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# Restoring Chinese Heritage in Boston's History

Wing-kai To



“Are Boston Chinamen Becoming Americanized?” This was the question raised by an essay in *Boston Globe* printed on October 31, 1899. This quote exemplified the attitudes toward the Chinese at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Chinese settlers were perceived as both

exotic and foreign on the one hand and capable of being assimilated on the other. The essay discussed the division between the merchants who were more and more becoming Americanized and the laundrymen who had been in the country only for a short time and remained totally Chinese in outlook. A decade later, on April 3, 1910, another essay entitled “Sunny Side of Boston’s Chinatown” was published on *Boston Globe* that included a picture and story about Mrs. Lee Kim, a merchant’s wife, and her six children, four of whom attended American schools. The essay was written by the famous writer with the pen name Sui Sin Far (1865–1914), whose real name was Edith Eaton. A

biracial woman, the child of an English father and Chinese mother. she was born in England but grew up in Montreal. Sui Sin Far published a series of fictions about North American Chinatowns and has been referred to as the first Chinese-American writer because of her sensibilities to the complex stories of Chinese-American men, women, and children instead of the orientalist gaze of the Yellow Peril atmosphere. These depictions of Chinese merchants and families contrast more sharply with the downtrodden image of the anti-Chinese movement, represented in immigration raids, opium dens, gambling and crime, and tong wars.



There were Chinese sailors who arrived with the New England merchant ships including one named “Chow” who was buried in the Boston Common Burial Ground in 1799, but a fuller picture of the lives of any sailors who landed in Boston remains a speculation. In an essay

entitled “First Chinaman in Boston” published in *Boston Globe* on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1902, the legendary merchant Ar-Showe was considered to be the first Chinese who lived in Boston. He arrived on a merchant ship in 1848 serving Captain Ryan as a servant and while in Boston was taken by the Halliburton family to advertise the tea trade. Later he married a German employee Louisa Hentz, cut off his queue, became the first naturalized Chinese in the US, and had four children. Ar-Showe established a tea store on 25 Union Street by the 1850s and later lived in Malden until about 1878 when he went to San Francisco and China to continue his business.

Ar-Showe’s life thus marked both the end of the era of prosperous Chinese tea trade in Boston and the beginning of Chinese presence in the city.

Another origin of the Chinese in Boston came from western Massachusetts after the construction of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. It is unclear how many of the seventy-five Chinese workers employed by the Calvin T Sampson shoe factory in North Adams to break the labor strike in 1870 arrived in Boston after 1875. Yet the earliest laundries of Chinatown can be found on 110 Harrison Avenue as well as a couple others on Kneeland and Washington Streets in the 1875 Boston City Directory. By the 1885 directory Chinese laundries

were listed all over the city of Boston and several groceries and restaurants can also be found. A Chinese reading public was able to support a Chinese newspaper named *Chinese Monthly News*. The newspaper office was located at 36 Harrison Avenue, managed by P.Y. Moy and the paper sold for 5 cents. The paper provided news of China and sold advertisements to an assortment of stores selling liquor, jewels, firearms, hats, and paper items.

Another period of development occurred in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The elevated train started to go through Chinatown and more restaurants and shops had been established including the Sen Lock Low restaurant on the corner of Beach Street and Harrison Avenue. A photographer and a journalist completed a featured article entitled "China in New England", published in *New England Magazine* in 1905. The images presented Chinese merchants socializing in the Bun Fong Low restaurant on 32 Harrison Avenue and provided a glimpse of the small number of Chinese-American families in the still bachelor-dominated Chinatown. The article featured a Chinese merchant, his wife and their young daughter Mabel. According to the author, this merchant's wife was one of only fifteen Chinese women in Boston. In addition to the discussion of this family, the essay also noted that "there are the humble clerks and labors and laundrymen that come from all parts of the city and surrounding city." By the



1920s Chinese businesses expanded across Tyler Street and Beach Street. The famous restaurants included Hon Hong Low and Joy Hong Low in the 1920s and later Ruby Foo's Den and the Good Earth in the 1940s. Part of the appeal of the restaurants was to cater to non-Chinese customers who started to park their cars along Tyler Street for both restaurants and night clubs.

A sense of solidarity was found in the family associations newly established in the 1920s. The family associations such as those developed by Goon, Moy, Yee, Chin, and Lee as well as its umbrella organizations—the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New England and the local Nationalist Party branch—were centers of activities for the Chinese elders who dominated commercial activities in Chinatown. The Goon Family Association on Tyler Street, the Moy Family Association on Beach Street, and the Nationalist branch on Hudson Street were important architectural examples. The Lee Family Association opened a new building in 1960 and the Gee How Oak Tin Family Association comprised



mainly of the Chin family opened a new building in 1964. These are all spectacular structures. Chinese children who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s in Boston were increasingly living under the multiple influences of American public schools, Chinese language schools, as well as missionary activities. The Chinese American Citizens' League at 36 Harrison Avenue sponsored Troop 34 of the Boy Scouts at least since the 1920s. In an article "Chinatown proud of it's boy scouts" published in *Boston Globe* on July 23, 1922, it mentioned that the troop paraded across the State in Springfield and also in nearby Lowell and Lawrence. According to the article, the children in the Troop lived near Tyler and Oxford Streets. They normally met at the YMCA at 73 Tyler Street once a week and conducted camping activities mostly in Dedham. It further stated that these boys went to the Kwong Kow Chinese language school every evening on 2 Tyler Street. After the Kwong Kow school moved to 20 Oxford Street in 1931, the school organized a Junior High School band and was active throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. Children in the 1930s often participated in parades in support of the American troops in the Second World War and the Chinese War of Resistance against Japan.

What is quite remarkable was the increasing role played by women in activism in the 1930s. Rose Lok was the first woman who joined the Chinese Patriotic Flying Corps in the early 1930s to assist China in its defense against Japanese aggression. The Denison Settlement House at 93 Tyler Street was founded in 1892 to serve immigrant women and a Chinese girl's basketball team was formed by the early 1930s. Some young women joined the lion dance troupe and paraded on the streets of Boston to raise funds in support of China against Japan before Pearl Harbor. The Chinese Women Association was founded in 1940 in Boston with participation of all ages and continued to march in support of American troops against Japan after WWII.

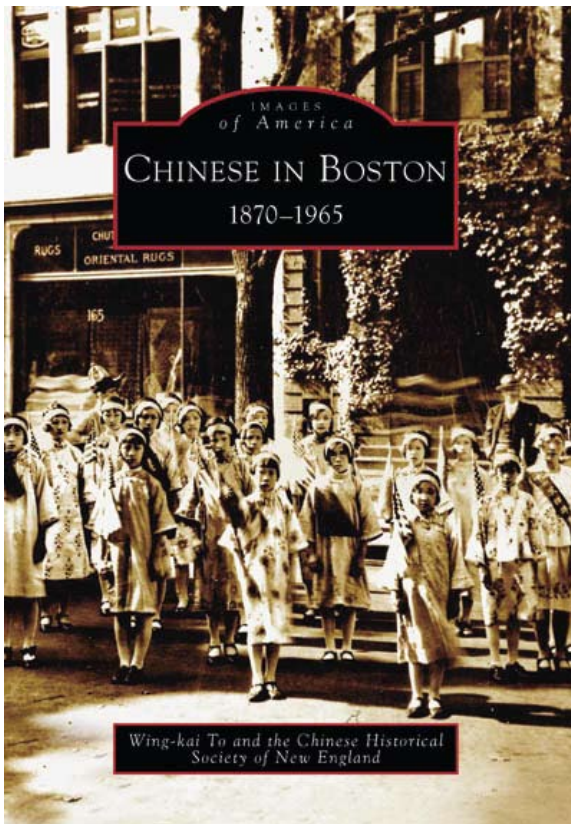


The role of Chinese children changed with the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the end of the Second World War in 1945. After the War more Chinese were represented in the local public school. Initially the Quincy School, founded in 1847, on 90 Tyler Street was a magnet for all immigrant children. After the war as Italian, Jewish, and Syrian children moved away, more Chinese children were represented at the school. They learned about China on the one hand and also became citizens as seen in their pledge of allegiance rituals at the school.

However, the traditional Chinatown community changed its character during the 1960s due to urban relocation of residents on Hudson Street and Albany Street, an area today known as Parcel 24. The immigration reforms and the Vietnam War brought in new immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The development of New England Medical Center and Tufts University, along with formation of new civic associations and new property development has transformed Chinatown through gentrification and the influx of non-Chinese residents.

In a photo history book published earlier this year I have presented traditional Chinatown as an enduring community in Boston. Similar to New York and San Francisco, Boston's Chinatown has maintained a rich history as a vibrant commercial and residential commu-





nity since its initial settlement in the 1870s. In this overview we have explored the role of merchants and laborers in Chinatown from the 1880s to 1910s, growing commercialization of the 1920s and 1930s, and the youth culture and civic participation of Chinese Americans from the 1920s to the 1950s. Early Chinese Americans in Boston expressed a strong sense of community values; some of them took advantage of expanding educational opportunities, and many became bicultural and civic-minded in supporting both China and the United States. We should preserve the legacy of Chinese Americans in Boston and honor the vitality of their continuing history.

—Wing-kai To is Professor of History and Coordinator of Asian Studies.

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