

A Night in Old Chinatown

American Orientalism, China Relief Fundraising, and the 1938 Moon Festival in Los Angeles

ABSTRACT In 1938, the Chinese American community in Los Angeles hosted the Moon Festival in Old Chinatown as a fundraiser for Chinese victims of the Sino-Japanese War. Held against the backdrop of Bowl of Rice fundraisers across the United States, and the demolition of most of Old Chinatown by the construction of Union Station, the 1938 Moon Festival attracted tens of thousands of visitors to Old Chinatown while providing a stage for local Chinese Americans to perform self-representations of Chinatown to visitors. Focusing on Chinese American performances such as those of the Los Angeles Mei Wah Girls' Drum Corps, this article examines the extent to which Chinese Americans utilized the festival's performances of race and gender to challenge Orientalist ideas about their community.

KEYWORDS Chinatown, Orientalism, Los Angeles, Bowl of Rice Fundraisers, China Relief, Second Sino-Japanese War

On October 8, 1938, as dusk fell over Los Angeles, crowds from around the city converged on what remained of Old Chinatown for a celebration of the Moon Festival. Passing under one of three elaborate gates constructed for the festival, visitors entered a roped-off section of Los Angeles Street decorated with lanterns and flags and lined with concession stands. In the center of the festival area, adjacent to the Lung Kong Tin Yee Association headquarters, Chinese American youth volunteers had constructed an Alter of Blessings to the Moon Goddess, next to which Dr. Edward Lee told fortunes and sold horned nuts to interested visitors.¹ The Chinese Cinema Players, a group of U.S.-born Chinese Americans who worked in the film industry as bit-players, designers, and artists, were responsible for most of the festival decorations. At one booth, the Los Angeles-born movie star Anna May Wong signed

1. *Federation News*, November 1938, David and Dora SooHoo Collection, Chinese American Museum at El Pueblo Historical Monument, Los Angeles, Calif.; "Chinese Plan Celebration of Eighth Moon Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1938, A16.

autographs and took photos with fans. The festivities included street dancing, music, and a shadow boxing performance. At the height of the festival, a Chinese dragon operated by dozens of residents wound its way along Los Angeles Street to the delight of curious onlookers while lion dancers performed for the crowds.²

Alongside the dragon and the lion dancers, fourteen-year-old Barbara Jean Wong prepared to lead other Mei Wah Club members in their first official public performance as a marching drum corps. The Mei Wah Club began seven years earlier as a girls' basketball team, and many of its members were teenagers who attended local high schools like Belmont and Polytechnic. American citizens by birth, these young Chinese American women shared interests similar to other American youth. Under the guidance of Barbara's mother, Maye Wong, and her uncle, David SooHoo, the teenagers had designed costumes and choreographed a routine.³ Their performance as an all-female Chinese American youth marching band that night stood in sharp contrast to many of the more Orientalist aspects of the festival.

With its panoply of Chinese Americans performing for white audiences, the 1938 Moon Festival bore little resemblance to the centuries-old Mid-Autumn Festival from which it borrowed its name. The event was not a traditional ethnic festival, but rather a theatrical fundraising performance that mixed tropes from Chinese culture with representations from the Orient of the Western imagination. This festival was the second such fundraiser held in Los Angeles in 1938 after the success of the China Nite Festival held earlier that summer. Both China Nite and the 1938 Moon Festival resembled Bowl of Rice fundraisers more closely than they did customary Chinese festivals. Held largely between the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941, Bowl of Rice fundraisers were hosted as war relief events created through partnerships between newly formed China aid societies—controlled primarily by white businessmen and former missionaries to China—and local Chinese American organizations.⁴ From New York to San Francisco, Portland to Santa

2. "Chinese Hold Moon Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1938; *Federation News*, November 1938.

3. Marjorie Lee, "Building Community," in *Linking Our Lives: Chinese American Women of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, 1984), 97.

4. On Bowl of Rice fundraisers, see Karen Leong and Judy Tzu-Chu Wu, "Filling the Rice Bowls of China: Staging Humanitarian Relief During the Sino-Japanese War," in *Chinese Americans and the Politics of Race and Culture*, ed. Sucheng Chen and Madeline Hsu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 130–52; K. Scott Wong, *American's First: Chinese Americans and the Second*

Barbara, Bowl of Rice fundraisers brought large crowds into Chinese American communities, raised millions of dollars for China war relief, and garnered extensive coverage in the nation's press.

Like other ethnic festivals, pageants, and street performances, Bowl of Rice Festivals became complex sites for the negotiation of social power.⁵ Bowl of Rice fundraisers increased the visibility of Chinese Americans and in the process played a fundamental role in eroding the negative image many whites held about China and Chinese people.⁶ In addition to increasing visibility, the cultural representations at these fundraisers also played a role in transforming popular conceptions of Chinese Americans. For most of the twentieth century the U.S. citizen was defined legally, economically, and culturally against the figure of the Asian immigrant.⁷ Popular representations of Asian immigrants worked in tandem with the law to determine who would be given rights of citizenship and how extensively those rights could be exercised.⁸ Beginning in the nineteenth century, popular culture commonly represented Chinese immigrants as a predominantly male, opium-using Yellow Peril, threatening to overrun the United States, take jobs from white workers, and seduce white women.⁹ The cultural logic of Yellow Peril justified legislation restricting Asian

World War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 38–39; Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 239–40; Him Mark Lai, “Roles Played by Chinese in America during China’s Resistance to Japanese Aggression and during World War II,” *Chinese America: History and Perspective* (1997): 75–128.

5. See for example, Robert Anthony Osri, *The Madonna on 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Susan Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theater in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); April Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American through Celebration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); Chouh-Ling Yeh, *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

6. K. Scott Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 42.

7. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

8. On popular American representations of China and Chinese Americans see Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on the Minds: American Views of China and India* (New York: John Day and Company, 1958); Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of Chinese, 1785–1882* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*; Gordon Chang, *Fateful Ties: A History of America’s Preoccupation with China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

9. Robert Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 51–144.

immigration to the United States, beginning with the Page Act in 1875, continuing through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and culminating in the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 that banned the immigration of “aliens ineligible for citizenship.”¹⁰ Changes in immigration policy along with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War provided the backdrop against which representations of the Yellow Peril began to shift.¹¹ By the late 1930s, popular images increasingly constructed China and Chinese people as allies, while representing Japan and Japanese people as the new Yellow Peril.¹² As part of this shift, Bowl of Rice fundraisers played a fundamental role in challenging Yellow Peril stereotypes of Chinese Americans.

In Los Angeles, the 1938 Moon Festival took on added importance when the Chinese American merchants who controlled the local Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association decided to hold the fundraiser in Old Chinatown. Chinatown merchants were aware that white residents of the city often made moral judgments about Chinese Americans based on the perceived disrepair of the neighborhood. The festival not only offered the merchants an opportunity to reshape long-held stereotypes about the neighborhood as an urban slum, but also gave them an opportunity to reassert the community’s continued existence in the face of the demolition of most of Old Chinatown. Beginning in 1933, much of the community had been displaced to make way for the construction of a new Union Station.¹³ By 1938, only a few blocks of Old Chinatown remained. In this context, the Moon Festival provided the residents of Old Chinatown a chance to reassert the neighborhood’s existence while also reshaping its image.

10. On the passage of anti-Chinese immigration legislation see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: University Press, 2004).

11. David Palumbo-Liu argues that the completion of Asian immigrant exclusion with the Tydings McDuffie Act of 1934 caused the nation to reimagine its relationship with Asia and to question how to manage those Asians already in the United States. David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 18–19.

12. On the growth of Yellow Peril stereotypes of Japanese people in the United States from the late nineteenth century through World War II, see John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 157–64.

13. “Sledges Sound Old Chinatown’s Knell in Preparing Place for New Railway Terminal,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1933, A1.

Festival organizers simultaneously drew on and subverted Orientalist notions of the neighborhood as distinct from the rest of the city. To do so, they engaged existing theatrical elements inherent in Orientalist notions about Chinatown, and they placed Chinese American women at the center of their representations. The 1938 Moon Festival included a dragon boat with young Chinese women, a parade of more than two hundred lantern-carrying Chinese American female youth, and the presence of Anna May Wong, whose star persona embodied the contradictions inherent in many popular representations of Chinese women of the period. Many of the self-representations performed by Chinese Americans at the festival challenged older representations of the neighborhood as a violent slum of male bachelors, in part by promoting a related set of representations of a romantic and feminine Orient. Yet the festival's relationship to Orientalism was much more complex than simply replacing one set of Orientalist representations with another. The 1938 Moon Festival also contained subversive elements that did not conform to either the long-circulating Yellow Peril representations of Old Chinatown or to the representations of a romantic and feminine Orient. Key among these elements was the performance of the Mei Wah Drum Corps. The group's costuming and mode of performance as a marching band produced a contradiction in the festival that allowed the young women of the Mei Wah Club to be seen in ways that challenged the more Orientalist representations in other parts of the festival.

This article intervenes in the existing scholarship on American Orientalism by examining the extent to which the 1938 Moon Festival's Chinese American organizers and performers rearticulated Orientalist conceptions of Chinatown for their own benefit.¹⁴ Scholars have largely focused on the ways that whites, and not Asian Americans, engaged Orientalism.¹⁵ After all, Edward Said defines Orientalism as the discursive practices and systems of power that constructed the East as an imagined geography against which the West defined itself—a definition that implicitly casts whites as active subjects and Asians as passive objects.¹⁶ Most historians foreground the

14. On racial rearticulation, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 165; for racial rearticulation in a similar Japanese American festival in Los Angeles, see Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 6.

15. I build on the work of Karen Leong who makes a similar critique. Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.

16. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 12. On American Orientalism see John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American*

agency of Chinese Americans, by focusing on social history rather than on Orientalism.¹⁷ In contrast this article utilizes oral histories, community publications, and family photos to demonstrate the ways that Chinese Americans negotiated American Orientalism through the performance of race and gender at the festival. In the process, this article foregrounds the instrumental role of Chinatown—as a place, a community, and a popular idea—in facilitating this process.

While films, newspapers, and white-led tours had long represented Chinatowns as sites of Yellow Peril, in the decades before World War II residents in these communities also found ways to perform their own representations to white visitors that often subverted Orientalist expectations.¹⁸ The 1938 Moon Festival was part of this process. Popular ideas of Chinatown were never the product of whites alone. Rather, over the course of the early twentieth century, Chinatown became the apparatus through which a heterogeneous group of social actors negotiated and engaged American Orientalism, with the power of groups to do so changing over time and place.¹⁹ In 1938, the Moon Festival provided a platform for merchant groups, like the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, and youth groups, like the Mei Wah Club, to present their own vision of Chinatown to whites. By 1941, when United China Relief presented its own Moon Festival fundraiser in Los Angeles, the vision of Chinese Americans was no longer central. Chinese American organizations lost much of their control as elements and performances originated by Chinese

Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration Contact and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). On Orientalist views of Chinatowns, see Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995); Anthony Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

17. Examples of Chinatown social histories include Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* (New York: New Press, 2001); Yung, *Unbound Feet*.

18. Ivan Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction: The Moral Career of American Chinatowns, 1880–1940," *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 3 (August 1, 1974): 367–94; Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Raymond Rast, "The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1882–1917," *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (February, 2007): 29–60.

19. Michel Foucault defines an apparatus, or *dispositif* in French, as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid." Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books 1972), 194.

Americans in 1938 were incorporated into the 1941 Moon Festival to promote the vision of United China Relief. Yet even if the 1938 Moon Festival did not fundamentally transform the nature of American Orientalism, it did have impact on individual lives by creating a stage on which local Chinese Americans could perform their own representations of China and Chinese people.

CHINATOWN, TOURISM, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ETHNICITY

Long before the advent of Bowl of Rice fundraisers, both Chinese Americans and whites drew on the performance of ethnic difference to attract tourists to urban Chinatowns. Beginning around the 1890s, as interest in urban tourism increased, white tour guides in the nation's Chinatowns began hiring Chinese Americans to perform as opium smokers or in scenes of Chinese tong violence for the viewing pleasure of paying white tourists. At the same time, Chinese American merchants increasingly performed their own representations that contrasted with the Yellow Peril depictions of Chinatowns so often promoted by newspaper publishers, film producers, and white tour guides. In some Chinatowns, like San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, Chinese American merchants were able to take control of the local image of Chinatown to shape the way tourists understood the neighborhood. Yet in Los Angeles, where nearly all of Old Chinatown was located on a single plot of privately owned land and where business owners had little control over the space or buildings in which they operated, before the late 1930s, the local Chinese American merchants struggled to effectively perform self-representations or to attract significant numbers of middle-class, white customers.²⁰

By the 1930s, the 75,000 or so Chinese Americans in the United States were an increasingly urban population living in all parts of the nation—a drastic change from the prior century. The first wave of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth century settled primarily in rural areas and small towns across the American West.²¹ Composed predominantly of young men from the Pearl River Delta area of Guangdong province, this first wave of nineteenth-century immigrants often worked as miners, railroad

20. On the Chinatown plot of land, see, "Putting Millions in Old Part of the City," *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1913, III; "Buys Los Angeles Chinatown for Two Million Dollars," *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1914, III.

21. Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 45.

workers, and agricultural laborers.²² During this period, San Francisco Chinatown functioned as the social and political center of Chinese American life. It was a place that Chinese Americans could visit to speak their native language, attend the Chinese theater, buy Chinese food and supplies, and interact with fellow immigrants from similar villages and regions of China.²³ Even as the overall Chinese American population decreased following the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, white mob violence in the American West drove Chinese immigrants into urban areas.²⁴ In 1880, only 22 percent of the Chinese American population lived in communities of 100,000 or more. By 1940, large urban Chinatowns like those in San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles housed 71 percent of the Chinese American community.²⁵ No longer isolated to California, by the early twentieth century cities like Chicago and Boston included their own Chinatowns.

In the early 1930s, on the eve of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Los Angeles had two identifiable Chinese American communities: Old Chinatown adjacent to the Plaza, and the area surrounding the City Market, a wholesale produce market located at Ninth and San Pedro Streets.²⁶ The Chinese American population in Los Angeles had grown from a reported population of 234 in the 1870 census to 3,009 in the 1930 census, making Los Angeles the fourth largest Chinese American community in the nation.²⁷ Yet in a city with more than 1,200,000 residents in 1930, Chinese Americans composed a relatively small part of the total population. By 1930 these 3,000 or so Chinese residents lived spread across these two distinct neighborhoods. The community near the City Market featured mostly detached single-family homes and was more ethnically diverse than Old Chinatown. Despite being home to a significant portion of the population, Ninth Street

22. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 239.

23. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 78.

24. On white mob violence see Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 2007). On the growth of urban Chinatowns, see Peter Kwong and Dusanka Miscovic, *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 110–11.

25. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 239.

26. Kit King Louis, "A Study of American-born and American-reared Chinese in Los Angeles" (University of Southern California, M.A. thesis, 1931), 15–16.

27. In 1930, the Chinese population of Los Angeles trailed only New York, San Francisco, and Oakland. Kim Fong Tom, "The Participation of the Chinese in the Community Life of Los Angeles" (University of Southern California, M.A. thesis, 1944), 11.

was not perceived to be a Chinatown by most whites. As such, the community failed to capture the imagination of the white community.

In contrast, Old Chinatown had long attracted the fascination of whites, playing a much larger role in the popular imaginary of the city than the community's small size would suggest. Throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century, Old Chinatown was a significant topic in Los Angeles newspapers, where sensational stories about alleged opium dens and tong wars helped sell local papers. Hollywood films produced in Los Angeles also often used Chinatown as a setting for their stories drawing on Yellow Peril narratives similar to those found in the mainstream press. Popular representations were fueled by the ways that Old Chinatown was actually physically distinct from many other areas of Los Angeles. In part because much of Old Chinatown was located on a single lot of privately-owned land, infrastructural improvements were slow to appear in the community. Chinatown did not receive streetlights until 1913; and as late as 1922, there were only two paved roads in the community.²⁸ In addition, many of the area's residents lived in poverty, crowded into two story brick buildings housing multiple families or living in small rooms behind storefronts.²⁹ In 1931, a number of U.S.-born Chinese Americans expressed their general displeasure with Old Chinatown to a researcher from the University of Southern California: "The Chinatown here is terrible . . . It disgraces the Chinese people . . . I feel sluggish when I go there. It is dirty and poor in appearance." Another respondent described Chinatown as "a dingy, dirty place."³⁰

Like the Orient of the Western imagination, Old Chinatown was depicted in popular culture as physically, socially, and even temporally distinct from the rest of the city—a depiction the community shared with many urban Chinatowns across the nation. In San Francisco, for example, late nineteenth and early twentieth century white Victorian conceptions of gender and sexuality marked Chinatown and its residents as deviant and distinct from the rest of the city. According to historian Nayan Shah, Chinatown came to be seen as a homosocial space where the sexual relations of bachelors were portrayed as

28. Mark Wild, *Street Meetings: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 23.

29. Isabela Seong Leong Quintana, "Making Do, Making Home: Borders and the Worlds of Chinatown and Sonoratown in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles," *Journal of Urban History* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 62–66.

30. Quoted in Louis, "A Study of American-born and American-reared Chinese in Los Angeles," 110.

outside the confines of “respectable domesticity.”³¹ At the same time, Chinese women in San Francisco’s Chinatown were “considered to exist in sexual slavery, either as concubines to polygamous merchants or as prostitutes serving Chinese and white men.”³² A similar perception prevailed in Los Angeles. By the 1930s, even as the local press began to acknowledge the existence of the U.S.-born Chinese American population elsewhere in the city, Old Chinatown continued to be represented as devoid of families and as linked to violence through male members of the tong associations. Chinese gangs, tong associations, and tong wars were a defining part of Yellow Peril iconography and were often represented as an outgrowth of the perceived homosocial nature of Old Chinatown.

Popular representations of the physical space of the neighborhood also marked Old Chinatown as distinct from the city proper. The local press often depicted Old Chinatown as a world of underground passages and secret rooms, a depiction common to other major Chinatowns around the country. A 1930 *Los Angeles Times* article described: “Tong wars, murders, dope raids, hop-house scandals, white and yellow slavery, underground tunnels, secret trap doors; all have been here. Outside in the streets old men bask lazily in the sunshine and life is peaceful to the eye, but behind barred doors one feels that mystery is eternally seething.”³³ These articles portrayed Old Chinatown as not only *unseen*, but also *unknowable* to the city’s white population. Stories of underground tunnels reflected broader fears that many whites held of Chinatown as invisible to police and government power. In marking Chinatown as outside the visual control of whites, these stereotypes also represented Chinatown as outside the legal and juridical boundaries of the rest of the city. At the same time, these stories also played into notions that many whites had that in visiting Chinatowns they were experiencing only a staged version of the community and that something unseen and sinister lay below the surface, outside the view of white visitors.

Chinatown was not just depicted as unseen and ungovernable—it was also depicted as a mystical world untouched by modernity or progress. In 1933, for example, following the announcement that Union Station would be constructed in Old Chinatown, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article that reflected this viewpoint: “Of old Chinatown . . . all that will be left will be

31. Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 78.

32. *Ibid.*, 78.

33. Gordon L’Allemand, “Old Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1930, K8.

memories of pungent, complicated, Oriental odors, the slup, slup of slipped feet or the throbbing from the joss house of a gong to mark hours that, somehow, march much more slowly there than in the outside Occidental world.³⁴ This article described the neighborhood as an extension of the mystical and timeless Orient of the Western imagination, positioning Old Chinatown as a place of odors, sounds, and other sensations soon to be relegated to the realm of memory.³⁵ Not only was the passing of time signaled differently—with the beating of a gong—but time itself was portrayed as moving more slowly than it did in the rest of society. Despite these Orientalist representations, Old Chinatown remained the center of the Chinese American community. The neighborhood contained the local branch of the Chinese Americans Citizens Alliance; the headquarters of most district, family, and tong associations; and perhaps most importantly, the local Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA).

In most urban Chinatowns and particularly in San Francisco, the CCBA played an influential role in Chinese American life. Officially founded in 1882, and incorporated in California in 1901, San Francisco's CCBA was often referred to in English as the Chinese Six Companies after the earlier, more loosely defined federation from which it developed.³⁶ Formed in part to provide a more organized response to the Chinese Exclusion Act, the CCBA was composed of representatives from the city's district and family associations that acted as immigrant mutual aid organizations based on members' common surnames and regions of origin in Southern China.³⁷ The organizations' functions included granting temporary lodging, providing burial expenses for the indigent, and settling disputes between members. Larger communities like Los Angeles developed their own CCBA's that operated autonomously from the San Francisco CCBA, although these regional associations generally recognized the San Francisco association as the head of a confederation of CCBA's that reached throughout the United States and

34. "Chinatown Hail and Farewell," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1933, G1.

35. Kay Anderson argues that Chinatown, like the Orient, is a creation of the white imagination. Kay Anderson, "The Idea of Chinatown: The Power of Place and Institutional Practice in the Making of a Racial Category," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 4 (December 1987): 581; Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*.

36. Him Mark Lai, "Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/Huiguan System," *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, 1987, 24–25.

37. Throughout the nineteenth century the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) hired white lawyers and provided financial backing to legal challenges of anti-Chinese legislation. Kwong and Miscovic, *Chinese America*, III, 125.

into areas of Latin America that lacked Chinese diplomatic representation.³⁸ In Los Angeles, the local CCBA appears to have been founded shortly after the Chinese Revolution of 1911.³⁹ Across the nation, CCBAs advocated for the interests of the merchant class and played an important role in suppressing tong violence and promoting tourism in the nation's urban Chinatowns.⁴⁰

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, as the perceived ethnic differences of the nation's Chinatowns transformed these neighborhoods into popular tourist destinations, Chinese American merchants and white tour guides both attempted to capitalize on the heightened interest in Chinatown tourism. For example, in New York City as early as the 1890s, middle-class white sightseeing tours featured the district's Chinese Theater, a Joss House, and a Chinese restaurant.⁴¹ As historian Raymond Rast has demonstrated, tourism in San Francisco Chinatown during the waning decades of the nineteenth century was driven in part by a desire of whites to "come in contact with authentic cultures."⁴² In San Francisco in the 1890s, this impulse included not only a desire to see and experience traditional Chinese garments, food, and religious practices, but also to see opium dens, gambling houses, and brothels. But as reform efforts reduced vice in Chinatown, tour guides began to stage performed acts—ranging from opium smoking to reenacted tong violence—that met the expectations of paying white tourists.⁴³

Many white tourists visited Chinatowns in hopes of witnessing authentic representations of Chinese American life, but these same tourists were often aware that the acts they were witnessing were in fact theatrical performances staged for their own benefit. Writing in 1898, Thaddeus Stevens Kenderdine reflected on his tour of San Francisco Chinatown: "The guides were a pair of fakes, the Joss House seemed like a store, and the opium 'victims' as if sharing the money we paid the guides; and I was glad to leave the scenes and get some fresh air."⁴⁴ Certainly, Kenderdine was not the only white visitor to feel that

38. Lai, "Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association," 27, 39.

39. Chew Pack, "What Chinese Think of Exclusion Act," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1912, III1.

40. Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction," 388–92.

41. Sabine Haenni, *Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 156; Lui, *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery*, 38–41.

42. Rast, "The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown," 40.

43. Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction," 390; Rast, "The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown," 40–46.

44. Thaddeus Stevens Kenderdine, *California Revisited, 1858–1897* (Doylestown, Pa.: Doylestown Publishing Company, 1898), 104–5.

Chinatown was fake. The theatrical nature of these tours became such common knowledge that by the early twentieth century popular silent films satirized the tours' fictitiousness.⁴⁵ This perception that Chinatown was explicitly performed for tourists continued into the late 1920s and early 1930s. As a character in the 1929 film *Chinatown Nights* stated after being convinced by his companion to join a tour of the neighborhood, "This is ridiculous, Joan. You know Chinatown is all a fake."⁴⁶

In this way, tourism in urban Chinatowns became closely intertwined with ideas of theatricality. Performance studies scholars have shown that the presence of an actual theater is not a prerequisite for theatricality; rather, according to Josette Feral, theatricality can occur whenever the spectator's gaze creates a "spatial cleft" between the spectator and performer that allows illusion to emerge. As long as this spatial cleft is present, theatricality can exist regardless of whether the subject of the gaze is consciously performing.⁴⁷ Similar to entering a theater, Orientalist depictions of Chinatown led many whites to believe that they were entering a world that was socially, spatially, and temporally distinct from the rest of the city. As a result, American Orientalism often led white visitors to regard urban Chinatowns as a type of theater in which both the neighborhood and its residents existed for the visual pleasure of white onlookers. Yet at the same time, this theatrical expectation produced by an Orientalist outlook on Chinatown threatened to undermine the white tourists' search for authenticity. The challenge for Chinese American merchants was to find ways to exploit white, theatrical expectations of Chinatown in ways that challenged Yellow Peril stereotypes while still appealing to white tourists' desire for authenticity.

In Los Angeles in the early twentieth century, it was not Chinese American merchants or white tour guides who best exploited the theatrical possibilities of Old Chinatown, but instead the film industry—as Hollywood producers throughout the 1910s and 1920s used the community as a backdrop for motion pictures. Films like *The Tong Man*, *Wing Toy*, and *The Cameraman* were all shot in part in Old Chinatown. While white guides did lead tours of Old Chinatown, Los Angeles never witnessed staged tours to the same extent as San Francisco or New York. As one *Los Angeles Times* article

45. Haenni, *Immigrant Scene*, 151–52.

46. *Chinatown Nights*, directed by William Wellman (Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation, 1929), film.

47. See Feral, "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language," *SubStance* 31, no. 2/3, 98/99 (2002): 97.

wrote on the eve of the destruction of Old Chinatown, “Unlike other American Chinatowns this one is not on exhibit for ‘tourists.’ In fact they scoff at tours through Chinatown.”⁴⁸ Orientalist depictions of the Old Chinatown provided the possibilities of transforming the neighborhood into a stage, but—despite the film producers who used the area as a cinematic backdrop—neither white guides nor Chinese American merchants successfully drew on these theatrical elements to draw significant numbers of middle-class white visitors to Old Chinatown before the late 1930s.

While Los Angeles Chinatown attracted comparatively few middle class tourists, a certain segment of the city’s white population did frequent Chinatown in the opening decades of the twentieth century. For decades, many Chinese American businesses, such as the restaurants Man Jen Low, Tuey Far Lowe, and Yee Hung Guey, catered to large numbers of working-class white men.⁴⁹ In 1924, a group of Chinese American merchants in Los Angeles issued a statement to the city press directed at potential white visitors. The statement read, “We, the merchants of Chinatown, use every opportunity to induce white people of the city and tourists to visit Chinatown.” The merchants insisted that they would ensure that Chinatown was “a safe place for women to come to, whether escorted or alone,” and they vowed to “suppress rowdyism among the lower class of white people,” and address the “rudeness” on the part of guests in “chop suey houses.”⁵⁰ In San Francisco, Chinese American merchants following the 1906 earthquake and fire had been able to reshape the built environment of Chinatown to project their own vision of difference in order to better attract middle-class, white customers.⁵¹ In Los Angeles before the destruction of most of Old Chinatown, Chinese American merchants struggled to do the same.

When the new train station displaced much of Old Chinatown, two projects competed to replace the neighborhood for the city’s tourists. Though they were dubbed “Chinatowns,” these two projects are better described as Chinese American business districts, in that they focused primarily on commerce rather than housing. New Chinatown, one of these business districts, was the product of a group of Chinese American merchants headed by Peter SooHoo and was designed to both attract tourists and serve as the Chinese

48. Carroll O’Meara, “Chinatown,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1931, K7.

49. Between 1903 and 1923, the number of Chinese restaurants in Chinatown grew from five to twenty-eight. Light, “From Vice District to Tourist Attraction,” 384–85.

50. “Chinatown to Tell World,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1924, A1.

51. On San Francisco’s Chinatown, see Mae Ngai, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010), 127–28.

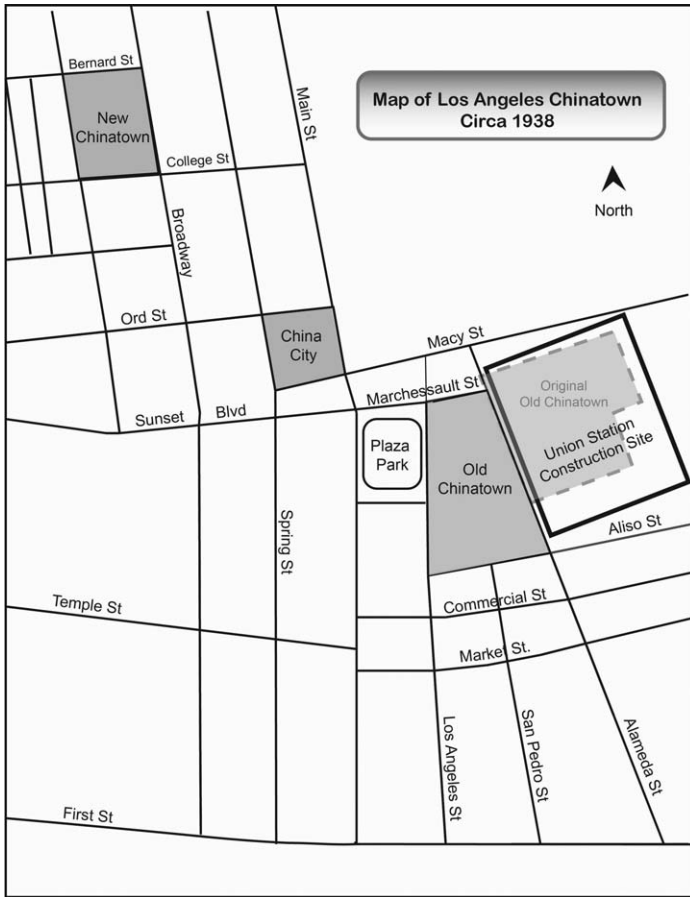


FIGURE 1. By 1938, Union Station had displaced much of Old Chinatown to two new locations, known as New Chinatown and China City. Source: Map by the author.

American commercial replacement to Old Chinatown.⁵² The other new district, China City, was the brainchild of the white philanthropist Christine Sterling who also developed the popular Mexican-themed tourist district Olvera Street.⁵³ Both New Chinatown and China City drew large crowds

52. Josi Ward, “Dreams of Oriental Romance,” *Buildings and Landscape* 20, no. 1 (March, 2013): 19–42; Suellen Cheng and Munson Kwok, “The Golden Years of Los Angeles Chinatown: The Beginning,” *Chinatown Los Angeles, 50th Year: The Golden Years, 1938–1988* (Los Angeles: Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, 1988), 39–41.

53. William Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 169–229; William Gow, “Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles: Christine Sterling and the Residents of China City,” *Gum Saan Journal* 32, no. 1 (2010): 39–53.

of increasingly middle-class, white tourists. China City, in particular, did so by capitalizing on the theatrical elements long present in North American Chinatowns. The district featured a recreation of the set from the 1937 film *The Good Earth* as well as regular staged theatrical performances, such as lion dances, for white visitors. With the opening of these two new districts, the businesses that remained in Old Chinatown struggled to remind white visitors of their continued existence. The two war-relief festivals held in Los Angeles in 1938 would provide the stage from which Chinese American organizers, and in particular community youth organizations, could reassert the old neighborhood's continued presence in the face of Union Station construction.

WAR RELIEF FUNDRAISING AND CHINESE AMERICAN YOUTH

Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, the United Council for Civilian Relief in China sponsored China relief fundraising festivals across the nation on June 17, 1938, as part of its first Bowl of Rice campaign.⁵⁴ In Los Angeles, both China City and New Chinatown opened in June, keeping most Chinese Americans from fully supporting the Bowl of Rice event held on June 17 at the Los Angeles Breakfast Club. Instead, the opening ceremonies of New Chinatown and China City occupied the attention of the Chinese American community and tens of thousands of white visitors, including local celebrities, politicians, and dignitaries. However, the local CCBA hosted two fundraising festivals later in the year: China Nite in August and the Moon Festival in October. The CCBA hosted both of these fundraisers without the apparent support of outside aid organizations.⁵⁵ The leadership delegated significant responsibilities for planning, decorating, and performance to the newly formed Federation of Chinese Clubs—an umbrella organization for local Chinese American youth groups in support of China war relief. This decision

54. "Nations to Rally Tomorrow to Aid Civilians in China," *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 1938, 18.

55. The *Los Angeles Times*, the *Federation News*, and the official souvenir programs for both China Nite and the 1938 Moon Festival mention the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society as the sole sponsor of these two events, though the Chinese Patriotic Society did donate money to the American Bureau for Medical Aid to China (ABMAC) in 1940. See *China Nite Souvenir Program and Directory*, Chinese American Museum at El Pueblo Historical Monument; "Benefit for Oriental War Refugees Attracts 40,000," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1938, A1; "Moon Festival Souvenir Program and Directory," Folder 6, Box Y13, You Chung Hong Family Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; *ABMAC Bulletin*, II, no. 4 (May 1940), Folder 1, Box Y43, You Chung Hong Family Collection.

ensured that these two fundraising festivals would include the vision of U.S.-born Chinese American youth.

China war relief in Los Angeles must be understood in the context of national Chinese American war relief fundraising. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, the San Francisco CCBA helped organize the China War Relief Association (CWRA) to consolidate control over fundraising efforts in a large number of Chinese American communities in the western United States.⁵⁶ With forty-seven branches in over three hundred cities and towns, the organization was the largest of its kind in North America.

In other larger cities, Chinese communities formed separate relief associations rather than working under the umbrella of the CWRA.⁵⁷ In Los Angeles, a war relief association formed called the Chinese Patriotic Society. Although ostensibly an independent organization, the Chinese Patriotic Society was housed inside of CCBA headquarters at 415½ Los Angeles Street in Old Chinatown. Indeed, it appears to have functioned as an extension of the CCBA.⁵⁸ Run almost completely by volunteers, the Chinese Patriotic Society paid a salary to only a general secretary and an office administrator.⁵⁹ While the society did occasionally print broadsides in English in an attempt to influence popular white opinion, the Chinese Patriotic Society focused its efforts on Chinese immigrants.⁶⁰ Each month, CCBA representatives, most likely on behalf of the Chinese Patriotic Society, went house-to-house in Los Angeles collecting funds from Chinese immigrants in support of war relief.⁶¹ Those who did not contribute faced public humiliation—at least one person was paraded through the streets for failing to give to the cause.⁶²

Despite the Chinese Patriotic Society's focus on the immigrant community, its leadership appears to have included American-born members who

56. The China War Relief Association (CWRA) was formed when two separate fundraising organizations, one founded with the backing of the CCBA, combined; Lai, "Roles Played by Chinese in America," 78–79, 89–90; Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 227.

57. Lai, "Roles Played by Chinese in America," 89.

58. *Federation News*, November 1938; Charles Ferguson, "Political Problems and Activities of Oriental Residents in Los Angeles and the Vicinity" (M.A. thesis: University of California, Los Angeles, 1942), 81.

59. Tom, "Participation of the Chinese," 70; *Federation News*, November 1938.

60. Chinese Patriotic Society, "Chinese Appeal to Americans," Oviatt Library, Special Collections, California State University Northridge.

61. Wen-Hui Chung Chen, "Changing Socio-Cultural Patterns of the Chinese Community in Los Angeles" (University of Southern California, Ph.D. dissertation, 1952); Tom, "Participation of the Chinese," 71.

62. Lai, "Roles Played by Chinese in America," 93.

served as a bridge between the Chinese-speaking immigrant community and the larger white English-speaking world. The historian Lisa Rose Mar describes intermediaries such as these as “Chinese brokers.”⁶³ The society was likely founded by a group of CCBA officers including Dick Tom, an American-born Chinese grocery store owner, and Thomas Wong, an American-born produce wholesaler who was married to the Mei Wah Club sponsor, Maye Wong.⁶⁴ Thomas Wong particularly exemplified the role of “Chinese broker.” It appears that he used his position as a leader in the community to work with United China Relief in planning the Moon Festival held in 1941.⁶⁵ Having leaders who could negotiate both the internal politics of the community and also interact with larger white society became increasingly important as organizations within the Chinese American community began to partner with newly formed white-run aid groups to create a national, yet decentralized, structure for war relief fundraising.⁶⁶

By 1930, the composition of the Chinese American community was changing from comprising primarily men separated from their families in China to families living in the United States, often with their American-born children. In 1900, only 10 percent of Chinese Americans were born in the United States; by 1930, 41 percent were born in the United States.⁶⁷ The relationship of this U.S.-born generation to American society was distinct from that of their immigrant parents, especially in Southern California. Because the Chinese American community in Los Angeles was more geographically dispersed than other urban Chinese American communities, second- and third-generation youth attended racially mixed high schools and often shared similar

63. Wen-hui Chung Chen makes a similar observation about the leadership of the Los Angeles CCBA—while the membership was primarily immigrants with limited English-speaking abilities, the leaders tended to be well educated and bilingual; Chen, “Chinese Community in Los Angeles,” 250; Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada’s Exclusion Era, 1885–1945* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

64. Dick Tom recalled founding a group to raise funds for China within the Los Angeles CCBA, with the help of Thomas Wong and other CCBA officers—this group was likely the Chinese Patriotic Society. Dick Tom interview, February 13, 1980, Folder 5, Box 11, Southern California Chinese American Oral History Project (SCCAOHP), Special Collections, UCLA; see also the finding aid summary transcript for this interview.

65. Billy Lew interview, October 19, 1979, Folder 2, Box 4, SCCAOHP.

66. Lim Suey Chong was president of the CCBA in 1938 but not necessarily the organization’s most powerful member. The presidency was a role that many leaders avoided, and Chinese brokers like Thomas Wong, Dick Tom, and Peter SooHoo probably had more influence over the development of China war relief fundraisers. *Federation News*, November, 1938; Tom, “Participation of the Chinese,” 52.

67. Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 303.

interests with other American youth their age: playing football, basketball, and tennis, organizing and attending their own dances, reading popular fiction, and watching Hollywood films.⁶⁸ These youth were U.S. citizens by birth, but because they were of Chinese descent, overt racism and xenophobia often limited their opportunities once they entered the work force, keeping them from fully integrating into the larger white-dominated society.⁶⁹

Even with U.S.-born Chinese Americans at the forefront of many early fundraising efforts, younger members of the U.S.-born generation did not always feel connected to war relief efforts organized by their parents' generation. Barbara Quon expressed this sense of ambivalence in an article she wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* in February 1938:

I have taken part in the local activities, and what I have done has partly been at the suggestion of my parents. Mother asked me to gather together my old clothes so she could take them to the relief station. I was glad to do it. Of course, there were cash contributions too. It's not that I think the war is none of my business, for that isn't true. It's just that it doesn't affect my personal life as much as it does my mother's.⁷⁰

Quon was representative of the demographic shift underway in the Chinese American community and undoubtedly reflected the viewpoints of her U.S.-born peers.

Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Chinese American youth in Los Angeles began organizing their own fundraisers. These youth-led efforts took on different forms than the efforts organized by their parents' generation and were more effective in galvanizing the interest of young people. Between the winter of 1937 and the spring of 1938, local Chinese American youth organized a series of charity football games against Chinese American youth in San Francisco.⁷¹ During this period, the Mei Wah Club sponsored a joint fundraiser that featured musical dance performances held at the Nationalist Hall in Los Angeles.⁷² Young Chinese Americans in Los

68. Mabel Sam Lee, "The Recreational Interests and Participation of a Select Group of Chinese Boys and Girls in Los Angeles California" (University of Southern California, M.A. thesis, 1939), 39–48. On Chinese American youth participation in sports during this period see Kathleen S. Yep, *Outside the Paint: When Basketball Ruled at the Chinese Playground* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2009).

69. Louis, "A Study of American-born and American-reared Chinese in Los Angeles," 73–94.

70. Barbara Quon, *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1938, H9.

71. *Chinese Digest*, December 1937, Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley.

72. See Lee, *Linking Our Lives*, 96.

Angeles also organized benefit dances for war relief. *The Chinese Digest*, an English-language publication based in San Francisco, written for and by second-generation Chinese Americans, explained why activities such as dances were important for involving the younger generation: “In times of financial need, whether that need is within one’s community or in the homeland, the older generation contributes without any thought of any kind of return. But somehow you don’t approach any second generation youth and ask for a direct donation. You ask ‘Won’t you buy a ticket to a benefit dance?’ Somehow the psychology is different.”⁷³ Football games, musical performances, benefit dances—the fundraising efforts of these U.S.-born youth reflected their recreational interests.

In April 1938, under the guidance of the Chinese Patriotic Society, seventeen Chinese American youth clubs formed the Los Angeles Federation of Chinese Clubs to raise funds for war relief.⁷⁴ The groups included the Mei Wah Club, the Kwan Ying Club, the Guardsmen, the Lo Wah Club, the Lo Wah Auxiliary, the Chinese Cinema Players, and the Chinese student clubs at Jefferson, Belmont, and Polytechnic high schools.⁷⁵ Following on the formation of a similar federation in San Francisco, the Federation of Chinese Clubs issued a statement at its inception that read in part: “We the Chinese youth of Southern California, whether citizens of China or citizens of the sympathetic democracy of the USA should . . . assume the responsibilities which are ours.”⁷⁶ The Federation boasted more than four hundred members at its founding and included Chinese students studying in the United States as well as U.S.-born youth.⁷⁷

Even though many of its members were still of high school age, the Federation chose twenty-seven-year-old Marshall Hoo as its president.⁷⁸ Originally from Oakland Chinatown, Hoo moved to Los Angeles in 1930 in the hope of finding employment during the Great Depression. Hoo was active in social movements around Los Angeles and held an interest in the

73. “The Chinatown Crier,” *Chinese Digest*, March, 1938, 3, Ethnic Studies Library, UC Berkeley.

74. On the relationship to the Chinese Patriotic Society, see Marshall Hoo, “In Which Federation Is Believed,” *Federation News*, April 1938, Folder 14, Box EO50, You Chung Hong Family Collection; on the number of clubs in the federation, see *Chinese Digest*, April 1938.

75. *Federation News*, August 1938, Chinese American Museum; Billy Lew Interview, SCCAOHP.

76. Quoted in *Chinese Digest*, April 1938.

77. *Federation News*, April 1938.

78. Marshall Hoo interview, May 24, 1980, Folder 4, Box 13, SCCAOHP.

evolving geo-political situation in Asia. A charismatic speaker, Hoo exerted much of his energy toward increasing awareness of evolving events in Asia among his fellow Chinese American youth in Los Angeles.⁷⁹ Under the leadership of young people like Hoo, the Federation of Chinese Clubs put out its own bilingual newsletter as a way to keep both Chinese-born and U.S.-born youth in the organization informed.⁸⁰ The bilingual nature of the organization's newsletter made it distinct from the San Francisco-based *Chinese Digest* and spoke to the organization's attempts to incorporate both Chinese and U.S.-born youth into the local war relief effort. Once established, the Federation of Chinese Clubs became the main venue through which members of the younger generation became involved in war relief.

When the local CCBA sponsored China Nite in August, the Federation of Chinese Clubs played a fundamental role in making the event a success—China Nite was so successful, in fact, that it attracted more than 40,000 visitors to Old Chinatown. The Federation of Chinese Clubs formed its own division to support the event, chaired by the twenty-one-year-old Mei Wah Club president, Eleanor SooHoo.⁸¹ Building on the Federation of Chinese Clubs' success managing concession stands at the New Chinatown opening, the CCBA handed over control of the concession stands at China Nite to the local youth groups.⁸² The influence of the youth on China Nite was reflected not just in concessions, but also in the festival's entertainment, which included live music by Suen Luen Due—identified in the souvenir program as “the Chinese Bing Crosby”—and an area of the plaza that was reserved for “street dancing.”⁸³ Eleanor SooHoo's photo even appeared on the front cover of the festival's program. China Nite would provide the template for the Moon Festival held later that same year.

The Federation of Chinese Clubs lent their support to the CCBA-sponsored event at a time when many of district and family associations in Los Angeles were reeling from the destruction of much of Old Chinatown. The construction of Union Station brought a period of uncertainty to many older immigrant organizations.⁸⁴ In fact, the Kong Chow Association, which

79. Ibid.

80. *Federation News*, April 1938.

81. *China Nite Souvenir Program and Directory*, Chinese American Museum.

82. “New Chinatown Opening a Grand Success” and “China Nite,” both in *Federation News*, July 1938, SooHoo Collection.

83. Ibid.

84. Tom, “The Participation of the Chinese,” 56; Chen, “Chinese Community in Los Angeles,” 235.

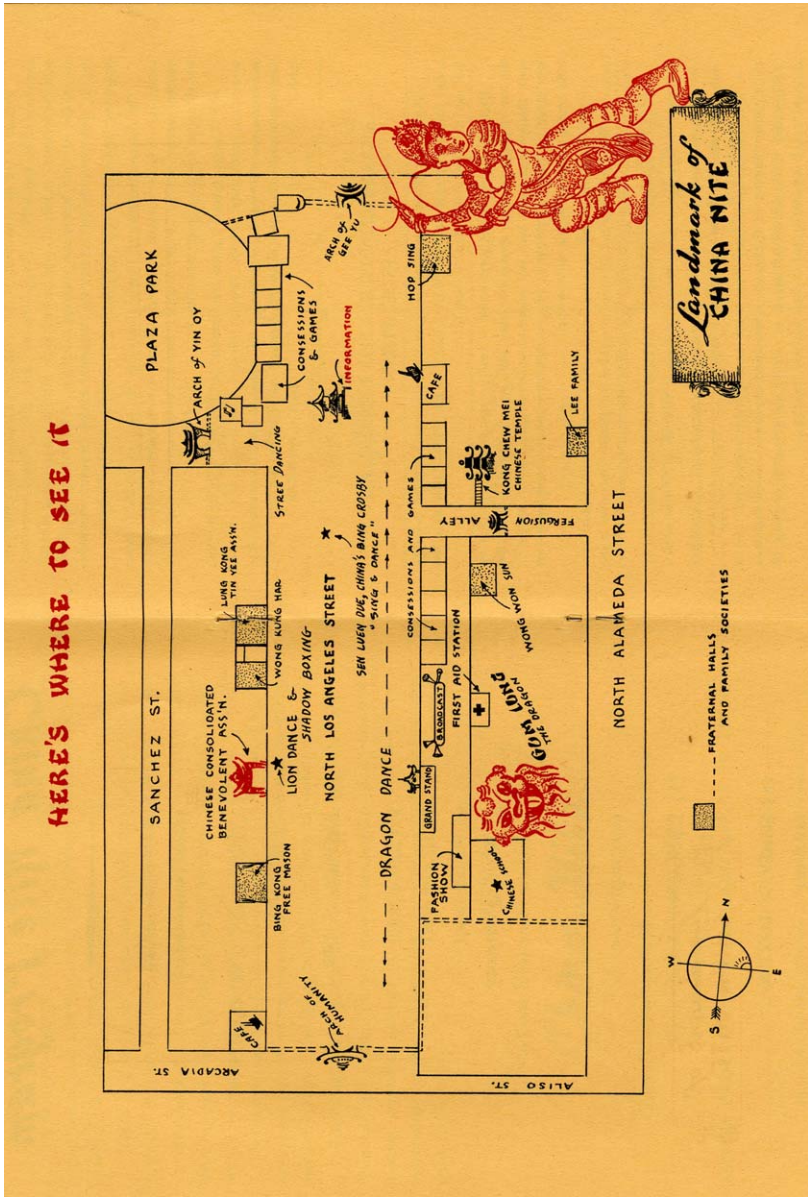


FIGURE 2. This map of China Nite shows the influence of local youth groups, which incorporated concessions, dancing, and music by "Sen Luen Due, China's Bing Crosby." Source: China Nite Program. David and Dora SooHoo Collection. Courtesy of the Chinese American Museum.

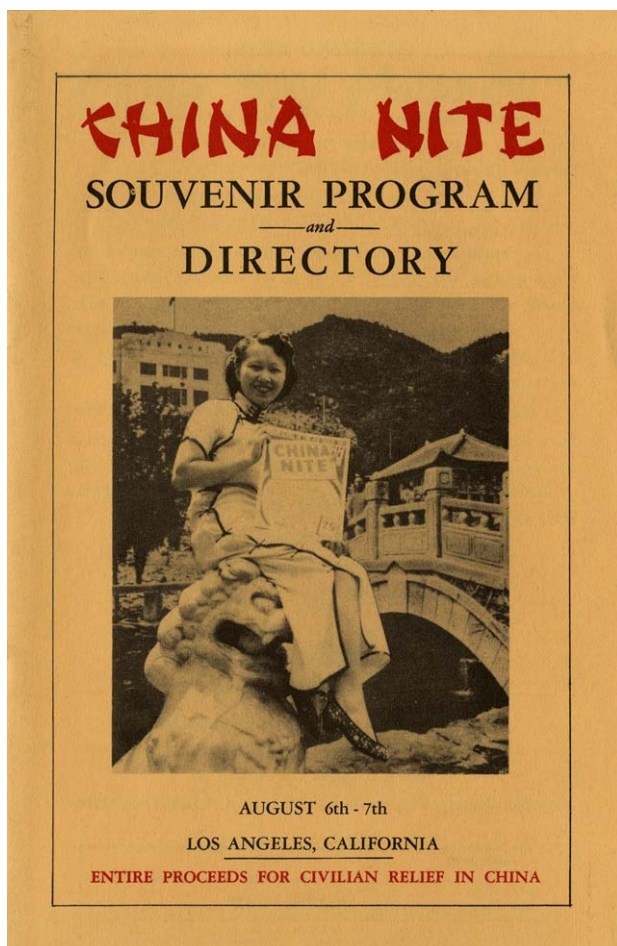


FIGURE 3. Eleanor SooHoo, the president of the Mei Wah Club, appeared on the China Nite Program Cover. Source: David and Dora SooHoo Collection. Courtesy of the Chinese American Museum.

helped manage the local temple, was the only district association whose headquarters were not demolished.⁸⁵ While the existing archival record provides no way of knowing the role individual family or district associations played in the planning of either China Nite or the Moon Festival, the general turmoil of 1938 certainly hindered the ability of these neighborhood-based groups to contribute. In contrast, the groups comprising the Federation of

85. Chen, "Chinese Community in Los Angeles," 235–36.

Chinese Clubs were based throughout Los Angeles, not just in Old Chinatown. Working alongside an older generation of U.S.-born leaders like Wong and Peter SooHoo, these youth groups played a significant role in planning the two festivals.⁸⁶

AMERICAN ORIENTALISM AND THE 1938 MOON FESTIVAL

Taking place over the Saturday and Sunday evenings of October 8 and 9 in Old Chinatown, the Moon Festival attracted 25,000 people and garnered media coverage in most of the city's major papers.⁸⁷ Even as Chinese American self-representations at the festival largely rejected older Yellow Peril stereotypes that emphasized the presence of Chinese bachelors, the festival remained deeply engaged with the discourse of American Orientalism. Rather than try to challenge the Orientalism at the heart of so many mainstream conceptions of Chinatown, Chinese American organizers and performers utilized the illusionary and theatrical elements inherent in Orientalist conceptions of the neighborhood to draw visitors to the event while simultaneously asserting the neighborhood's presence in the face of Union Station construction. In the process, local Chinese American organizers transformed Old Chinatown into a stage on which they could perform their own representations of race and difference. Chinese American youth, and in particular young women, played a complex and at times contradictory role in many of these performances.

Unlike earlier largely unsuccessful attempts by the Chinese American merchant class to define the theatrical elements present in the tourist economy of Old Chinatown, Chinese American organizers and performers controlled nearly every element of the Moon Festival. The festival was roped off from the rest of the city and open only to paying visitors. Within the festival area, the Federation of Chinese Clubs ran concession stands with games and food. Side stages along Los Angeles Street featured performances by both the "Chinese Bing Crosby" and the Chinese Cultural Mission, while Anna May Wong took photos with fans and signed photos at a booth near the entrance

86. Gilbert Leung Interview, March 27, 1979, Folder 1, Box 4, SCCAOHP; *Federation News* November 1938.

87. See "Chinese Festival of Moon," *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 7, 1938; "Moon Festival to Begin Tonight," *Los Angeles Daily News*, October 8, 1938; "Chinese Plan Celebration of the Eighth Moon Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1938, A2; "Gigantic Dragon to Feature Chinese Moon Fete Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1938; "Chinese Hold Moon Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1938, A16.

to Ferguson Alley. On both Friday and Saturday night, Los Angeles Street became a stage for scheduled performances beginning at seven o'clock in the evening and continuing until eleven. This program included not only the Mei Wah Drum Corps, but also a children's parade, a 1,000-foot golden dragon, and a dragon boat proceeded by more than two hundred local Chinese American women carrying lanterns and dressed in Chinese gowns. On Saturday night, the Jinnistan Grotto Band also performed.

To set the atmosphere of the festival, organizers drew on the experiences of local community members in the Hollywood film industry. The Chinese Cinema Players—an organization in the Federation of Chinese Clubs whose members worked as actors, set designers, and artists in Hollywood—decorated sections of Chinatown in a manner similar to that of a Hollywood set. The group placed a giant smiling moon on the top of a building at the entrance to Ferguson Alley next to Anna May Wong's autograph booth. With one eye closed and a large grin, the cutout bore more than a passing resemblance to the famous moon from Georges Méliès's 1902 silent film, *A Trip to the Moon*. Across the top of the building adjacent to the smiling moon, the club members crafted letters that spelled out "Moon Festival Oct 8-9." By decorating the corner of Ferguson Alley in this way, the Chinese cinema players gave the street corner adjacent to Wong's autograph booth a movie set-like quality, distinct from the way the corner would have appeared to tourists who visited before or after the festival.

Unlike the later 1941 Moon Festival, which featured more than a hundred Hollywood stars sitting in a parade of open-air vehicles, Wong was the biggest Hollywood movie star at the 1938 Moon Festival. As a Chinese American born in Los Angeles, Wong was an important member of the local Chinese American community. By 1938, she was a rising star who had taken high profile supporting roles in Hollywood films. In much the same way that the Moon Festival did, Wong simultaneously drew on and challenged aspects of American Orientalism. Her most famous role of the decade had been opposite Marlene Dietrich in the 1932 film *Shanghai Express*, in which Wong played a Chinese prostitute. Even as her performance in the film was lauded in the American press, Chinese papers were heavily critical of Wong's role in the film, which many in China saw as a disgrace to China and Chinese people.⁸⁸ In contrast to their peers in China, Chinese Americans viewed Wong's performances in a much more nuanced manner. Chinese Americans

88. Leong, *China Mystique*, 73-74.

in Los Angeles acknowledged the complex ways American racism defined her film prospects.⁸⁹ Wong's role at the 1938 festival consisted of signing autographs and taking pictures with fans. According to the *Federation News*, her popular booth "was always filled to capacity with her fans."⁹⁰

At the same time that organizers used set design techniques to highlight the presence of Wong, they also drew on the existing architectural environment to promote the idea that the Moon Festival would allow visitors to see parts of Old Chinatown usually not open to those outside the community. The Bing Kong Tong, the Lung Kong Tin Yee Family Association, and the CCBA all opened their halls to the public, and in the process they challenged visitors' visual perceptions of the community.⁹¹ Visitors who entered the buildings may have expected to encounter underground rooms and secret tunnels. Rather than fulfill this expectation, visitors to the CCBA hall watched the performances below on Los Angeles Street from the building's balconies and windows. By allowing visitors to view the festival from the second floor of the CCBA building, organizers positioned visitors to view the neighborhood from a vantage point usually reserved only for Chinese members of these organizations. In this way, the festival presented an opportunity for organizers to respond to popular depictions of Old Chinatown as a labyrinth of underground tunnels outside of the visual control of whites. The Moon Festival drew in visitors with the promise of seeing parts of the community they may not have had access to otherwise only to then subvert those expectations by positioning visitors to watch the festival from the point of view of the community's residents.

The CCBA, Bing Kong Tong, and Lung Kung Tin Yee family associations were not the only buildings that were open to the public—the 1938 Moon Festival also highlighted the Kong Chow Temple. The temple, which had proven to be an important draw in publicizing the earlier China Nite Festival, was featured on a map in the festival program and remained open for visitors throughout the event. The words of the *Los Angeles Times* highlight the attractions the temple offered to curious tourists: "Through the closed shutters of an overhanging balcony near Ferguson Alley, the reverberating boom and clang of a huge prayer drum and gong will sound a call for devout

89. On feelings about Anna May Wong in the Chinese American community during the period, see Ella Wong interview, August 16, 1980, Folder 15, Box 14, Interview 124, SCCAOHP.

90. "Colorful Moon Festival," *Federation News*, November 1938.

91. "Chinese Hold Moon Festival," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1938, A16; Moon Festival Program, Folder 14, Box E50, You Chung Hong Family Collection.

worshippers to the Altar of Blessings in the Kong Chow Temple, which will be open to visitors. Sightseers will learn much of the ancient Chinese worship.”⁹² In this way, pre-festival news coverage turned the temple into an attraction where spectators could consume Chinese religious practices.

Even as the temple was publicized as a religious site, the newspaper focused visitors’ attention on the ability of the temple to teach visitors about “ancient Chinese worship.” This representation of the temple reflected the overall publicity for the event, which the official program called “China’s Greatest Ancient Festivity.” Orientalist stereotypes often represented Chinese culture as unchanging and ossified thereby advancing notions of the West as a symbol of modernity and progress. In this way, the Orientalism of the festival made the Kong Chow Temple visible to whites in ways that belied the temple’s place as a house of worship serving local residents of Los Angeles even in the face of Old Chinatown’s destruction. The temple was overseen by a priest and visited regularly by local residents.⁹³ Furthermore, in the midst of the Great Depression, the temple housed at least five indigent, elderly members of the community who had nowhere else to turn for support. One man in his late seventies had come to America as a fourteen-year-old and worked as a cook for railroad workers. Now too frail to support himself, he relayed his story to an interviewer from the Federal Writers Project in 1936, “I am such an old man now that I can’t work at all. If I try to stand long on my feet I fall down and I have nothing to do . . . I am so helpless that I wish I die because I can’t get along well enough without working. I live in the temple with four other men who old like myself and can’t work either.”⁹⁴

Of course, representing Chinese culture as unchanging and outside of modernity was not the only Orientalist trope that the 1938 Moon Festival engaged. The festival also relied on Orientalist ideas of Asian femininity. Historians have noted that Bowl of Rice festivals relied on particular representations of Chinese American womanhood, portraying Chinese women as either exotic or as helpless and suffering.⁹⁵ The 1938 Moon Festival promoted these same representations through its large number of Chinese American youth performances featuring young women. For example, the Federation of Chinese Clubs’ newsletter described “two hundred girls dressed

92. “Chinese Plan Celebration of Eighth Moon Festival,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1938.

93. “Past Lives in Temple,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1935, A1.

94. Federal Writer Project of California Records, 1930–1942, Folder 10, Box 95, Racial Minorities Survey, 1936–1937, UCLA Special Collections.

95. Leong and Wu, “Filling Bowls of Rice,” 144–47.

in colorful Chinese gowns, forming Chinese characters” carrying lanterns that proceeded the Dragon Boat.⁹⁶ Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that “Pretty Chinese girls rode in a grotesque dragon boat, seeking to appease the wrath of the dragon on the fifteenth day of the eight moon in the Chinese Calendar.” Thus, through the high visibility of young women, the festival on the one hand challenged conceptions of Old Chinatown as a neighborhood of bachelors but on the other hand reaffirmed sensationalized representations of Chinese women.

While the performances by Chinese American women at the lantern parade and dragon boat promoted the idea of a mystical feminine fantasy world that was divorced temporally and spatially from the rest of the city, embedded within this narrative were also counter-narratives that contradicted these exotic images. Nowhere was this expectation challenged more than by the Mei Wah Club. The club, which held its first meeting at the YWCA’s International Institute in the early 1930s under the guidance of adult sponsor Maye Wong, began as a girls’ basketball club.⁹⁷ While Wong did not perform in the group’s Drum Corps, she and her brother David were instrumental in shaping the club’s direction.

The Drum Corps began in July of 1938, shortly after the opening of New Chinatown when the CCBA invited the Mei Wah Club to perform for China Nite.⁹⁸ The invitation was hardly surprising given that Maye Wong’s husband, Thomas Wong, was one of the CCBA’s most influential members, and their daughter, Barbara Jean Wong, was a member of the Mei Wah Club. In inviting the Mei Wah Club to perform at China Nite, the CCBA gave the club nearly complete control over the form that their performance would take. Sponsor SooHoo and member Iris Wong suggested that the Mei Wah Club utilize a set of unused drums at the CCBA offices for their China Nite performance. With little practice, a handful of members from the Mei Wah Club put on a short performance with the drums at China Nite. This performance was such a success that when the CCBA announced they would host a second fundraising festival, they invited the club to perform again. The original performers gathered other young women and began practicing for

96. *Federation News*, November 1938.

97. Marjorie Lee dates the founding of the Mei Wah Club as January 5, 1931 but does so without attribution; Maye Wong recalls the founding as some time in 1932. Lee, *Linking Our Lives*, 107; Maye Wong interview, May 8, 1979, Folder 3, Box 6, Interview 34, SCCAOHP.

98. Mei Wah Club Minutes Book, SooHoo Collection.

what would be the official debut performance of the Los Angeles Mei Wah Girls' Drum Corps at the 1938 Moon Festival.⁹⁹

More so than any other performers at the festival, the Mei Wah Girls' Drum Corps served to disrupt notions of Chinese women as linked to a particular conception of femininity rooted in the Orient of the Western imagination. The club members made their own costumes and choreographed their own routine. Unlike the mostly traditional Chinese dresses worn by women in the Dragon Boat and lantern parade, the costumes designed by the Mei Wah Club combined aspects of Chinese culture with U.S. youth culture in ways that subverted mainstream Orientalist discourse. The performers in the Mei Wah Club blended Chinese and American elements into their military band-style uniforms, pairing shirts with frog buttons and cheong-sam collars with American white pants and shoes.¹⁰⁰ All the members of the Drum Corps dressed in matching uniforms with the exception of Iris Wong and Barbara Jean Wong. Unlike most of the other band members whose dark shirts contrasted with their lighter pants, Iris Wong, the drum major, wore a light-colored top to match her light-colored pants with a flowing sash tied around her waist. Barbara Jean Wong, the group's only majorette, wore a light-colored shirt and shorts, outlined in sequins, with matching white shoes.¹⁰¹

Because so much of the festival drew on Orientalist fantasies about Chinatown, these military marching band-inspired costumes provided a subtle and recognizable contrast to much of the surrounding atmosphere. Certainly the high school students who made up the Mei Wah Drum Corps provided a striking contrast to the Moon Festival Queen, the dragon boat, and the "two hundred girls dressed in colorful Chinese gowns, forming Chinese characters" described by the Federation of Chinese Clubs newsletter.¹⁰² This contrast was especially true of Barbara Jean Wong's majorette uniform. Her costume was distinct from both the military-inspired uniforms of her counterparts in the Drum Corps and from the traditional dress of the women in the lantern parade. Wong, through a combination of sartorial choices and performance, embodied the ways in which the Mei Wah Drum Corps subverted mainstream Orientalist representations of femininity at the festival.

99. Ibid.

100. Shirley Jennifer Lim, *Feeling of Belonging: Asian American Women's Popular Culture 1930s–1960* (New York: New York University Press: 2005), 93.

101. *Federation News*, November 1938.

102. Ibid.



FIGURE 4. In its coverage of the Moon Festival, the *Federation News* credited the Mei Wah Girls' Drum Corps with a "spectacular show" and noted that majorette Barbara Jean Wong performed "like a veteran." Source: *Federation News*, November 1938, David and Dora SooHoo Collection. Courtesy of the Chinese American Museum.

In short, the Mei Wah Drum Corps created a cultural contradiction within the world of the festival, one that could not be easily reconciled with the expectations that many white spectators brought to the event. The very rupture in the fantasy world facilitated by the Mei Wah Club's performance made the young women of the Mei Wah Drum Corps visible in a way that

other performers at the festival were not. The Orientalist nature of the festival created the theatrical space for the Mei Wah Club to perform; yet at the same time, the young women in the club created a representation of themselves as simultaneously members of Chinatown and also *not* a part of the Orientalist world that so many spectators expected at the festival. Through their performance, these Chinese American women demanded to be seen as part of modernity in a way that traditional Orientalist iconography implied was not possible. In the process, the Mei Wah Club engaged in a distinctly Chinese American form of cultural expression.

With her distinct costume and placement at the front of the Drum Corps, Barbara Jean Wong occupied a prominent place in the performance. In many ways her position as the majorette at the front of the group was fitting. Wong was no stranger to the spotlight, having performed as a childhood radio actor and a Hollywood background performer. Yet her performances with the Drum Corps differed in one important way from those she did in radio and film—in films she always performed in the background; in her radio performances she was given a prominent role, but listeners heard her voice without attaching that voice to an Asian American face. But as the majorette of the Mei Wah Girl's Drum Corps, Wong discovered that the Moon Festival provided a platform where she could be both Chinese American and a star.

CONCLUSION

Planned primarily by the CCBA with the support of the Federation of Chinese Clubs, the 1938 Moon Festival presented a way for local Chinese Americans to engage their place in the national imaginary in ways that would have been nearly impossible even one decade earlier. As the war in Asia progressed, the nature of China relief fundraising also evolved. In 1940, under the guidance of Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* and *Life* magazines, eight major aid organizations in America joined to form United China Relief.¹⁰³ This newly combined organization continued to partner with local communities to host wartime festivals. The added support of Luce ensured that these festivals received national media coverage. In the Los Angeles area, United China Relief created a committee in Hollywood to fundraise in the film industry. The Hollywood committee was headed by David O. Selznick, the powerful movie producer behind features such as *Gone with the Wind*

103. Leong and Wu, "Filling the Rice Bowls of China," 136–37.

and Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*.¹⁰⁴ When United China Relief partnered with the CCBA to plan the second Moon Festival in 1941, the event was organized under the direction of Selznick and the Hollywood division of United China Relief.¹⁰⁵

No longer held in the autumn as the Moon Festival traditionally was in China, the 1941 Moon Festival was held as part of Mayor Fletcher Bowron's city-wide China Relief Week.¹⁰⁶ The 1941 Moon Festival took place on three nights that week and was held in China City, New Chinatown, and Old Chinatown. Spectators who wished to enter the three "pay areas" had to purchase a fifty-cent ticket, the proceeds of which went toward United China Relief.¹⁰⁷ The Chinese dragon, the fashion show, and Anna May Wong all returned. A local teenager, Margaret Kwong, was chosen as the Moon Festival Queen and had her name in the *Los Angeles Times*. The Mei Wah Drum Corps performed once again; and this time, Barbara Jean Wong's photo appeared in *Life* magazine.

Despite the continued involvement of the Chinese American community, the added involvement of Hollywood meant less control was in the hands of the community. The CCBA appears to have ceded much of the planning for the 1941 event to United China Relief. A parade between the pay areas featured fifty bands, two Chinese dragons—one of which was more than two hundred feet long—two camels, two hundred women carrying Chinese lanterns and at least six rickshaws. More than one hundred Hollywood stars, including Bob Hope and Marlene Dietrich, participated in the parade over three different nights. Meanwhile, Old Chinatown was transformed into an amusement zone replete with a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round. New Chinatown featured a one-ring circus.¹⁰⁸

Amongst all this festivity, local community members found their roles different than in the earlier two fundraising festivals. The Mei Wah Drum Corps did not wear the military-inspired uniforms they had designed, but instead wore costumes with elaborate embroidered borders surely meant to

104. See David O. Selznick to B.A. Garside, June 16, 1941, Folder 1, Box 18, United Service to China Records, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J.

105. "China Fete Open Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1941, A1.

106. *Chinese Press*, August 8, 1941.

107. "Moon Festival Will Be World's Biggest Four-bit Show," *Los Angeles Daily News*, August 7, 1941, Los Angeles Clipping File, Chinese American Museum at El Pueblo Historical Monument.

108. *Ibid.*

evoke “the Orient” in the minds of onlookers.¹⁰⁹ The photo that appeared in *Life* did not give the names of either Wong or even the Mei Wah Drum Corps. While the 1941 festival still presented a platform for everyday Chinese Americans to engage dominant notions of race and gender, that platform now had to be shared with others, many of whom were much more experienced in shaping public opinion. Aspects of the Chinese American vision still came through, but the festival did not provide the same opportunities as in 1938.

Ultimately, the 1938 Moon Festival provided a platform for Chinese Americans to rearticulate Orientalist tropes while reasserting Old Chinatown’s presence in the face of Union Station construction. In the process, the festival challenged Yellow Peril narratives that defined the neighborhood as a site where criminality festered in a secret underground world outside of the view of white authorities. Of course, the same representations that subverted Orientalist notions in 1938 were eventually incorporated into mainstream Orientalist discourse and used in the maintenance of social power. Yet to focus only on the larger discursive implications of the festival misses the influence the festival had on the lives of the performers involved.

Indeed, one of the longest lasting and most empowering elements of the 1938 Moon Festival came in the launching of the Mei Wah Drum Corps. Years after the end of the Pacific War, this group continued to provide young Chinese American women a chance to perform with other youth their age at regional parades and festivals. In 1939, the group captured first place in their division at the All Western Band Review in Long Beach. The Mei Wah Club itself continued to host their own fundraising dinners and events decades after their final official performance as a drum corps at the opening of the CCBA building in Los Angeles Chinatown in 1952. In fact, the original members of the Mei Wah Club held annual fundraisers for scholarships into the 1980s even after the women in the group reached retirement age.¹¹⁰ Much of this long-lasting success was grounded in the group’s first official performance at the 1938 Moon Festival.

With tens of thousands of spectators and expansive coverage by the local press, the 1938 Moon Festival can be seen as the film that Hollywood never

109. The photo of the Mei Wah Drum Corps is captioned, “Chinese Drum Majorette Leads Chinatown Band with a Flourish of Symbols.” “Hollywood Stars Help Los Angeles Celebrate China Relief Festival,” *Life*, September 1, 1941.

110. On the activities of the Mei Wah Club after the 1938 Moon Festival see Lee, *Linking Our Lives*, 107–9.

produced. Organized primarily by the local community, the festival provided a platform for Chinese Americans in Los Angeles to present their own vision of Chinatown to a broader public audience. For members of the CCBA, the festival provided a way to challenge long-held views about Old Chinatown as spatially and temporally distinct from the rest of the city. For the teenagers of the Mei Wah Drum Corps, the festival launched their group on a journey that would last more than a decade and feature scores of competitions and performances. For many of the other U.S.-born members of the community who participated in the festival, the event provided an opportunity to portray themselves as both Chinese and American. Long regarded as perpetual foreigners, a generation of American citizens found in the 1938 Moon Festival a moment when their heritage was recognized, rather than denigrated, and when their relatives across the Pacific were supported. In short, for the first time in many of their lives, the Moon Festival provided hundreds of Chinese Americans an opportunity to perform on a stage of their own creation. ■

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