

# Christian: Chinese once comprised a third of Astoria's population

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A harvest celebration by ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese, the Mid-Autumn Festival is often seen as the second-most important holiday after the Chinese New Year in China and Tet in Vietnam.

## Building Astoria

Christian said she was struck by the sheer impact of Chinese immigrants on Astoria when she researched their history.

By 1880, Chinese immigrants comprised a third of Astoria's population, wrote Liisa Penner in the Clatsop County Historical Society's Cumtux Magazine. They were drawn as cheap labor to work in the many waterfront canneries.

"By 1880, the town took on a new look with streets leveled, docks reaching farther out into the river and buildings going up at an amazing rate," Penner wrote. "Much of this was accomplished, literally, on the backs of Chinese who were forced to labor on city projects as a way of paying off a tax unfairly levied on them."

The population started waning after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. By World War II, Chinese labor contractors were largely nonexistent.

## Lighting up the moon

Christian contacted Suenn Ho, the designer of the Garden of Surging Waves honoring Chinese heritage in Astoria, for help designing an art installation for the festival.

After hearing Christian's proposal and her enthusiasm, Ho said, she couldn't think of anything more fitting for the space. "The intention of the public garden is to have community members take ownership of it," she said.

Ho, who grew up attending the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hong Kong and has taught architecture for more than 20 years, helped Christian refine her art installation to a more vertically oriented display to hang along the garden's story wall.

On Wednesday, Christian walked into local eclectic Jeff Daly's underground workshop with boxes of white LED lights and red lanterns. She started constructing a full-scale model of her installation, slated to go up Sept. 13 to Sept. 17 in the



Cumtux Magazine

Much of Chinatown was demolished in the 1940s for the rerouting of what is now Marine Drive.

**'I just think it's important to learn about all the groups that helped build Astoria.'**

**Victor Kee**

son of Chinese immigrant Sing Hee Leong

garden next to Astoria City Hall.

Strands of LED lights will hang down like a curtain across 30 feet of the garden's story wall on either side of the circular moon gate. On each strand will hang six or seven red lanterns, along with another three yellow lanterns above the moon gate.

Christian has organized a pre-event at the Astoria Public Library 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Sept. 9 to promote the event. The event will include children's stories from "Thanking the Moon: Celebrating the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival," a book being donated to the library by Ho.

## Honoring all Astorians

A community celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival is from 6 to 6:30 p.m. Sept. 16 — the night of the full moon. The North Coast Chorale will play translated Chinese songs. Christian is also bringing in speakers with Chinese heritage

to talk about their experiences in Astoria.

One of the speakers will be local real estate agent Victor Kee, the son of Chinese immigrant Sing Hee Leong, a barber who served many of the region's laborers. When Christian reached out, Kee said, her idea brought up memories of his own childhood with his mother.

"I got to remember all the times come August or September, we'd get on the train, go spend a couple weeks in San Francisco."

Kee said he hopes the event will lead to a better archiving of Chinese history in Astoria. "I think all the ethnic groups of Astoria should be doing that," he said, warning that time is running out as older generations pass away.

"I'm just hoping to raise more awareness," Christian said. "I just think it's important to learn about all the groups that helped build Astoria."



Clatsop County Historical Society

Chinese immigrants were often employed as cheap labor for the region's canneries.

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