

Chinatown Political Tour

By Mike Chow, Danny Lim, Sinny Thai, Gloria Chan, Kydah Dang, Johnathan Lin, Diana Ngo-Vuong, and David Nguyen

Collectively, we chose to be apart of the Chinatown group due to a number of reasons. Most of the members in our group were Chinese American, which naturally fueled the curiosity of the group to learn more about Chinatown and the cultural communal bond that it provides for many of us. Some group members were currently taking courses or have taken classes in the past, which dealt extensively with the immigration process of Chinese immigrants to California. We figured that this tour would provide for us a more comprehensive historical background of Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, and would also compliment those classes, by giving insight into where and how the Chinese immigrants of those times migrated. In addition, some of our group members were from northern California, in which case, they wanted to compare the similarities and differences between the San Francisco Chinatown and the Los Angeles Chinatown.

In our group, some have taken a wide range of Asian American Studies courses, while others have little or no prior experience with Asian American Studies or other ethnic studies classes. Although this may be the case, each member in the group had prior knowledge about Chinatown, whether it was from taking classes that dealt extensively with Chinatown, or from individual and community-based experiences, every group member has been personally exposed to Los Angeles's Chinatown environment in one form or another.

The people who took courses which dealt with Chinatown learned that Chinatown was a place where the Chinese immigrants ended up, not by choice, but by forces that were influenced by racism, socio-economic status, and ignorance towards a new nation and culture. Chinatown, thus, became an enclave where people struggled in similar occupations to adapt to their new living environment. Eventually, however, immigrants moved out of Chinatown into suburban cities mainly located within the San Gabriel Valley, to escape the poor living conditions, along with the shortage of public parking.

Many of us noticed that most Asian American Studies classes focused more on the San Francisco Chinatown and New York Chinatown as opposed to the Los Angeles Chinatown due to the significance of each location. This fact contradicts some of the group's impressions and prior knowledge of LA's Chinatown which carries a reputation as an active community with vital socio-economic and political standing that currently affects members in not only the Los Angeles state community, but also the national Asian American communities as well.

Some group members have taken classes that focused more on issues in the Asian American community that addressed problems facing people in the Chinese American community, such as laws and voting issues that hold greater importance to them. As we saw on the tour, politicians and anti-Chinese groups have tried to pass laws that severely affect the ways of living for people in the Chinatown community since the mid-19th

century. Although these unjust practices by policymakers occurred in the past, the impact that it has had on the community is long-lasting, with a social divide among the people of the community and the local legislators still prevailing within Chinatown.

As a group we first had to decide whether we should lead the tour ourselves or find a person who could lead the tour for our group. To help prepare us for this, we had to figure out who the facilitators of our group were and who were the primary participants. After deliberation, we then proceeded to divide up the workload amongst our group members. Some would work on preparing the week-to-week logistics, while others had their hands on carrying out the tasks in accordance to the agendas. Each member contributed to the configuration of the final paper.

We then decided to visit Chinatown specifically because we tried proposing different parts of San Gabriel Valley (Monterey Park, San Gabriel, etc.) that we would be interested in touring. We decided that as a group we would contact people within the Chinatown community who would have the necessary resources to help us form the tour. The organizations and resources that we listed were Chinese Historical Society, Chinatown Service Center, Chinese American Citizens Alliance, Chinatown Library, World Wide Web, and the Asian American Studies Center. We divided up the contacts and tried to find out as much as we could on Chinatown. Some group members were more familiar with the general background information about Chinatown, while others had access to resources and contacts to the community. Some members knew of the politics of Chinatown changing overtime, with community preservation of historical monuments pinned up against outside commercial forces wishing to redevelop 'Old Chinatown'. Some were also aware of how the ethnic breakdown within Chinatown had been gradually changing from the original ethnic Cantonese Chinese immigrant settlers of the past, to more of a South East Asian population makeup of today. Some other students researched using books such as: "The Golden Years of Los Angeles Chinatown; The Beginning" by Suellen Cheng and Munson Kwok and "The Lonely Queue; The Forgotten History of the Courageous Chinese Americans in Los Angeles" by Icy Smith.

After researching, we stumbled upon a wealth of information on the establishment of Chinatown, and learned how many of the organizations were founded, but there was not a lot of information on contemporary issues affecting the current community at hand. We drafted a list of places and significant events that took place within Chinatown. Upon researching, we came in contact with Eugene Moy from the Chinese Historical Society, who invited two other community members to come lead our political tour on February 6th, 2005. We had two student liaisons for the Chinese Historical Society and we presented the list of places and significant events that we were interested in learning more about, while on tour. Additionally, we had also mentioned that, as students, we were going to contribute to leading the tour since we had the information on hand and that Eugene and the community members would add on in terms of the historical context and present development and issues. We gained an overwhelming amount of knowledge just by having discussions after each meeting.

After our group attended the political tour in Chinatown, the group came to a consensus that this tour opened up many of our eyes to the leaps and bounds. While going on this tour, it invoked a sense of enlightenment when we learned about current affairs relating to controversial development plans of the city, preservations of the historical society, as well as the different family associations that served as the foundations for the city. We became acquainted with important political leaders as well as forming connections with local youth leaders. In addition, a notable lesson that we gained from our experience was that in order to bring on social and political change, one must have patience and perseverance. Many people in the community did not realize the little progressive changes that were made to the community, but these changes are what led the overall community condition. After going on the tour, many of us now realize how important it is to preserve the culture that Chinatown was once founded upon, rather than commercializing it for the unsentimental purposes of industrialized commerce.

Chinatown has come to an age of community awareness and activism. As Asian Americans, we cannot begin to imagine what our Chinese communities would be like if we did not have dedicated community leaders to help forge a direction and pave the way for the rights of these communities. We also had the opportunity of being able to learn from some of the community leaders themselves, and each them with their unique way of speech brought us to a greater understanding with the different perspectives of different types of people. San Gabriel City Councilma, Chi Mui (one of the speakers after the tour, gave insight into a politician's perspective, whereas Eugene and Gilbert (tour guides) supplied the local community point of view. Though their ideas were of innovation and integrity, these thoughts are often times unheard due to the lack of interest and understanding among the Asian American community. Like many of the members in the group before the tour, the general public fails to realize the issues that Asian Americans have had to face in the past. In order to implement the ideas and issues that Chi, Eugene, and Gilbert posed, one must come up with a strategy to reach a greater audience base. Two possible methods of broadcasting messages in greater volume might be to hold entertainment workshops and community awareness dinners, and have discussion groups with presentation and visual documentation (video, tape record, pictures, etc). These methods may be just what the community needs to earn the interests and awareness of students in motivating them to become more involved. One particular group member suggested that we could start by holding workshops or have booths during events at colleges, or send out "party flyers" that ask questions about whether the person knows about their ethnic community. Though these ideas are innovative, it is up to the small educated (college students usually) pool of people to bring light to not only issues in the Asian American community but also to other issues still prevalent in society today.

There is a great demand for people within the Asian American community to step up and become more involved with issues that affect their city along with surrounding cities alike. During our political tour of Chinatown, the presence of community members in our tour showed us the different areas where we can get involved, with most of these efforts requiring very little time and effort. We can get involved locally by tutoring and mentoring students in the community, volunteering with cultural organizations, and even interning at politically based organizations or government.

By tutoring and mentoring students, we can increase the chance that these students will go to college instead of joining gangs, committing crimes, and working labor jobs. By volunteering with cultural organizations, we can help preserve the tradition and cultural aspects of the community, and even put on entertaining events such as festivals and parades that would teach others about our community. By interning and volunteering with political organizations, we learn the importance of unity by making changes for the community such as funding for recreation centers and tutoring centers. By volunteering or interning, we are able to develop a better understanding of the needs of the community through networking with community leaders as well as work hand in hand with people who are fighting for the interest of the community in hopes that we can see the positive effect this experience will have on ourselves and the community.

While a few of our group members believed that they can lead political tours, others feel that they cannot lead a political tour, sufficiently. However, everyone agreed that knowledge of the community's issues, history, and requirements are vital to leading a political tour. Thus, one suggested that a vast amount of research has to be done to provide an efficient thorough political tour. In addition, knowledge of not only Chinatown's history and issues are important, but also knowledge of Chinatown's surrounding communities is vital to understanding how Chinatown functions and how it is affected by its neighboring cities.

Another group member recommended that the person who leads the tour must participate in community developmental projects, city council meetings, and talks with residents to further learn about their needs and goals. However, another member mentioned that the need to have an in depth understanding of the community is crucial but can be compensated. For instance, if a person has a list of community leader contact information, including established members of the community and those who do activist work, then it might be possible to ask these leaders to come speak with group members prior to the actual tour. Plus, these leaders may find it proactive to be present through attendance or co-leadership among the first few events. Instead of getting a filtered version from the tour leader, maybe the tour can get a first-hand account of the issue and problems like what we had with Councilman, Chi Mui. While it is important to have an in-depth perspective of the community and its issues, the most important part of the political tour is the willingness to lead a tour and begin to expose the participants of the tour to the issues within the community. That way, the participants can begin to exercise their own willingness to learn about the community and to be an active participant within that community.

It is so easy for college students to lose themselves in their studies and their college life. However, as college students, we do have more power in the form of knowledge than most others. It is in the student's capacity to have a responsibility to their community to use this knowledge to further the rights of those who are more disadvantaged. Who falls under this disadvantaged category? Immigrant workers, the elderly, the young (elementary to high school), the parents (might have two jobs and speak no English), those who are not fluent in English, those who are handicap, etc. For example, one can

tutor/mentor kids about the issues facing Asian Americans from racism to identity issues. One can work for the rights of immigrant workers who get “working poor wages,” barely any health care, and poor working conditions. One can participate in city council meetings and speak for what the community needs and oppose the efforts of non-community-oriented outside business interests. Thus, there are a variety of ways for the college students to be an asset to the community but most importantly a person who cares passionately about the welfare of the community is most appreciated and needed.

Students have the ability to learn more and more about the different Asian Pacific Islander communities that they are connected to. By going on tours or getting involved with the community, people gain more knowledge through experience. As students, we have access to multiple resources from school and connections with other students who can each contribute a little bit of knowledge. Students have the power to advocate for more classes on these communities. Knowledge is spread through student groups and shared amongst one another. To inspire the younger generation, we will help shape not only their lives, but that of the community itself. These political tours help expand people’s awareness of the public policies issues rampant within the community.

After attending the political tours and gaining formal exposure, volunteer tour leaders can emerge and then encourage their fellow peers to do the same. Once the foundation has been established, public office would be the next step, with students entering a career of active involvement after graduating. Students would then become legislators, and through legislation, laws would be enacted to promote learning of Chinatown within the community.

Besides focusing solely on the specific community such as Chinatown, it is also important to start bridging other ethnic communities together and addressing common issues among these communities. It is a little different for Chinatown because there is an array of culturally and ethnically diverse groups residing in Chinatown, which demands a need to create an environment in which the different groups can come together and learn about one another. Where it is an open forum to voice concerns or even educational conferences, these sorts of community educational programs would get more dialogue going among the different populations. The youth in the community can carry out a lot of the cultural preservation in the community and keep on reassessing the community to better meet the needs of the people residing in the community (i.e. low incoming housing, cultural center, expanding the recreation center, etc).

Hopefully in the future, students will do more community service to learn about the community because sitting in a classroom to learn about a community is not enough. It is great that we learn about the community, but if we physically go out to help, there is so much more that can be done. Community service is probably a must for ethnic studies majors such as Asian American Studies. One can easily be an AAS major and never go beyond the campus. We believe passing down our college experience is also important. We should help the groups in the community that struggles to get to where we are and to attend college.

On this political tour venture into the heart of Los Angeles Chinatown, we as a group explored the cultural roots and historical confines of a neighborhood once drawn together as a mere Chinese immigrant settling ground, but later transformed into a community lavishly lucrative in offerings of Asian American cultures. Setting out in search of knowledge pertaining to race relations, historical events, landmarks, and political issues, we received an abundance of information in return, that was historical, educational, and applicable towards the teachings of the community. This is why it is important to not only to preserve and maintain the integrity of the Chinatown community for present generations, but for the intrigue and amazement of future generations to come.