



Western Edition Episode 6  
 “L.A. Chinatown: Today and Tomorrow”  
 Released June 28, 2022

(MUSIC – SPRITE STAR)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): Hi, I’m Bill Deverell. This is *Western Edition*, Season Two: “L.A. Chinatown”. In this season we’ve explored the origins of L.A.’s Chinatown – from the Gold Rush and the influx of Chinese immigrants to their exclusion through racist labor and housing laws, to the destruction of Old Chinatown and the construction of New Chinatown in the 1930s. Fast forward to today – what does Chinatown look like now, in L.A. and elsewhere in the country? What challenges does it face amid rising housing costs and anti-Asian violence? Does it still serve as a community center for Chinese American people?

JASON CHU: My impression of Chinatown L.A., it was a place I could go and feel like I kind of knew what the lay of the land was. That’s the funniest thing, you know, growing up as an Asian American on the East Coast and moving to the West Coast, there’s so many cultural differences between the coasts, but Chinatowns everywhere kind of feel like Chinatown.

DEVERELL: In our final episode, we continue our discussion of Chinese Americans and Chinatowns of L.A. and beyond, focusing on the present and the future. Because we are historians, we begin to understand the present by looking back. Let’s start with historian Beth Lew-Williams.

BETH LEW-WILLIAMS: I am really struck by the longevity of Chinatowns, and the way in which they are celebrated today, and that they have continued to be the center – of at least urban Chinese communities. I think this longevity is complicated because Chinatowns in the 19th century started out based in segregation. But then when they were successfully commercialized

and became more open to outsiders, attractive to non-Chinese that wanted to try out what was considered an exotic culture and cultural cuisine, the Chinese community was able to turn towards this more service economy and tourist economy. And I think that that's really central to what some of these Chinatowns are today, in addition to being community centers. I think that's really interesting because we don't necessarily see the same thing for other historically segregated areas.

DEVERELL: The discrimination that Chinatown faced compared to other neighborhoods continues to affect the residents who live there. Sissy Trinh heads the Southeast Asian Community Alliance, or SEACA.

SISSY TRINH: Skid Row was created as a containment zone and its predecessor was Chinatown. You weren't allowed to live or work or go to school, or even hang out outside of just the six-block area that was Chinatown historically. And over the years, you have planned investments that are designed to make Chinatown unlivable because it was an undesirable neighborhood. So, our regional prison system is in Chinatown. The first freeways that were built in this country are through Chinatown. So, we have three freeways, industrial rail, we have factories, and secondary highway, air quality, pollution, traffic – all of those things are a by-product of the historical racist legacy that created Chinatown in the first place. And so today, it's actually the top 1% most environmentally burdened in the state. And one of the things that we're pushing for is a program to build more housing for people who are making 15% of the area median income. So basically, we're talking about households that are making about \$15,000 a year for a family of four. So, we'll have even deeper affordability for, you know, the folks that would be otherwise too poor to qualify for affordable housing. And we believe that doing this is an important homelessness prevention strategy.

DEVERELL: The community you serve – the individuals – you obviously see new arrivals, new immigrants who haven't been here long. Do you also see multi-generational residents of Chinatown?

TRINH: Oh, absolutely. I mean, we have low-income families that, you know, you have three, maybe four generations living in the same home. They're all relatively recent immigrants – I would say within the last 20 years. If you're talking about that first and second generation of Chinese American immigrants that came, let's say in the 1800s, a lot of them ended up moving somewhere else – San Gabriel Valley, Silver Lake. Once the containment policies for Chinatown and redlining were struck down as illegal, and they had opportunities to move to the suburbs where there were bigger homes and better schools, that's what they ended up doing. You might see them still owning property in Chinatown and coming back to manage it or doing some social activities, like going to Chinese First Baptist Church, for example on the weekends, but they're not necessarily living here and engaging in the same way that maybe their grandparents did with the neighborhood. But you might see their child – so like maybe a fourth generation coming back and living there, partly because of the historical connections, but also partly because they want to live in a more urban environment. So, I'm talking about the

millennials and the Gen Z's who want to kind of connect back with their roots, but also like the convenience of living in the downtown core area.

(MUSIC – ALLÉGRO)

DEVERELL: Sissy and other activists are working with newcomers to Chinatown to make sure that they give back to the area's longtime tenants.

TRINH: I had a whole conversation with Roy Choi, who is the chef of Kogi BBQ, about new businesses that could be seen as gentrifiers, and how they can work in allyship with low-income communities to fight gentrification. And so, we actually wrote a community pledge. You know, and it's geared towards small businesses that are coming in that might be perceived as gentrifiers. Like, you know, the \$6 coffee shops, the hipster fried chicken places – that kind of stuff – and how they can be a good neighbor to a low-income community.

DEVERELL: Gentrification is a core issue to ethnic communities all around Los Angeles and other major cities, and Chinatown is no exception. Michael Woo was the first Asian American elected to the Los Angeles City Council, and he served from 1985 to 1993.

MICHAEL WOO: As more of the population started to move into the suburbs, that took away a lot of the economic rationale for Chinatown. That has led to deep questions, which have become increasingly intense over the last few decades about what should be the role of Chinatown – given the fact that so much of the Chinese population has moved away. And yet, in Chinatown you still have many ethnic Chinese who can't afford to live somewhere else. And also, there are the physical remnants – whether it's in the form of buildings, the courtyards, or other physical aspects of Chinatown – that still speak to the Chinese.

DEVERELL: The gentrification of ethnic enclaves is yet another example of the kind of forced removals that we studied in earlier episodes.

(MUSIC – LITTLE DRUNK, QUIET FLOATS)

DEVERELL: Di Gao, Senior Director of Research and Development at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, sees gentrification and a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes affecting Chinatowns at a national scale.

DI GAO: Historic Chinatowns across the board are losing Chinese residents, and that's happening for a variety of reasons. The existing population is aging and aging out. Chinatowns in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia all went from predominantly Asian to Asians being minority – in terms of residents – in just the past several years. D.C.'s Chinatown is also down to a few hundred Chinese residents from a few thousand who lived there at its peak. So, this is some pretty significant turnover in terms of shifting demographics. And a lot of this change is

happening voluntarily – it's younger generations moving out, people seeking better job opportunities, better housing and living conditions, or they're moving from the old Chinatowns to satellite Chinatowns. And of course, not all of this change is voluntary. And you increasingly hear about displacement being a huge concern either through redevelopment or by gentrification. It seems like economic development and helping legacy businesses and small businesses survive this pandemic and the continued fallout from this pandemic is one of the most urgent challenges. The increased anti-Asian attacks and violence – that has been really affecting these communities and making them live in fear. I think it's all interrelated. People are closing their businesses down earlier because they're afraid to walk home in the dark. They are sacrificing income and changing their lifestyles because of this increase in aggression towards the Asian community – and that has definitely had an impact. But I think they're also struggling with what does the future look like for these places – when they're catering to so many different audiences beyond the local residents. In many cases, Chinatowns have to attract tourists in order to survive because the residential base isn't enough to sustain the level of business that's required. And with that comes a lot of difficult decisions about what Chinatown is and who it's being developed for. There's sort of this tension between the need for tourism revenue and building an authentic place for its residents and businesses that are functional and safe.

DEVERELL: Understanding how gentrification in major cities occurs is an important step to combatting this issue. Gene Moy, member of the Chinese Historical Society – whose grandfather lived in Chinatown – knows this issue well.

EUGENE MOY: In the 1950s, I was still a little boy, I guess, in South L.A. We didn't live here even though my grandfather and his two brothers were here. So, we would come and visit grandpa. He lived first at an apartment on Solano Avenue, but then later he lived in the hotel above Little Joe's restaurant. If you remember Little Joe's Italian American Restaurant, it actually had – before the 1971 earthquake – there were actually two single room occupancy hotel levels above it. And so, my grandfather lived there, and his two brothers – one he shared a room with. So, my memory of Chinatown in the 50s was going to grandfather's, walking up a creaky set of stairs into a dark hallway, and going to a hotel room knocking on the door. And so, my grandfather and his brother there in one room, basically, so they had two spring-loaded cots on the floor with a mattress pad on it. And then they did not have a kitchen, but they had a table or a counter with a hot plate on which they cook things or heated up things. The bathroom was down the hall. And this was what a single room occupancy hotel was like, and there were many of these throughout Chinatown. And actually, in most central cities – early central cities – that was where the blue-collar folks lived.

(MUSIC – MOSSWOOD)

MOY: Partly because of the effects of exclusion and also because of the nature of the immigrants who came here, many were involved in blue-collar work. So, whether you're a cook or a farmer or a laundry person, working in a sewing shop, Chinatown became a place where

working-class people lived. People who did very well and let's say had a very successful restaurant or a good store operation or became a labor contractor, would make every effort to try and find better housing, a bigger place to live – not a one room apartment or a hotel room in the middle of a dense neighborhood, but they wanted the American dream or just to have elbow room. If you had a growing family and you were doing well, then you wanted to go into the best neighborhoods, and you would have wanted to go to where the best schools are. Some pioneers went out and did the blockbusting by moving to Hollywood or Claremont or other neighborhoods that maybe in the past were restricted to Chinese. Then once the door was open, many of the more successful families would start moving out – and I'm speaking of both Old Chinatown in its original form and also in New Chinatown here where many people relocated. So that meant that some of our original blue-collar working-class base started dispersing. That's not to say that there weren't some people – a few people who did stay here – but overall, when you looked at the neighborhood demographics, it historically has been a population that had lower than average incomes. People would take public transportation; people would not go to high-end places to shop or to eat. You go to the local mom-and-pop store or the local mom-and-pop restaurant. But because we're also close to Downtown L.A. and because the global economy and also just the growing wealth of the core community – has resulted in increases in land values. Then that has caused a corresponding rise in rents that unfortunately has put a lot of pressure on the working-class population.

DEVERELL: While many forces on the community are out of their control, activists within the community are determined to make positive changes and help others out. We've heard in previous episodes from Pat Lem SooHoo and heard stories of her father, who was one of the founding members of the present Chinatown. I had the pleasure of meeting Caitlin Bryant, Pat's niece, on the roof of the SooHoo family building, and learn how this place inspired her.

CAITLIN BRYANT: This is the SooHoo Leung Corporation building. So, this building was built in 1940 – so just a couple of years after New Chinatown had their grand opening – owned by Peter SooHoo Senior, my great-grandfather. And then when he passed in 1945, everything went to his wife, Lily, who I found out was the Secretary of the Chinese Consulate for L.A. So that was 1945 when he passed, and then about 15 years later, one of his – he was one of seven kids I believe – and one of his relatives said, "I really want to have a restaurant in the back". Where we're standing right now used to not have a roof; it was little kiosks. His siblings after he passed, they were always one of the tenants here. One of them was – had a security guard office. Another one had a barber shop, or what have you, or a gift shop. So, one of the sisters wanted to have a restaurant. And when they first opened in 1960s, it was called Cooley Joe's. So, they took out all the kiosks and the fountain, and then they did Cooley Joe's Coffee Shop.

DEVERELL: Just making it exotic for white tourists.

BRYANT: Yes, yeah. We're standing on the roof of old Cooley Joe's. And I knew that the Hop Louie building, you know, Golden Pagoda – my grandfather, Junior, used to work there as a bus boy. And I remember he would tell me stories of how hot it was working on the second floor,

and that my grandmother, Lucy, would throw them ice cream popsicles when they were like 14 years old. So little things like that – they have these little stories, and of course they would talk to me about, you know, during the war, how buzzing it was in the Plaza and those types of things – that my grandfather always wanted Chinatown to kind of come back and be revitalized, and he was really sad about where it had gone in the 90s.

(MUSIC – SAVANNAH)

DEVERELL: Motivated by her roots, Caitlin continues in her grandfather's footsteps, strategizing how to make Chinatown a better place and community.

BRYANT: So, for me – specifically for our building – if we take a look at all of the tenants that we have, every single one has a story about Chinatown themselves. So that was very important for me. So when I got involved, you know, now I have professional work in commercial development. So, I took that experience and I brought it to the building and with my family, I'm like, we have so many vacant spaces. We got to keep the rents low, and it was during COVID – all these tenants are new in the last year-and-a-half – keep the rents low, but keep it so low that we can be picky about who we bring in. So we got a lot of interest, which was really wonderful. So, we have Heather Wong, who's going to be Flouring, the bake shop. She's half Mexican, half Chinese. Her grandparents own the building, it's on Broadway, the restaurant Yang Chow. So, they've had that in the family since the 50s. So, I was so excited, got connected to her. She's this incredible pastry chef. She's always wanted to have a little retail space. How perfect. Then you have Linda of Sesame LA. She's of Vietnamese background, but she grew up coming to Chinatown and just that – having that cultural sense and appreciation for the history. Jonathan Yang of Thank You Coffee – he and I worked together in coffee ten years ago. His wife was born here at the French Hospital. So, he and his grandmother lived in Chinatown, so he grew up coming to Chinatown also. And then you have Johnny of Pearl River Deli. His whole background coming from Southern China, really honing in on the Cantonese cuisine and all of that. So, each tenant has such an incredible story and to be a part of a historic building and, you know, and I'm really helping them get all their permitting and all those things – the resources I have – to just be successful but put that awareness out there. You know, I started my company four years ago. Before that, I was in restaurants and hospitality my whole life – went to culinary school, worked for big corporations. My last corporate job, I worked for Westfield, you know, like the mall developer, but I was overseeing all food and beverage at LAX. So, I was the landlord overseeing, you know, over a hundred restaurants and construction and development and all of the leasing and all of those types of things. So, it really exposed me to commercial development and being a landlord in a sense. And I think that, you know, now when I look back, I really do feel, you know, like my great-grandfather is really kind of pushing through me to really kind of help out Chinatown, and bring some just more awareness to the community of Chinatown. It's really people's hearts. There is a lot of people in poverty that live in Chinatown. And so, a large majority of our tenants, like Thank You Coffee and even Paper Plant, you know, they make sure that they do things that are specifically for the elders – whether it's just giving them a free cup of coffee or giving them a free meal or whatever it is, they understand that

these are our neighbors and we do have to respect them. And I'm very much about karma, you know, so you put out what you want to get back. And so, I really want my tenants to be profitable, successful so they stay here for a long time. And so, there's things like lower rents for them to hopefully that they can give back to the community, too. There's just so much more heart that I think more people should be giving to Chinatown. It has incredible soul, but it needs some TLC to keep the longevity.

DEVERELL: Caitlin has many ideas to draw business activity to Chinatown, like adding more of the iconic red Chinese paper lanterns to other streets to encourage more foot traffic, holding a night market during the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, and having a float in the Tournament of Roses Parade. Caitlin's work is crucial in preserving the culture of Chinatown. Di Gao weighs in on the importance of preservation for Chinatowns across the United States.

GAO: I think there's a stereotype from the outside that preservation is mostly focused on architectural preservation. And I think if you look at our policies – the common policies that people are aware of around landmarking – I think that's certainly true, but Chinatown is such a living, dynamic community and it has so many dimensions – cultural dimensions, historical dimensions, it's a sensory overload and experience – and that all contributes even more so than the architecture to its sense of place. So how do you preserve that is I think the big question, and the small businesses and particularly the legacy businesses are such a huge part of what makes Chinatown seem and feel authentic. And it's businesses that cater to both the residents and newcomers who visit to see what Chinatown is all about.

DEVERELL: With Caitlin and other activists advocating for change in Chinatown, I checked in with Sam Wang. He's co-owner of Steep LA, a modern tea room dedicated to traditional Chinese tea and the Chinese tea ceremony.

SAM WANG: We obviously made the choice – a conscious choice to be in Chinatown because we didn't want Steep to just be for a Chinese American audience. We really want to share this like tea ceremony, knowledge, and this social experience with everybody. It was just uniquely situated, really right in the middle of everything. And I always tell people like Chinatown is very much a small town in a big city – somebody will recognize you.

(MUSIC – KEYS TO THE APOCALYPSE)

DEVERELL: Chinatown is clearly an important place – historically and culturally. Here are some of the voices we've talked to this season, reflecting on how they'd like to see Chinatown continue to grow and evolve.

NOWLAND HONG: Chinatown is somewhat of a relic that I think that needs to be preserved because it shows part of the history of Los Angeles, and the fact that immigrants here have always been able to succeed in some fashion.

JASON CHU: You know, one could say it's all Chinatown now. One could say Westwood and USC and Irvine and Fullerton and Arcadia – these are all Chinatown. I would say that the spirit of a Chinatown is not just where are there people of Chinese descent, but there's something about people of Chinese descent coming to a place and building something in response to and in defiance of pressures. All the Chinatowns I love. It's not just that there's Chinese culture there, it's that there are people taking care of each other and protecting each other.

DI GAO: Chinatown at its core is a spiritual homeland for a lot of Asian American. And depending on where you are in the country, I think Chinatown can be a place where you go to eat; it's a place where you can go to work; it's a place where you can be in community with people like you. And I was talking to a friend recently about that, and even though we didn't grow up in Chinatown, it very much feels like our spiritual home, in a sense. And in many ways, I think it's one of the first places that people feel a sense of belonging. But I recognize that it's not just a place where people who grew up in America can go to experience Chinese culture or Asian culture, but it's also a home and an ecosystem for many new immigrants and others who are trying to find footing in this country.

CAITLIN BRYANT: It's an incredible place where it is today, but the potential of it is just amazing. And I don't know very many other areas in Los Angeles that really pay a respect to the history of what they've gone through and celebrate it by really generating something great for the community and for the area.

ROSTEN WOO: I think Chinatown is a place, and if you say Chinatown to anybody – whether they're a Chinese American, an Asian American, or not – it really does conjure up like a whole set of things that are surprisingly consistent across all the different places I've lived that have had a Chinatown, you know? It really feels like a kind of place that obviously is born out of racism and deliberate segregation. But also, is a place that – you know, as with like most ethnic enclaves – also a place that has tremendous pride and a lot of consistency and a lot of comfort for me and for a lot of other people.

DORÉ WONG: I think the wonderful thing about America is that everyone has a story because we weren't here – what 300 years ago, right? So everyone who came after, they all have a story and we can't forget it. And we're all in the same boat. Nobody owns the United States. We *are* the United States, and we have to remember that so that we're not fighting each other. We'd rather help each other get better.

(MUSIC – DIGITAL SOLITUDE)

DEVERELL: That was Nowland Hong, Jason Chu, Di Gao, Caitlin Bryant, Rosten Woo, and Doré Wong. Together and along with dozens of others, these remarkable people have given their time, their knowledge, and their ideas so that we could all take this podcast journey with one another to and through the past, present, and future of L.A. Chinatown. We are grateful, and we believe that the time to take such a journey is now and urgent. Amidst and in between all



the layers of resilience, perseverance, and accomplishment that is a major part of the story of L.A. Chinatown and its people, are darker stories, then and now, of discrimination, hatred, and violence. We believe that grappling with all of that – trying to understand it, trying to come to grips with it – is crucial to finding ways out of the darkness. None of this is easy, but we fail as a city, a community, and a society if we don't wrestle with all that history lays at our feet – its angels and its demons. Burying it in the past doesn't make it go away, and dealing forthrightly with the past doesn't excuse the errors and heartaches of what has come before our time. We can, we should, we must, and we will do better. If you'd like to see images related to this episode, head to our website [www.usc.edu/icw](http://www.usc.edu/icw). I'm Bill Deverell. *Western Edition*'s team includes Avishay [ah-vee-shy] Artsy, Katie Dunham, Greg Hise, Jessica Kim, Elizabeth Logan, Olivia Ramirez, Li Wei Yang, and Stephanie Yi. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Thank you for listening and be well.