

## Political Tours of Chinatown and Koreatown: Differences as a Way to Unity

By Hanna Kim

Beyond the glitz and confetti of Chinatown is an industrial sector that rarely meets the tourists' eyes. Even though I have lived in Los Angeles for nearly two decades and have ventured into Chinatown, I never saw the areas that Allan Lo presented. I had never been to an Asian market equivalent to a Costco in Chinatown. I had never seen beautiful murals of youth and history, never talked with workers and owners of Chinatown markets, and most of all, I had never taken a critical, political view of the immigrant experience.

There were commonalities in the workers we were fortunate enough to talk with. Most were paid minimum wage by the hour at LAX-C and monthly (\$800 by Princeton International, Inc.) with the exception of Mario who had worked 24 years with Princeton Int. Inc and got his wages increased with vacation time. Most though are not as fortunate and receive no vacation time. The facilities were clean, but that does not indicate the working conditions for the workers. Professor Glenn Omatsu said that the workers were probably exploited.

In addition, we walked past Mead Housing Projects, a single school and a developing park. We saw neglected parts of the city with trash on the pavement and fences and boards mounted on business windows. This was a visual indication that the city allowed some areas of Chinatown to grow decrepit and dilapidated.

Unfortunately, Allan remarked that there had been division between religious groups in this region. Christians go to churches while Buddhists congregate in temples. They each have their own sanctuaries to attend. Perhaps even worse, the Chinese keep to themselves becoming a silent majority as long as “no one steps on them” (Allan Lo). They do not attempt to unite, work with different communities, and create interethnic alliances. Rather, they continue to perpetuate the disenfranchised situation of their ancestors and their present state as well. This inertia harkens back to the time of WWII when Chinese wore badges stating that they were not of Japanese origins in order to prevent themselves from being removed to relocation camps. It is my hope that we will be able to rise and stand up against injustice, advocate for our rights and fight against discrimination and inequality. We can act as spokespersons for our communities with critical awareness and organized action. As long as immigrants remain cloistered in their own niches, our pursuit toward democracy and dignity will fall miserably and torrentially on deaf ears. We must try as much as humanly possible to open their minds and hearts toward positive social change.

In that endeavor, the Koreatown tour gave us a glimpse into what is possible when advocates for respective communities speak out and address issues pertinent to our history, culture, and future. On Saturday, January 7<sup>th</sup>, the class went to Koreatown with Steve Moon as the facilitator. After walking through Assi Market, we went to see Tammy from the Bus Riders’ Union. Her presentation was enlightening and encouraging because she was an example of what shared leadership is. With the members, they went

out in the frontline to the community to bring about social justice in transportation. They are trying to build a mass grassroots movement fighting against class capitalism because transportation struggles mirror the hurdles that working class people face everyday. 89% of people who ride the rails and buses are people of color (African American, Native American, Latinos, and Asian Americans). They address the totality of urban life with mobility issues, anti-racism and adequate healthcare. Most of all, I learned that they acknowledge differences as a way to unity. This, I believe, is the beginning toward reconciliation among cultures and massive social change.

We met Sonny Park at Venice and Western in Koreatown. The significance of this place related to its history with the Los Angeles Riots of 1992. The plaza that Park showed had iron gates installed after the riots, and the fires and pillages that erupted during the riots were manifestations of the fundamental conflicts and miscommunications among people of color. He quoted K.W. Lee's categorization of Korean people as "half blind, half mute, and half deaf." In many respects the first-generations were not able to communicate, see, or hear the messages of its community members because they lacked the language skills and the understanding of etiquette and social behaviors that govern appropriateness. This inability, along with the Rodney King verdict and Soon Ja-Du incidents, fueled the hatred and resentment that many African Americans felt against Korean Americans. Two extreme cultures collided trying to survive. Park described Koreatown as an economic internment camp so that we can rot and die here. That's a bleak interpretation of Koreatown considering the recent boom in commercial businesses. Perhaps he was addressing the effects of glass-ceiling, and the fact that many Korean-

Americans have not learned from past experiences — that many continue to discriminate based on race and see no wrong in what they're doing.

Asian Americans are part of the greater American culture, and Park advocated that we take this more seriously. When Abercrombie and Fitch produced racist shirts against Chinese Americans, our community became impassioned and mobilized until they were off the racks. Asserting his declaration, we have to work together with everyone in mind. Treat people with kindness and equality. Second-generation Asian Americans are not “half blind, half mute, and half deaf.” We have the education and language/cultural skills that will allow us to take responsibility and “clean up the bullshit our parents made” (Sonny Park). The community needs to allocate more resources, opportunities, parks, and schools for the youth. Half the stores in Koreatown sell liquor, and that limits the job opportunities for teenagers. Some turn to drug dealing to make ends meet, but that will either end them up in jail or death, perpetuating a cycle of self-hate and torture. More teachers are needed in the inner cities, and the education of children should be our utmost priority. Instead of haggling over businesses in the case of the Ambassador Hotel, they should follow the advice of a friend of Robert F. Kennedy who was assassinated at the hotel, and build a school K-12 to relieve some of the overcrowding and bussing of children to schools outside LA County. By building the school, 4,500 new seats would become available to our students.

Park also advocated that we support one another. Please go and see “Better Luck Tomorrow” even if you will not like the film. He is currently working on a screenplay

called “Next Generation” and be on the look-out to support his endeavors. He also said that we have to adapt to our surroundings and to respect our neighbors and workers.

“Under adversity, people become stronger” (Sunny Park).

We can continue to increase our understanding of both Chinatown and Koreatown by sharing our knowledge and expertise with our families and friends. Many are not aware of the distinct incorporation of these communities into the fabric of American life. We can lead future political tours for other students as well as community members and show them another viewpoint to Asian American culture. We can give voice to the silent members of our communities so that they will feel some validation and sense of dignity and worth. Most importantly, we can learn from the past and not repeat the mistakes that had been made by becoming active and open ambassadors of social change for our communities.