

# Merging memory and history in preserving heritage, community

**Forever, Chinatown**

Directed by James Q. Chan  
Streaming online  
May 9 through June 6

By Maileen Hamto

The Asian Reporter

Peek inside one of Frank Wong's dioramas of miniature rooms depicting life in San Francisco's Chinatown and one is transported to the nostalgia of an all-American community that, until recently, has only existed in memories of old-timers wishing for the bygone days.

There's the living room, with a decked-out Christmas tree and a table set up for a game of mahjong. Family dinner features a bountiful and delectable feast. Then there's grandmother's kitchen in the midst of preparing mooncakes: mung bean and eggs on freshly kneaded dough.

Over more than four decades, Wong devoted countless hours to researching, designing, and creating every painstaking detail in three-dimensional dioramas that are now part of the permanent collection of the Chinese Historical Society of America museum in San Francisco. His work spotlights Chinatown as a place created and nurtured by people who reflect the crosswalk of cultures in mid-century Americana.

Bay Area filmmaker James Q. Chan immortalizes Wong's miniatures, method, and memories in the short film *Forever, Chinatown*.

"All my miniatures are composites: It's half-wisdom and half-memory. That's like the movies," artist Wong says in the film. Wong grew up in San Francisco's Old Chinatown in the 1940s and 1950s, as part of the city's vibrant Chinese-American enclave.

With his talent for set design and prop-making, he moved to Hollywood to work on television and film sets in Los



**DELICATE DIORAMAS.** *Forever, Chinatown* tells the story of unknown, self-taught 81-year-old artist Frank Wong, who has spent the past four decades re-creating his fading memories by building romantic, extraordinarily detailed miniature models of the San Francisco Chinatown rooms of his youth. The short film is streaming online from May 9 to June 6, 2017. (Photos courtesy of the Center for Asian American Media)

Angeles, and eventually Hawai'i. Wong is most renowned for his work on the 1980s television series "Magnum P.I.," which was set in O'ahu.

Chan's film opens with scenes of a busy Chinatown street: a traditional herb shop next to a hair salon flanked by clothing retailers. Cranes lift exterior panelling to towering condos. Across the way, laundry hangs from rooftop clotheslines.

"I'm getting very forgetful at times. I want to capture my memories," says Wong. "And the only way for me to capture my memories is to make them in three dimensions."

Moving back to Old Chinatown inspired Wong to create the miniature dioramas to recapture the vibrant Chinese-American community of his youth. Each miniature

derives elements from historical photographs, his memories, and creative imagination.

While he may lament fading memories, Wong's creative imagination and impressive manual dexterity have not diminished in his golden years. Be prepared to salivate over a Chinese stir-fry dish that Wong "made" inside a take-out box that measures only a couple of centimeters, but looks like the real thing.

Beyond nostalgia for Old Chinatown, *Forever, Chinatown* also confronts — albeit briefly — the harsh reality of racism and prejudice that created the nation's

Chinatowns in the first place. Anti-immigrant — particularly anti-Chinese — sentiment led to housing and labor discrimination that prevented Chinese Americans and immigrants from living anywhere else.

The sense of community that developed from the close-knit families and clans that built ethnic enclaves nurtured pride in heritage among artists like Wong. Amid the rapidly changing landscapes of traditional ethnic enclaves, Wong's 3-D memories provide quiet comfort to the Chinese-American community's enduring resilience. There is hope his miniatures serve to inspire others to carry on the work of fighting to preserve fast-disappearing places of heritage and history.

*Forever, Chinatown* is premiering nationally May 8, 2017 on World Channel's Local, USA. The short film is also streaming online free of charge between May 9 and June 6, 2017. To learn more, visit <www.caamedia.org>.

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