

“Beyond the Gate: A Tale of Portland’s Historic Chinatowns” highlights Portland’s hidden history

By **Kate Hubbard**
The Asian Reporter

The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) Museum presents us with well-curated collections. Now through June 21, Oregonians and visitors to the museum are in for a treat. In addition to “Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion,” a travelling exhibit currently on view, there is also “Beyond the Gate: A Tale of Portland’s Historic Chinatowns,” a display focusing on the unique and interesting history of the area and its inhabitants.

It works well, how OHS organizes their exhibits. They weave you in, enticing you with fascinating bits of history. The displays are richly sensorial and varied, from the sumptuous example of the home of a prosperous man to the image of Portland’s Chinatown gate when it was fresh and new.

In 1869, there were just 500 Chinese living in Portland. By 1900, it was the second-largest Chinatown in the country, behind San Francisco. Portland’s Chinatown was initially built on Second Avenue between Burnside and Jefferson and only later moved. OHS’s display allows visitors to experience some of the sights, sounds, and visual interest of this usually hidden part of our city’s history. The exhibit will enrich your life and expose views of the city that some may not have known existed. It fires the imagination and gives insight into the people who formed Portland’s Chinatowns.

In order to understand Portland’s Chinatowns, it helps to learn about the



BEYOND THE GATE. “Beyond the Gate: A Tale of Portland’s Historic Chinatowns,” a display of rare and seldom-seen objects such as Chinese opera costumes, theatrical sets, interactive visitor stations, and more that tell a sprawling transnational story of contact and trade between China and the west, is on view through June 21 at the Oregon Historical Society Museum. Pictured are Chinese stores at Southwest Second and Alder, circa 1885. (Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, #bb002410)

Year	Total	Total Chinese	Chinese Male	Chinese Female	Chinese M:F Ratio	% Chinese to Total Population
1860	2,874	22	17	5	3.4:1	0.8
1863	4,794	53	49	4	12.3:1	1.1
1865	6,068	200	143	57	2.5:1	3.3
1867	6,717	324	208	116	1.8:1	4.8
1868	7,980	388	256	132	1.9:1	4.9
1869	8,928	500	329	171	1.9:1	5.6
1870	9,565	720	500	220	2.3:1	7.5
1880	17,577	1,612	1,547	65	23.8:1	9.2
1890	46,385	4,539	-	-	-	9.8
1900	90,426	7,841	-	-	-	8.7

* Statistics compiled from Marie Rose Wong, Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004)

history of the arrival of Chinese people in the area. The displays introduce museum-goers to how China, America, and Europe

first started to interact. A journey to America from China would have been time consuming (especially by modern aviation

standards), perilous, and expensive in the 19th century — needing strong motivation to risk it. How did that start?

It began 800 years before the internet, when Marco Polo’s journey of discovery over the Silk Road in the 13th century brought tales of tea, silks, opulence, and the wealth of China to Europe. Europe responded by launching into the Age of Discovery. Generations of explorers still compete to cover every last corner of the planet.

While walking through the exhibit, visitors learn about the arrival of the first American ship to reach Guangzhou (Canton City) in the 1700s and how trade began between China and North America. How when news of the American gold rush hit Hong Kong in 1849, it spread like wildfire. Men left their homes in search of *Gam Saan*, or “Gold Mountain,” as America was called.

The Chinese who landed on American shores joined an international multicultural flow of settlers. They worked in numerous industries, becoming a vital and important part of their new country. They built roads, fished, farmed, mined, laid

Continued on page 15



My team. My possibility.

At the Port of Portland, we stand together, richer for our differences. We celebrate the wisdom of collaboration and the strength of diversity.

www.portofportland.com

PORT OF PORTLAND
Possibility. In every direction.®