

# Gum Saan Journal

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Tsin Nan Ling booth selling scholar's stones at the Cleveland World Fair. Courtesy of Ruby Ling Louie Collection.

## Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles: Christine Sterling and the Residents of China City, 1938-1948

By William Gow

In 1938, China City must have been a sight to behold. Located near Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, only a few blocks from the nearly completed Union Station, the walled city featured buildings adorned in Chinese-style architecture, a lotus pond and Chinese rickshaw rides. There was a temple and replica buildings from the set of the 1937 Hollywood blockbuster, *The Good Earth*. Costumed Chinese American workers greeted tourists and a Chinese opera troop performed live shows in front of the shop of Hollywood recruiter Tom Gubbins. Those who visited the community in 1938 can be excused if they overlooked the tall man named Tsin Nan Ling who had set up a table outside one of the many curio shops,

where he and his family members sold artifacts carved from the stones of his native village in China.<sup>1</sup>

Some days it seemed that even other Chinese immigrants treated Mr. Ling as an outsider. Unlike most other Chinese immigrants, Mr. Ling did not hail from Guangdong province in southern China, or from the district, Toisan. Rather, his family made its home farther north, in the province of Zhejiang (Chekiang).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Mr. Ling and his family were different from the many other Chinese who had settled the nation's many Chinatowns. Maybe this was why this tall man had spent so many of his previous years in America working as an itinerant merchant, traveling the United States with his family from one World's Fair Exhibition to the next, selling the carved scholar's stones for which his home village was so famous. Mr. Ling settled his family for as long as business allowed before moving on to the next city: Chicago in 1933, followed by Cleveland in 1936, and finally San Diego later in 1936. While he may have hailed from a different section of China than many of his countrymen in America, his travels around the United States made him comfortable in new environments and adept at dealing with a variety of people.

Despite all he gained from his travels, Mr. Ling knew that this nomadic lifestyle was difficult on his wife and four children. Earlier that year, word had spread through the Chinese community up and down the West Coast that there was opportunity in Los Angeles, a new Chinatown of sorts, selling the magic of Hollywood, and catering to the city's many tourists and service men. The venture was called "China City" and it was the brainchild of Christine Sterling, an Anglo-American entrepreneur who had created a mock Chinese village directly across from the new Union Station. Storefront rentals in the walled tourist district were supposedly cheap and while the family couldn't live in China City itself, nearby housing was plentiful. Ling had come to Los Angeles knowing that if he could settle here and sell the village stones, he could provide his family with some much needed stability. Little could Ling or any of his family members have known so soon after arriving in Los Angeles in 1938, that life in China City would provide not only the stability heretofore lacking in their lives but that missing sense of community as well.

Little has been written about Christine Sterling's ten-year venture known

as China City, which opened on June 7, 1938 and was mysteriously destroyed by fire September 2, 1948.<sup>3</sup> The project was Sterling's attempt to fill a gap left when most of Old Chinatown was destroyed to make way for the new Union Station. Sterling envisioned a Chinese-themed tourist attraction, modeled after a Hollywood movie set, that would attract visitors to the Old Plaza area while at the same time providing jobs for the Chinese American community. Relegated by most historians to a footnote in the history of Los Angeles, China City played a pivotal role in the lives of many Chinese Americans who lived in the city in the 1930s and 1940s.

While Sterling's project lacked the backing of any of the major Chinese American community organizations, for the Chinese Americans who worked or rented property there, the development provided not only a means of commercial livelihood but a sense of community as well. Many who found work in China City were those who, for whatever reason, fell outside of the traditional networks of Los Angeles' Old Chinatown. Some like Ling hailed from different regions of the country or spoke different Chinese dialects than most of their neighbors, while many others lacked the financial means to own their own stores elsewhere. In this way, the makeup of China City was distinct from other Chinese American communities in the area. While most of the buildings, ponds and attractions were stylized sets or recreations, the friendships and bonds the workers and entrepreneurs of China City forged were real. Despite its artifice, China City, the community, became an integral part of the identities of so many of the Chinese Americans involved in the project. For those who worked, played and grew up in the area, the story of China City is a story of bonds formed, in this, the most unlikely of locales.

### Project Development

By 1933, as the slow destruction of Old Chinatown began, people both within the community and without realized the economic potential in creating a new Chinatown.<sup>4</sup> In the decades prior to 1930, Old Chinatown developed a substantial business catering to tourists. Between 1903 and 1923, the number of Chinese restaurants in Los Angeles Chinatown grew substantially from five to 28.<sup>5</sup> Most of these restaurants were so-called "Chop Suey" houses that catered not to Chinese residents but to interested visitors. This period also saw an explosion of curio shops catering to the same

cliente. As the destruction of the old neighborhood progressed, two competing visions of a tourist-friendly replacement to Old Chinatown developed.

On the one hand, there was New Chinatown, or “Chinatown on Broadway”, as its promoters originally called it. Backed by major merchants and restaurant owners in the community, this business district was the work of Peter SooHoo Sr. and the Chinatown Project Association. Funded completely within the community, New Chinatown was the first Chinatown in the United States owned, controlled, and operated solely by Chinese Americans. SooHoo believed that New Chinatown should be controlled completely by Chinese Americans, and yet the cost of buying into the project and the established nature of many of its prime investors, left some in the community unwilling or unable to invest.

The city’s other major project was China City, the brainchild of an Anglo American reformer and developer by the name of Christine Sterling. Only a few years earlier, Sterling had transformed Olvera Street from a corner of central Los Angeles, long forgotten by the city elites, into the tourist attraction sine quo non of Los Angeles city proper. In Olvera Street, Sterling created and marketed a version of the city’s past that glorified Los Angeles’ days as a Spanish outpost, while downplaying many of the messier details of the region’s history that might drive away potential visitors. By the mid-1930s, Sterling was ready to start work on her China City project, which she hoped would replicate the stylized showmanship and success of her neighboring Olvera Street.

Unable to agree on a vision or to form a working partnership, by late 1935 both SooHoo and Sterling announced their separate, competing plans for new business developments.<sup>6</sup> Over the next three years, a war of words between the two projects played out in the city’s papers as each project tried to paint the other project as doomed to fail. Sterling claimed that New Chinatown would not be accessible to the poorest members of the Chinese-American community and that SooHoo and the Chinatown Project Association lacked the business acumen to pull the project off, while SooHoo and his group claimed that only Chinese Americans could successfully build and create an authentic replacement for Old Chinatown.



**Peter Soo Hoo Senior. Courtesy of Peter Soo Hoo, Sr. Collection.**

China City finished first, opening on June 7th, three weeks earlier than New Chinatown. The event was covered by most of the city’s papers. Following the opening day gala, the *Los Angeles Times* described the event: “Ten thousand Southern Californians bid a smiling hello last night to the new China City... They thronged the cafes and shops. They ate Chinese delicacies and purchased coolie hats, fans, idols, miniature temples’ images.”<sup>7</sup> Sterling’s association with *Los Angeles Times* publisher, Harry Chandler went back to Olvera Street, and Chandler’s paper featured coverage of Sterling’s venture both in the buildup to the area’s June opening and in the months that followed.

For most of its first year China City attracted ample crowds. Then on February 20, 1939, less than a year after opening, a large part of the district burned down in a mysterious fire. Despite original claims by Sterling that she would not rebuild, she did. China City would remain a distinct part of the downtown landscape for nearly a decade. Then in 1948, the district burnt down again. This second fire proved to be a setback from which the community would never recover.

### **China City**

Like New Chinatown, China City was a tourist development, primarily

created to capitalize on the desire by many non-Chinese for a Chinatown in which to spend their money. Sterling was an astute reader of the popular conscience who wanted to create a Chinese-themed tourist attraction that appealed to the changing tastes of the average American consumer. Her China City project built on the growing fascination with Chinese culture that was only then beginning to become an integral part of the American cultural diet. Throughout the late 1920s and earlier 1930s, a new fascination with China began to seep its way into American culture in ways quite distinct from the yellow peril fears associated with the country in the later part of the 19th century. Newspapers carried stories of the ongoing civil conflict in China; a cycle of Chinese-themed films and to a lesser extent novels peppered the market place; and Hollywood developed its first genuine Chinese American star—Anna May Wong.<sup>8</sup>

China City sought to capitalize on this new fascination by transforming the experience the average tourist had in Chinatown from one defined by dark unpaved alleys, old red brick buildings and rumors of tong wars, prostitutes and opium addiction, into a bright, almost romanticized trip to “the Orient.” China City featured a walled shopping arcade replete with rickshaw rides, a temple, lotus ponds, and even a recreation of the set from *The Good Earth*. There were nightly shows for tourists featuring Chinese American performers and costumed workers speaking in English. In fact, unbeknownst to most visitors, some of the very extras that peppered the background of the most popular Hollywood films of the day worked in the storefronts of China City. Similar in goal to her earlier Olvera Street project, this was not an attempt to recreate any type of realistic facsimile of contemporary Chinese society nor was it meant to accurately reflect the lives of Chinese Americans living in Los Angeles in the 1930s. Rather, with China City, Sterling was trying to meet a very specific expectation held by many of the area’s visitors. China City was first and foremost a tourist attraction.

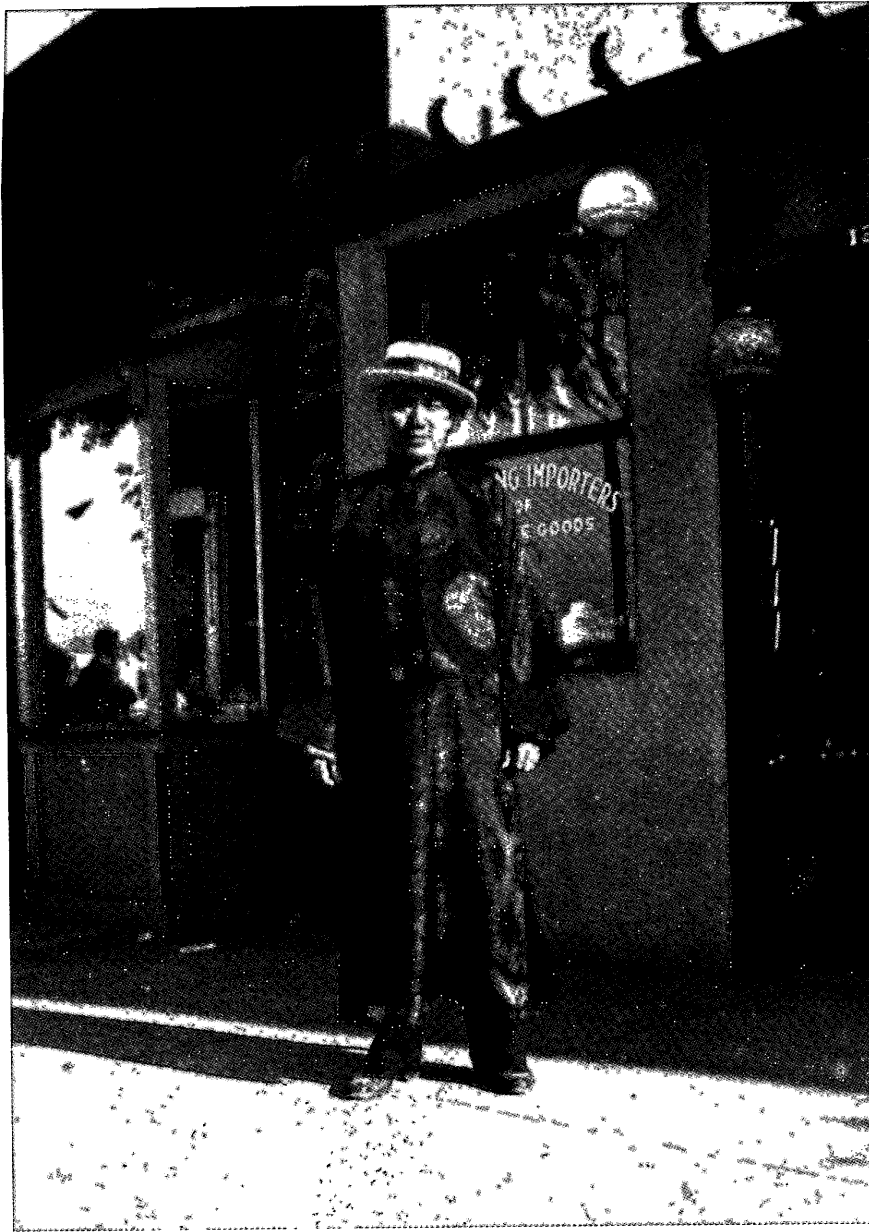
### **Workers, Shopkeepers and Their Children**

While China City may have been conceived of as a tourist attraction, Sterling’s project also provided jobs for many in the Chinese American community. Sterling saw this as an integral part of the district’s purpose: “Los Angeles is under obligation to the hundreds of Chinese, many of them early-day residents here, who have been uprooted from where they have

made their home for years.” She continued on, “The new China City will give these Chinese new opportunities to preserve their racial and cultural integrity by bringing them together in one district.”<sup>9</sup> Those in the community who worked and rented shops in China City were more than grateful for the opportunities the area provided. For immigrant merchants and entrepreneurs, China City created a space for those who, for whatever reason, could not or did not want to join Peter SooHoo’s New Chinatown. These men and women rented space in China City; they developed their own stores; and they created the China City Merchant Association to speak collectively to Sterling and the other directors of China City. While Sterling provided the vision for the project, it was these workers and shopkeepers who kept that vision alive on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Ling is emblematic of both the possibilities of success and the realities of the limitations that faced Chinese Americans who chose to run businesses in China City. When Ling arrived in Los Angeles, he did not have any money to open his own store even in China City where rents were quite affordable. But this did not deter him. Ling worked out a deal with Jake and Dorothy Siu, who ran a curio store in China City called the Flower Hut. The Sius allowed Ling to set up a table in front of their store to sell his wares on a trial basis. The trial was a success and soon Ling was able to open his own store in China City, which he named Chekiang Importers, after the province of his birth.

In time, Ling would run three stores in China City. He was so successful that he was able to bring a village cousin to the area and help him get started in the business as well. Ling soon became active in the China City Merchant Association and became a high-profile member of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. Yet for all his success, Ling would never be able to own a piece of China City the way many merchants in New Chinatown did. While the China City Merchants Association served to voice many of the concerns that the merchants had, the ultimate decisions about the direction China City would take lay in the hands of Christine Sterling and the other directors. Despite these limitations, for Ling and many other merchants like him, China City provided the foothold into established respectability that Sterling had promised.



Tsin Nan Ling in front of Chekiang Importers.  
Courtesy of Ruby Ling Louie Collection.

China City offered many Chinese Americans a path to a more successful means of livelihood for themselves and their families. Rents in China City were relatively cheap and the area by nature attracted enough customers to support most businesses. In return, the Chinese Americans who worked there traded some of the autonomy that was available to merchants in the competing New Chinatown development. Those who worked in China City found themselves working in an environment that created certain expectations on how they should dress, act and speak. Most people who worked in China City wore costumes of some sort — Mr. Ling's appears to have been in a black Chinese robe and straw brimmed hat — and many others performed jobs or activities—such as pulling rickshaws — that they never would have performed anywhere else in 20th century Los Angeles.

Mr. Ling, like so many of his colleagues in China City, gladly made these trade-offs in order to support his family. In return, Ling's children, like so many of the other American-born children that grew up in China City, looked on the community fondly. One of Ling's daughters, Ruby Ling Louie recalls her childhood in China City, "My two older sisters had to watch the stores. Especially since we had three stores we were in need of a lot of supervision. But I, the youngest one, was the freest. So I was able to visit the other children that were in the community. We really had a community of children because most of the families were large and all related... I was often with Choey Lan Fong in her father's basketry store, we were playing dolls and eating minced ham sandwiches. We were having a fun time."<sup>10</sup> Ruby's friend, Choey Lan, remembers the large number of young people fondly, "We lived in a fantasy. We all knew each other really well, played together. The people there were like a family more than a business."<sup>11</sup> The large number of children that both Fong and the youngest Ling daughter remember reflected a demographic shift then occurring throughout Chinese America. By the time of the 1940 census, native-born Chinese Americans outnumbered their immigrant parents in America for the first time in U.S. history. The large number of children who worked or spent time in the area created a real sense of community among the youth.

Life was difficult for many of the families that worked in China City. One of Ruby Ling's neighborhood friends was Esther Lee Johnson. Esther's family felt the weight of the Depression much more heavily than did the Ling family, and yet despite their differences they shared a common bond

through China City. Esther described the small upstairs apartment her family called home, "It's actually one big room and a kitchen and a bathroom, no bathtub. We had the pull chain toilet, and my mother had a carpenter come in and partition two bedrooms and that big living room. So my mother and father and younger sister slept in one room which was partitioned and then the other room was for the three of us girls."<sup>12</sup> Behind the artifice, it seems, many in China City continued to struggle.

At around the age of 12, Esther and her older sister found after-school, part-time jobs in China City at the Man Sing Bakery earning money to help support the family. The younger Lee daughter recalls the experience, "We worked at the main bakery, [we'd] make the cookies and then we go down to China City. We'd go down there around seven and we worked until ten. We'd just sell the cookies..." Despite having to work a part-time, Esther also remembers the large number of children that hung around or worked in China City, "It was fun because we had all these kids around there. We'd get together and there was an arcade there... One of my other sisters watched the bakery while I'd run over to the penny arcade and, you know, played the jukebox and danced. We just had fun...it was nice clean fun." Choey Lan Fong remembers the dances at the penny arcade as well, "During that period, there weren't a lot of people around then. One of my best friends worked at the penny arcade, she worked as a cashier there and we used to jitterbug everyday... We would just dance all day and all night. It was great for her to pass the time away. Either there were no customers or else I didn't notice them." Thus youth in the area were able to bring a meaning to China City that was separate from the somewhat contrived nature of their surroundings. As a result of the large number of children who spent time in the area, young people forged bonds and friendships as organically as they would have in any other community. In fact, the nature of China City insured that friendships and acquaintances formed between individuals from quite different backgrounds.

The community that developed around China City appears all the more impressive when one considers that almost no one lived in China City proper. The area was built as a business district and tourist attraction, and there was very little, if any, specified housing within its walls. While most who worked in the district lived in the area, many did not. For some youth, like Marian Lee Leng, who lived in completely different areas of town,

China City provided a connection to the Chinese American community that they lacked in the neighborhoods where they lived. Marian's mother, Elsie Lee, moved the family to Los Angeles from their home in Portland at the behest of Marian's uncle, who wrote to tell them of opportunity in the area. The family arrived shortly after the first fire in 1939 and eventually ran both a coffee shop and a gift shop in China City. Despite their business commitments, they lived a fair distance away. Marian recalls, "At the time, we lived in East L.A. and we had to take the street car from Brooklyn Ave. down to Main St. That got us to China City."<sup>13</sup> Because Marian didn't go to school with other Chinese American youth her age, most of the Chinese American friendships that she did have she had met in China City.

While she befriended many of the other youth who worked or spent free time in China City, she did not have the same luck with the other Chinese American youth from outside Sterling's development. Marian recalls, "I was more or less an outsider because I didn't grow up with the other kids here. I had cousins, but they lived near 20th Street, way out there. I was just in China City all my life." In this sense, China City provided the common space where Chinese Americans from different disparate parts of the city could interact. While the adults often formed partnerships and friendships despite their differences, for the youth who worked and played in the area, their association with China City became a part of their identity.

When Sterling first envisioned China City, little could she have known that her short-lived project would have such a profound effect on the Chinese Americans who worked and spent time there. The bonds that were formed between people in China City existed across generations: between older adults such as those in the Ling and Siu families; and between the younger American-born children, like Esther Lee, Ruby Ling, Choey Lan Fong and Marian Lee. The project may have been the brainchild of Christine Sterling, but the workers, shopkeepers, and merchants were its life's blood. While the community lasted only ten years, its existence is pivotal to understanding Los Angeles's Chinese American community in the 1930s and 1940s. Overshadowed in part by Ms. Sterling's competition with Mr. SooHoo's project, the real story of China City is not the competition with New Chinatown, but rather the space China City provided for those who worked within its borders to succeed financially, to provide for their families and to form bonds despite their differences.

## Notes

1. On the life of Mr. Ling, see Dr. Ruby Ling Louie, interview by William Gow, March 28, 2008, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
2. The earlier Wade Giles transliteration of Zhejiang province is Chekiang province. Chekiang is also the way the province was referred to by English speakers of the day.
3. In many publications the date for the fire is incorrectly given as 1947; the second fire occurred in 1948. See "China City Fire Burns Shops," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1948.
4. Partly as a result of the prodigious efforts of Peter SooHoo, the destruction of the Old Chinatown occurred slowly over the course of five years. The first section of Old Chinatown was destroyed in December of 1933, but residents and shops in the Union Station construction zone continued to live and work in the area as late as 1937. While most of Old Chinatown was razed by the time Union Station was completed in 1939, a small section of the community along Los Angeles Street continued to be occupied until 1949. Today, a little less than one block of the original Chinatown remains.
5. Ivan Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction: The Moral Career of American Chinatowns, 1880-1940," *Pacific Historical Review*, 43:3 (1974).
6. On SooHoo and Sterling's unsuccessful attempt at a partnership see Edwin S. Bingham, "The Saga of the Los Angeles Chinatown," (Master's Thesis, Occidental College, 1942).
7. "China City Lures Crowd," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1938.
8. On the changing notions of China, see Karen Leong, *China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2005).
9. Quoted in "Chinatown to Rise Again," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1937.
10. Dr. Ruby Ling Louie, interview by William Gow, March 28, 2008, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
11. Choey Lan Fong, interview by William Gow, September 1, 2009, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
12. Esther Lee Johnson, interview by William Gow, March 9, 2008,

Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

13. Marian Lee Leng, interview by William Gow, March 16, 2008, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

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