

# Photographer captures the people and sights of Portland's Chinatown

By Kelly La Croix  
The Asian Reporter

The first exhibit to be featured at the newly opened Portland Chinatown Museum is "Made in Chinatown U.S.A.: Portland." The display, which opened in June and is on view through September 2, is a collection of images by Seattle photographer Dean Wong.

Wong has been making trips to Portland over the past two years to document the current state of Portland's Chinatown. The result is a varied and complex collection of images that reflect a historic district in transition. Accompanying the photos are statements and stories penned by the artist, many about the people he met and the conditions he found during his visits. Some include quotes by the people he photographed.

"Before there were a lot of people living here," reads a card quoting Golden Horse restaurant owner Sophie Li. "In the old days, lots of Chinese people. Chinatown was more busy. More Chinese people came down here."

Another statement offers the words of Shu Yuan Hsu, owner of the Chinatown Convenience Store: "It's kind of sad. We had more stores. We had three bookstores, eight restaurants. Now a lot are gone. ... If they continue selling buildings, this Chinatown will be empty."

Adding weight to these sentiments, one of the photograph's titles proclaims that there are only seven Chinese residents currently living in Chinatown. The words accompanying the photo state that the seven are housed in rooms at the Gee How Oak Tin Association, where they share a communal kitchen and bathrooms.

In contrast to the wary tone and boarded-up buildings displayed in some of the images, several of the photos depict Chinese-American youth in vibrant color, candidly seen enjoying the neighborhood or performing in parades.

One photo titled "N.W. Chinese Fistology Lion Dancer" features a young woman in bright yellow emerging from her lion costume with a look of confidence.



Other images highlight family dynamics.

In "Lan Su Garden Baby," Wong captures a child carried in a traditional Chinese way, on a grandmother's back in a sling, or *mei tai*.

Other photos hint at the long history of the remaining community.

In a series of four photos depicting the Yat Sing Music Club, members of the Cantonese opera group are shown practicing musical instruments in their

rehearsal space, in front of a wall of pictures that date back to the club's beginnings in the 1940s.

Wong has travelled to many Chinatowns in his artistic pursuits. When asked about Portland's Chinatown, the photographer reflects with the same complexity seen in the images he captures, highlighting both the decline of Chinese businesses in the district and his hope for the future, and specifically, the role the Portland Chinatown Museum can play in that future.

**PEOPLE OF CHINATOWN.** The first exhibit to be featured at the newly opened Portland Chinatown Museum is "Made in Chinatown U.S.A.: Portland." The display, which opened in June and is on view through September 2, is a collection of images by Seattle photographer Dean Wong. Pictured are "Lan Su Garden Baby" (top photo) and "N.W. Chinese Fistology Lion Dancer." (Photos courtesy of the artist)

"It's very fragile. You've got developers out there, ready to sink their teeth into this, and they don't care about the history," Wong said. "I want the community in Portland to come and support this museum. Be a member, encourage your friends to be members, encourage your children to go to school and tell their teacher about this museum so they can come down for a field trip and learn ... to share the Chinese culture and history."

Sharing the Chinese-American experience is a large part of Wong's work, which ranges from his 15 years of journalism and editing with the *International Examiner* to his activism for Seattle's Chinatown-International District to the 2016 release of his American Book Award-winning *Seeing the Light: Four Decades in Chinatown*, which highlights images of Chinatowns across the U.S. and Canada.

*Seeing the Light* was propelled not only by his wish to share experiences, but by life-changing twin tragedies. His wife Jan and best friend, Donnie Chin, died within two months of each other. Wong said taking photos in these locales was helpful to him during that difficult time.

"Two months after my best friend was shot to death, my wife died. ... I [had] nothing left in my life, so I decided 'I'm getting on a plane, I'm going to ... photograph San Francisco. And when I came back, I went to Vancouver, B.C., went to Oakland Chinatown, too. And Seattle Chinatown.' So photography became therapy; it took my mind off things."

Motivated by a personal need to deal with grief, a love of Chinese-American culture, and a genuine caring for people that shows in the dignity he treats his subjects, Wong has captured a place that is

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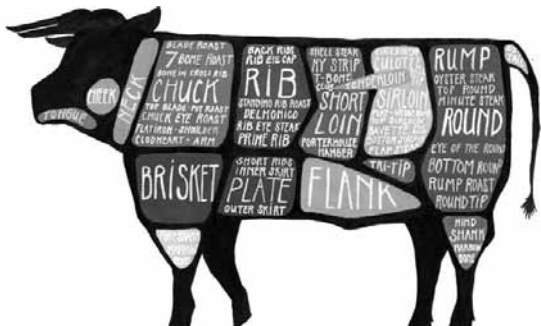


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