean up a block in the District. Group members participate in neighborhood community safety meetings and conduct weekly gutter sweepings on streets around the area. All supplies will be provided by the city through the Department of Public Works' Helping Hand Program, so participation is simple and completely cost-free! For more information on becoming a part of "Adopt-a-Block," please visit **www.cleancity.dc.gov.**

Dragon Boat Festival

The DC Dragon Boat Festival was held in June. The Dragon Boat Festival is a two-day event held along the Potomac River at the Thompson Boat Center with over 55 teams and 1500 paddlers from all over the east coast competing against each other in thrilling races. The event is sponsored annually by the Chinese Women's League, which serves to promote Chinese culture to the Washington, DC area through the sport of dragon boat racing. Each year, the Dragon Boat Festival boasts wonderful cultural exhibitions, a multitude of craft demonstrations, and breathtaking dragon boat races. Events vary each year, but often include brush painting, calligraphy, lantern paper cutting, *xiang bao* (scented sachets that bring good luck) making demonstrations, as well as kung fu performances and various dance performances. Cultural exhibitions include traditional eye-dotting ceremonies to awaken dragon boats and bring good luck to racers, lion dances with a drum accompaniment, as well as an array of Chinese foods sold by local vendors.

Other Chinatowns

In ancient China, markets that operated at night were known as ghost markets. Today, they are called "night markets," street markets that operate after dark and are dedicated to leisurely strolling, shopping, and eating. Night markets originally took root in mostly Asian cities, where locals were able to escape the heat during the day and bargain for goods during the evening, but they have now become a gateway for those who want a glimpse into the culture of the communities they visit.

The spotlight for this quarter is on Seattle's Chinatown Night Market, which is held every year in the Chinatown-International District. Locals and visitors alike can experience a real Asian-style night market. All attendees can sample tasty snacks, enjoy live music and performances, and shop from a selection of vendors. Annual festivities include traditional Chinese lion and dragon dances, as well as contemporary performances by local artists. The night market started in 2009 with just a movie screen, a few vendors, and a modest number of attendees; today, it boasts over 60 vendors and 20,000 attendees. The night market event is thrown as part of the Chinatown-International District Business Improvement Area's (CIDBIA) initiative to put a new face on Chinatown, and has shown success in breaking barriers between the residents of the neighborhood and those who live outside of it.

Chinatown from Past to Present