



Western Edition Episode 1
 “L.A. Chinatown: What is Chinatown?”
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(MUSIC – SPRITE STAR)

BILL DEVERELL (HOST): Hi, I’m Bill Deverell. Welcome to *Western Edition*, Season Two: “L.A. Chinatown”, the past, the present, and the future. In this first episode, we ask our partners and friends, “What is Chinatown?”

LI WEI YANG: Chinatown to me, it’s a place where the Chinese gather from the very early beginning.

EUGENE MOY: To me, and to many others, Chinatown is home.

CAITLIN BRYANT: It’s an incredible place where it is today, but the potential of it is just amazing.

DEVERELL: This seems like a simple question, but the answers frame a space that is real and imagined; historical, of the present and of the future; both born of racial restrictions and spaces where families and friendships form; a space both commercial and domestic, specific to L.A. and found in cities across the United States. The Chinatown in Downtown Los Angeles is the city’s most historic Chinese community. About 37,000 people call it home.

PAT LEM SOOHOO: Chinatown was a real designation when I was growing up and all through my growing up years, clear up to high school and going to college.

DEVERELL: Pat Lem SooHoo was born in Los Angeles in the 1930s, and is the matriarch of the SooHoo family, which has been in Chinatown for generations.

PAT LEM SOOHOO: So, it was a place go, and family was there. The SooHoo side was there, so we would go for that. It was a comfortable place to us, and even as a teenager, when it was, you know, not really very many people came after World War II because people went up to the Valley and whatever, it was still fun. You could walk to Chinatown at midnight, one o'clock in the morning. My girlfriend, Delma, my best friend from kindergarten – you could walk anywhere. Your mom and dad could care less where you were. You were in Chinatown. Uncle David was the night watchman, so it was safe. It was just a very easy place.

(MUSIC – CLOUD ECHO)

DEVERELL: For the rapper, poet, and activist Jason Chu, Chinatown is a place shaped by larger social and political forces.

JASON CHU: You know, these zones – these areas, they don't exist without certain histories, you know. Histories of red lining, histories of Chinese exclusion, waves of anti-Asian violence. Uh, and to me, Chinatown, I don't even want to say "symbolizes" because it's not a symbol, it's a reality, right? Chinatown is the reality of elders who don't speak English, and this is a place where they live out their lives.

DEVERELL: Pat and Jason help us to answer this larger question of "What is Los Angeles' Chinatown?" through memories that stretch from childhood to the present. L.A.'s Chinatown, or really its *Chinatowns* – as we will explore throughout this season – are part of a much broader community of Chinatowns across the United States. I reached out to Will Gow to better understand the question, "What is Chinatown?" Will is a fourth-generation Chinese American and a Professor of Ethnic Studies at California State University, Sacramento. He's been thinking, writing, and making films about Chinese American identity, Chinatowns, and Chinese American history for over two decades.

WILL GOW: I had connections with the community and a number of my Chinese American relatives live there. So, all of my grandfather's brothers and sisters ended up moving to Los Angeles when he moved to San Francisco. And so, when I think about my Chinese American identity, like L.A. was a place that always, always spoke to me. So, this kind of interest in L.A. is both kind of like an academic one, but also a personal one.

DEVERELL: Will says there are at least three ways of answering the question, "What is Chinatown?"

GOW: Academics cannot agree on what Chinatown actually is, and so it seems to be that there is a split, partly by discipline. So, sociologists tend to look at Chinatown as being a set of social connections, between members of the Chinese-American community and *that* as defining Chinatown. And then you've got the historians, and most historians tend to think of Chinatowns as neighborhoods. And so, historians would say that Chinatown is a physical place, a geographical place, and that it contains both Chinese Americans and non-Chinese American

residents and workers. In my mind, the most sophisticated definition of a Chinatown comes from the geographer Kay Anderson, and Kay Anderson talks about Chinatown as being a site in the social imagination, the kind of like popular imagination of North America. But you've got these three definitions of Chinatown being an idea, Chinatown being a kind of set of organizational principles connecting Chinese Americans that are maybe spread out around a geographic area. And then finally, a definition which defines it particularly as a neighborhood.

(MUSIC – WEB WEAVER’S DANCE)

DEVERELL: An imagined place, a defined geographic location, and a community defined by its residents. Let's explore these meanings and definitions of Chinatown. In the 19th-century American West, the dominant white society viewed Chinese immigrants as so foreign that they couldn't be assimilated, and therefore as threats to white economic and cultural power. In defining Chinatown as real, defined neighborhoods, as bounded spaces – Anglo Americans hoped to contain the perceived threat of Chinese immigration. Beth Lew-Williams is an Associate Professor of History at Princeton University.

BETH LEW-WILLIAMS: I think in general, Chinatown was an imagined space. A space that was, often in my sources at least, imagined by white Americans, in the American West in particular, and by state and local governments, police forces, public health departments, people like that. And when I say it's an imagined space, I don't mean that there weren't communities, ethnic enclaves, where there were large numbers of Chinese people living together. The reason why it feels so imagined to me is because the term was used to describe so many different spaces. Some of these spaces like San Francisco, there really was a very large Chinese enclave living together in a segregated area. But I also see the term Chinatown used when we're in tiny towns, you know, Sonora in Tuolumne County or Nevada City. I mean, and there, Chinatown might just be one block where, you know, three residents lived. So, I think it's just the way in which this was imagined as a racial space is really striking to me.

DEVERELL: What work is that description doing for the dominant society to just say, “See those three buildings over there? That's our Chinatown.”

LEW-WILLIAMS: Yeah, I think it's a lot about how the racial landscape of the West was imagined, you know, and the idea that Chinese were effectively segregated, that they were separate and that they could stay other, I think it did a lot of really powerful work. I mean so much of the sort of racial animus towards the Chinese was centered around the idea that they couldn't become Americans, they couldn't become citizens, but they also just couldn't adopt American values and culture. And I think that imagining them as physically separated did a lot of that work.

DEVERELL: Even if in that separation – let's take some of these small towns. It might be a separation of a couple of dozen yards, right? From the dominant society structures.

LEW-WILLIAMS: Yeah, and of course people move, right? The buildings don't move.

DEVERELL: Yeah, exactly.

LEW-WILLIAMS: The people move, they cross the street. So that's why it feels so imaginary. Even though it's imaginary, of course it had a lot of really important impacts. I mean, one of the things that I look at in my work is Sanborn Fire Insurance maps. I think it's really interesting when they surveyed Western towns, they would mark which buildings were occupied by Chinese. The Sanborn Fire and Insurance Company would ensure against fire – they did so across the United States in many towns and cities. You know, sort of literally putting them down on the map, and they did not do this for any other ethnic group or racial group that I found in any towns or cities. But I think there's an example of how this mattered, you know, by marking certain areas Chinese occupied, they were marking these areas as at greater risk for fire, as more expensive to ensure, as sort of these less desirable places in these towns and cities.

(MUSIC – OUTCAST)

DEVERELL: In the twentieth century, Chinatowns became popular tourist destinations, where white visitors expected to be able to experience and consume certain popular notions of what it meant to be Chinese and Chinese American. Back to Will Gow.

WILL GOW: I'm working on a book right now on L.A. Chinatown, and one of the things that I'm contending in my book is that Chinatown is actually defined in part by its performative aspects. What I would contend is that there are certainly Chinese American ethnic enclaves, but when we think of something called a Chinatown, Chinatowns are deeply embedded in the ways in which Chinese Americans were forced to kind of perform identity for white audiences, mainly through tourism, but they're also connected to broader, popular culture – through things like Hollywood and literature, try to perform certain notions of Chinese-ness.

DEVERELL: Chinatown is a popular backdrop for Hollywood, but it's often depicted in stereotypical tropes, as exotic, mysterious, and dangerous places. There are dusty antique shops which sell strange objects, like in *Gremlins*.

CLIP FROM *GREMLINS*: “Hey, wait a minute. What’s down here?” “This is it.” “This is your grandfather’s store?” “Yeah, come on.” “No wonder you gotta drag people in off the street.”

DEVERELL: Or Chinatown is portrayed as an underworld filled with brothels, opium dens, gangsters, and black magic, like in *Big Trouble in Little China*.

CLIP FROM *BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA*: “All I know is this Lo Pan character comes out of thin air in the middle of a goddamn alley while his buddies are flying around on wires cutting

everybody to shreds, and he just stands there waiting for me to drive my truck straight through him, with light coming out of his mouth!" "Jack, please!" (thunderclaps)

DEVERELL: And there's the metaphorical Chinatown, filled with shadowy organizations, a place where laws don't matter.

CLIP FROM *CHINATOWN*: "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown."

DEVERELL: Chinatowns have a long history in the popular imagination, but there's a second definition of Chinatown, as geographical place – neighborhoods and communities where Chinese immigrants created and sought economic opportunities, built community, and tried to escape persecution and racial violence. Discriminatory zoning ordinances and policies also sought to define Chinatowns geographically. Li Wei Yang is curator of Pacific Rim Collections at The Huntington Library.

LI WEI YANG: Chinatown to me, it's a place where the Chinese gather from the very early beginning.

DEVERELL: How early would that be in L.A.?

YANG: I would say the 1850s and 1860s. A lot of these early Chinese were laborers. They were attracted by job opportunities here – whether to work in agriculture or maybe they were cooking for wealthy families – they were doing a whole range of wage work. And because at a time there wasn't, here in the American West in the early days, there weren't many women around. And so, a lot of things such as cooking, a lot of things such as laundry work, there were a lot of openings, a lot of opportunities. And for the Chinese, they saw the opportunity for them to make money, to go into Los Angeles, and to gain a foothold in the community as well, too. And so to me, Chinatown was a place where the Chinese gathered for various reasons: to avoid violence, to avoid persecution, and also to seek safety in numbers. When we talk about Chinatown today, we're thinking about a very specific locale, but at a time, Chinatown was a place that can be here in L.A., it could be in San Francisco, it could be in mining towns in Northern California, that's where they got together and slowly developed their communities there. So that to me, is what Chinatown is.

DEVERELL: So, sort of pushed there by discrimination and racism, but also pulled there by the opportunity for racial, ethnic, and immigrant solidarity.

YANG: Exactly. And so, Chinatown to me became a refuge for these Chinese laborers, for these Chinese immigrants, who came over to the United States who didn't have any rights. They did not have the right to vote, and they have to get together in order to ensure that their safety is ensured in the community of their own.

(MUSIC – MOONLIGHT SERENADE)

DEVERELL: From their roots in the 19th century, Chinatowns emerged as places where Chinese immigrants lived apart from the rest of society, but it was also a place of common ground and shared values. This is the third definition of Chinatown: one created by social connections. Mae M. Ngai teaches Asian American Studies and History at Columbia University and co-directs the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race.

MAE NGAI: Chinatown is both a site of segregation and isolation on the one hand, but a place of community and solidarity and sustenance on the other hand. So, I think we have to think of it as both those things, even where Chinese were segregated into Chinatown. Not every Chinese lived in Chinatown. In San Francisco, it's very hard for Chinese to own property outside of Chinatown, but Chinese went to Oakland and to Berkeley, you know. There were middle-class Chinese who bought homes in white neighborhoods in the East Bay or in other towns. So, it wasn't confined absolutely, right. But it's also, you know, the center of Chinese businesses, Chinese cultural organizations, the traditional family and district associations, the schools, churches, you know, so it's a real community. It's got its own class and social hierarchies, you know, its own politics, so it's a real place.

DEVERELL: Many of the folks we talked to shared how Chinatown spaces are central to family and community, memories, and celebration. Chinatowns serve generations of communities, including those who live within their boundaries and an extended network of family and friends. Beth Lew-Williams at Princeton University reflects:

BETH LEW-WILLIAMS: So, my family – my Chinese family is in San Francisco, and so I still journey back. They live just outside of Chinatown on Russian Hill, but still when we go back and visit, the way we gather as a family is still a Chinese banquet in Chinatown. And there's something amazing about it. I think my Chinese family has been in the country since the 1890s. So, a very long time – many generations of migration. There is something beautiful to the continuity of being in the same place that Chinese and Chinese Americans have gathered for, you know, over a century – gathered together as family.

DEVERELL: Eugene Moy has been a leader in efforts to maintain that continuity through preserving Chinese American places and Chinatown histories. He's been an active member of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California since 1976 and has been involved in public history and historic preservation for decades.

EUGENE MOY: To me and to many others, Chinatown is home. And it's where I was born, of course, but it's a place where one comes to connect with people from the community – to enjoy all of the social and economic and political networks that we have here. So, we come here for food, we come here for family. I had my grandfather and two of his brothers were here on the maternal side. I've had aunts and uncles and cousins who lived here. I've come to

weddings – not only for my own, but for friends, for those of friends. And then over time as I became involved with community organizations, whether it's the Historical Society, Chinese American Citizens Alliance, or the Chinese American Museum, or others, we – my friends and colleagues – are part of this big network of people who helped define our Chinatown. We are various organizations who believe in the history, the contributions, and the future.

(MUSIC – CAST OF PODS)

DEVERELL: Navigating histories and memories in the present can be filled with complex emotions. Award winning novelist Lisa See's family has lived in Los Angeles for generations. She feels emotionally connected to Chinatown and her memories hold both joy and sadness for what used to be.

LISA SEE: The part that I spent so much time in as a child, it's really gone. So, I can walk along Spring Street and I can see where the Sam Sing Butcher Shop was, and the international grocery was, and I have these very specific memories of that as a child, but of course it's gone now. So for me, there's this sadness that's associated with it, so I do have this connection to family and I think a lot of people have connection to family that was there and is no longer there, or still hanging on.

DEVERELL: Jon SooHoo is a fifth-generation Chinese American. He's Pat Lem SooHoo's nephew. His family's roots nearly date back to the first Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. And he has one of the coolest jobs ever: the L.A. Dodgers' team photographer. For him, Chinatown is also about reinvesting in family history.

JON SOOHOO: Well, it means more now because of the building. My family is part ownership of the SooHoo Leung building, which is where Pearl River Deli is, and little shops are going into place there. And my niece Caitlin Bryant, has been instrumental in reviving our little neighborhood there.

(MUSIC – FYNSTLYK)

DEVERELL: We spoke with Caitlin Bryant about her work in Chinatown, which combines her love for the family business and her experience in the hospitality sector.

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 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. And I think that's where I started throwing out all these ideas just because of a desire to just help kind of clean things up, and make it a more desirable place, and a better place for the community. If I'm able to have the resources, unfortunately, I don't have as great investment and funding skills like my great-grandfather did, but I'm going to figure it

out. But, you know, there's just so much more heart that I think more people should be giving to Chinatown. It has an incredible soul, but it needs some TLC to keep the longevity.

DEVERELL: Eugene Moy of the Chinese Historical Society has been committed to providing this TLC and to preserving the past, even as Chinatown transitions into the future.

EUGENE MOY: The community is always dynamic, organic. It's constantly changing, and sometimes the media might try and condense it into something that's packageable and can be easily repeated so that others can understand it. But if you're in the community, you'd recognize that it's never the same. So, you know, what might be identified publicly one moment might be different the next – just simply because our community is constantly changing. If you really look at the origins of early Chinese, many came here because of political and economic and social strife back home. They came here, found opportunity – sometimes successful, sometimes not. But the same thing applied to all of the other communities who arrived here: the Italians, the French, the Latino. Many elements of the community are really not as clearly defined or well understood as you would think they were. And so, you know, there might've been a perception, a century ago, that the Chinese were laborers, you know, people who could come and do backbreaking work. But when you look behind the scenes, you'll see that there's much more to understand within the community. The same applies for all the other communities, too. So, what we try to do when we do our documentation or do our research is we really want to get a clear understanding of who's involved and what they're thinking. You know, that we are not a mass group of minions who just come here and do things. It's a community of human beings who interact and grow and become successful in many endeavors. So that's the kind of dynamic story that we're trying to tell.

DEVERELL: Sissy Trinh serves the low-income residents of Chinatown through her group Southeast Asian Community Alliance, or SEACA. For her, Chinatown is a test of how cities respond to the crises of our time.

SISSY TRINH: For me, Chinatown is a neighborhood that isn't just historic, but it's social, cultural, economic, and environmental. I think that it is a cultural hub, but it's also a place where people go to get access to affordable housing and access to jobs if they don't speak English. So, it's an employment center, just as much as it is a cultural center for low-income Chinese and Southeast Asian immigrants. I think that it is a bellwether for where this country is going – whether we want to be able to do what's right racially, economically, environmentally, or whether we're going to just allow everything to fall to pieces. And what I mean by that is Chinatown's an interesting neighborhood in that it is among the lowest income in the city. And so for me, a lot of our housing work is homelessness prevention work. Last year, we provided rental assistance to some seniors who couldn't afford a \$4 rent increase and wrote rent checks for households that were paying as little as \$192 a month. But it's also an opportunity for the city to really think strategically about issues around economic development of low-income communities in a way that isn't gentrifying.

(MUSIC – SAVANNAH)

DEVERELL: For Jason Chu, Chinatown is a place where history and opportunity come together.

JASON CHU: L.A. Chinatown is fraught because it's a place in transition. And transition can mean displacement; transition can mean opportunities. I rejoice when I go there and I see friends, small business owners, community members who see Chinatown not as a blank canvas, but as a playground, you know – I think that's the difference. I think a lot of people look at Chinatowns and they see a blank canvas. They say, "Oh, there's vacant storefronts, so we can make it whatever we want." But I think that's not looking deeply enough, especially because of the pandemic. Sure, some storefronts may be vacant; some lots may be open. But again, there's still these lives that are there. This isn't a blank canvas. We're jumping into a space of people working and living, and they have their dreams, and they have their needs. There's something about people of Chinese descent coming to a place and building something in response to, and in defiance of pressures, where I see that spirit of resilience and mutual care and aid of people who come in and are building something together – that to me, is where I find Chinatowns.

(MUSIC – LIGHTS)

DEVERELL: Real and imagined, Los Angeles' Chinatowns of history, the present, and the future are living places, reflecting rich community formation – commercial and familial. And there are also critical conversations about past and present-day anti-Chinese racism. I'm Bill Deverell. Coming up on the next episode, we walk with Laura Dominguez through Old Chinatown and learn more about the Los Angeles anti-Chinese massacre of 1871. And we'll ask, "How does the community and the city of Los Angeles plan to honor those victims and share this history more broadly?"

LAURA DOMINGUEZ: In some ways, I think that's L.A. encapsulated. That we have these beautiful romantic spaces that are layered and built upon bloodshed and violence and exclusion and racism. And maybe this event – more than any other – kind of encapsulates that.

DEVERELL: If you're interested in seeing images related to today's episode, please visit our website at dornsife.usc.edu/icw. *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.