



Western Edition
“L.A. Chinatown: Prologue”
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(MUSIC)

BILL DEVERELL: The Chinatown neighborhood in downtown Los Angeles is a popular tourist destination with traditional restaurants, trendy bars, gift shops, and art galleries drawing throngs of visitors. Chinatown is also home and a cultural and business hub. And below the surface is a rich and complicated history – of racial discrimination as well as community strength and resilience. It goes back more than a century and a half, and it’s a history we’re still uncovering.

EUGENE MOY: And I think that’s one reason why many people are so involved in this history research is because a lot of it has been hidden from us.

LI WEI YANG: It’s like a puzzle that we’re trying to solve. So, it’s every single photograph, every single documentation, every single letter that we find – you are able to have a better picture into the past.

(MUSIC)

DEVERELL: Hi, I’m Bill Deverell, a professor of history at the University of Southern California. And I’m the director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. For the past several years, we’ve been digging into archives, working with community partners, and talking

to longtime residents, activists, artists and others about L.A.'s Chinatown. Join us for Season Two of *Western Edition*, as we explore the past, present, and future of Chinatown.

JASON CHU: 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.

DEVERELL: It's a neighborhood that's welcomed immigrants and offered a sense of safety and connection.

DORÉ HALL WONG: It's a community of immigrants who came together and supported each other in moving ahead and finding a place in American society.

DEVERELL: The story of Chinatown is a story of immigration, integration, and of pursuing that American dream, but not always achieving it.

LISA SEE: And I think, gosh, people still think that way, that these are very different people, that they aren't like us, or that they are a model minority or whatever it kind of fits into all of those different categories.

DEVERELL: When we visit Chinatown, we have to ask ourselves, "Who is this neighborhood for?"

WILL GOW: Chinese Americans were forced to perform identity for white audiences, mainly through tourism. But they're also connected to the ways in which Hollywood and literature try to perform Chinese-ness.

DEVERELL: Like much of L.A., Chinatown has a painful history, including an anti-Chinese massacre that took place 150 years ago. It's a dark stain on the city that we're now acknowledging and memorializing.

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.

MICHAEL WOO: What could we do there that would open up people's eyes to this historical event that I'm sure the vast, vast majority of people who pass by Broadway and Seventh never think about.

DEVERELL: Even as many Chinese-American residents have moved to other areas of Southern California, downtown L.A.'s Chinatown remains the community's center of gravity.

MAE NGAI: It wasn't confined absolutely. But it's also, you know, the center of Chinese businesses, Chinese cultural organizations, the schools, churches, and even the Chinese who live outside of Chinatown – they still relate to Chinatown. It's unavoidable.

DEVERELL: Meanwhile, a new generation of Chinatown residents and activists is building the future.

CAITLIN BRYANT: 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.

DEVERELL: Listen for *Western Edition*, Season Two: "L.A. Chinatown". Launching May 24, 2022. Find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you find podcasts.

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