

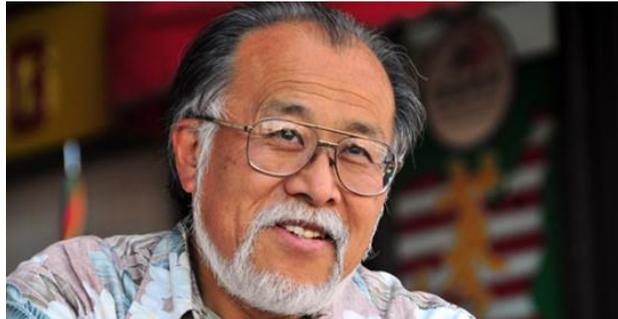


## Community Conversations: Eugene Wong Moy

By, Matthew G. Marquez  
Community Relations Officer

Eugene Wong Moy, an urban planner born in LA Chinatown and raised in South LA, shares his views on the evolution of Chinatown and the development of LA transportation. Wong Moy is an active community leader in Chinatown and Los Angeles, serving on the Board of Directors for the [Chinese Historical Society of Southern California](#) and as the Second Vice President for the [Chinese American Museum](#), located at [El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument](#). El Pueblo is at the center of ongoing discussions between community leaders and Metro, as active transportation improvements are being designed for the community as part of the LA Union Station Forecourt and Esplanade Improvements Project.

Eugene sat down with us to explain Chinatown’s roots in Los Angeles and ties with Union Station, views on the project, and how Chinatown is persevering, despite the growing pressures of gentrification.



*Pictured: Eugene Wong Moy, community leader in Chinatown, Los Angeles. -KCET*

**You are involved with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and Chinese American National Museum. What is some of the work that you do with both of those organizations?**

I was born in LA Chinatown. I feel a kinship, a commitment to support the community. I am interested in local history and how we have this very diverse history contributing to the growth of LA, so I get involved so I can tell the story. El Pueblo is the birthplace of Los Angeles, but it wasn’t just the Spanish and Mexican origins; we have French Italian, Chinese and Croatians and other that have contributed. We have been very motivated to try and tell this multicultural story.

**What is the history of Chinatown?**

The Spanish and the Portuguese had established trade routes between America and Asia since the 1500’s. Chinese, Filipinos and other Asian groups have been coming to the Americas since roughly the



late 1500's and there is plenty of documentation of the Chinese in Mexico and in South America and the Caribbean. When California was settled by the Spanish, the governors had Chinese house servants and cooks, and that was before the Americans came and took California away.

From the 1850's on, we began to see the settlement and the formation of Chinatowns in the 1860's. The area around El Pueblo became the focal point and point of entry. On the periphery—there have been Chinese in other areas related to mining areas such as Placerita Canyon, located near Santa Clarita.

Farmers and ranchers all took advantage of the Chinese labor pool and it contributed greatly to the economic growth of Southern California. In the second half of the 1800's and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinatown community grew because it provided services for the Chinese labor population, whether importing food, dealing with health care, or spiritual or religious life. Chinatown was the focus for that.

In the 1880's and 1890's there was a fairly complete community in Chinatown. There were women and families here. More affluent merchants were able to bring their wives and families to America. They came here and stayed.

### **During the 1800's, for what reasons did the Chinese come to Los Angeles?**

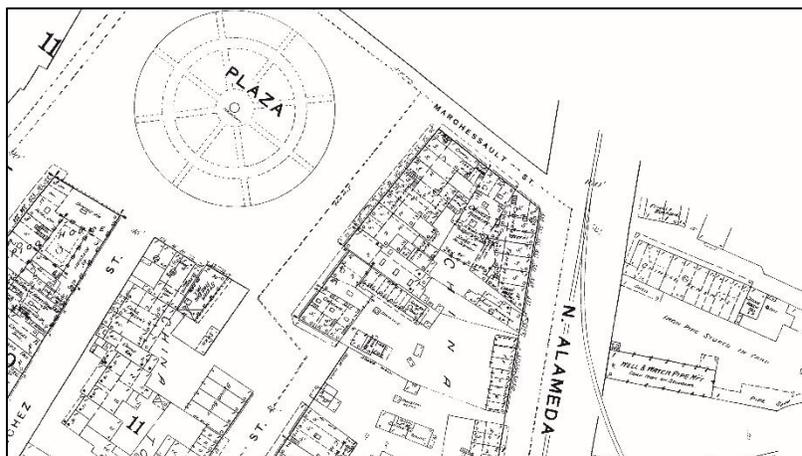
There was a push-and-pull aspect to why people immigrated to America, whether French, Spanish or Chinese. You often time find better opportunities elsewhere and that is what motivates people to move. Why do you travel across an ocean to go someplace? Because there is money to be made? Because there is a better life? Or, you may be in fear for your life, if you stayed?

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were revolutions everywhere—in Spain, in France, in China—so people were looking to a better life. People definitely came for the economics. People were coming over to find a better life.

### **What has been the evolution of Chinatown in Los Angeles?**

Earliest settlers were on the Calle de los Negros where adobe buildings were located. As the

community grew—some of the early Spanish and Mexican settlers started moving and buying property and ranch houses in San Fernando, Pico Rivera, Riverside. The Chinese followed often times because the labor was needed in these developing areas. There were orange groves in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties; in Orange County, grape vineyards were being developed there. The San Fernando Valley was able to prosper with the development with many ranches.



*1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance map showing Old Chinatown at present day location of Father Serra Park at El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument*

There were Chinatowns established in towns like Riverside and San Bernardino, Anaheim and Santa Ana. El Monte, Pomona and Upland also had Chinatowns. All these communities had an economic base which resulted in this great network of places where people could go find work and live.



*"Dragon's Den Collection" The Dragon's Den restaurant located along Alameda St in Old Chinatown was a popular spot for artists.*

*-Harry Quillen Collection*

In the 1910's, the City of LA started thinking about a joint railroad station. There were three major stations at the time. They were searching for a site for a Union Station and they settled on two potential sites—the Plaza at El Pueblo or Chinatown.

Often times, the promotion of new infrastructure project was seen as a way to "clean up" less desirable neighborhoods. At the time, it could have gone either way. They had a vote with the population of the LA; however, the City Council made the decision to have the future site on what was then Chinatown, which was seen as the worst blight in their minds

It was inevitable that Union Station was going to come, but Chinatown at the time was a fairly dense community. At least a couple of thousand were living in Old Chinatown. Union Station took out half of the community, and the 101 freeway took the other half. Since early Chinese did not own the land and railroads had been aggressively acquiring the property, the Chinese had no choice but to move into what is now called New Chinatown.

By the 1940's and 1950's, things started opening up in the outlying areas—so the Chinese could start moving outward from Chinatown. Because of Chinese Exclusion and pressure against Chinese, many of the old Chinatowns in the LA area folded and disappeared. It was not safe and there was no work going on in these areas anymore. You had to go into the urban Chinatown to find a new line of work.



*New Chinatown, circa 1939. -Metro Library Archive*

Chinatown that we know of today is only 10 to 12 thousand people and only represents 2% of LA County's Chinese population. There are four times as many Chinese in Alhambra than there are in Chinatown. The reason is there is more land. Chinatown is very limited in terms of its size and there is a lot more land elsewhere.

**What makes up the character of Chinatown today? Is it still a port of entry for new Chinese immigrants?**



*Sixth grade students from Castelar Elementary in Chinatown look at recovered artifacts from Old Chinatown during construction of the Metro Red Line in April 1995. - Metro Library Archive*

The ethnic and cultural composition of the Chinese population is different from earlier years. Most early immigration came from the southeast coast of China. Exclusion prevented large migration from China. Not until the quotas were relaxed in the 1960's and the war in southeast Asia created opportunities for refugees to come, did we begin to see Taiwanese, Hong Kong folks, and southeast Asians. And finally, after the 1970's with the normalization of relations with China, we began to see some migration from mainland China.

Today, the population in Chinatown and other Chinese communities in Southern California is very diverse. You are going to find people speaking a variety of languages, a variety of spiritual orientations. We have not only Buddhists and Taoists, we also have Islamic Chinese and Christians. Food options are also much more diverse than it used to be.

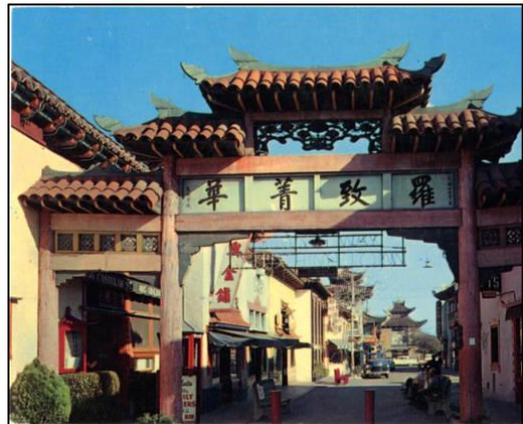
### **Who is coming to Chinatown today?**

LA Chinatown is facing pressure from an increasingly dense downtown. We are experiencing gentrification pressures. Rents have gone up and land prices have gone up. The older senior population is threatened with being pushed out and some are being pushed out. When you get 50% to 100% rent increases that is the result of the new economics of LA.

Chinatown is pretty diverse—not all Chinese. There is 60% Chinese from a variety of backgrounds. It is 20% Latinos. New apartments are being built—a lot of the young urban professionals are moving into the newer apartments. It is part of the new economics.

### **How does the community respond to these gentrification changes?**

There are individual groups that have been involved in the planning and negotiating process, demanding and asking for affordable housing. One of earlier groups is [the Southeast Asian Community Alliance \(SEACA LA\)](#). There is a [Chinatown Community for Equitable Development \(CCED\)](#). We have a Chinatown sustainability dialogue group that people have been meeting every month to review planning proposals for high rise housing and for other new developments. All of these are changing the character of the community and the culture. Many who are concerned about the loss of a historic community, one that has been here since the 1850's.



*Chinatown, Los Angeles, California, circa 1960*

### **What is your vision for the LA Union Station Forecourt and Esplanade Improvements?**

With the forecourt and Father Serra Park, the fact that the project sits on former Chinatown land and there is hardly a trace of recognition of that historic presence, these were places where families grew

up. We should at least see some recognition—this is a great teachable moment to share how cities grow and develop.

### How has transportation in Chinatown transformed the community?

This is a good question for Metro readers. I think it has been positive with the Gold Line having a station in Chinatown because of the community's request. We really wanted to have transportation access to the community. People do come by train. They come to our historical society for tours, they come to the museum to learn, they come to shop and eat. Not only the light rail, but also Metrolink. People come from Orange County, Pomona and Claremont, so it has been a benefit to the business community for sure. Having the enhanced transportation network is a big benefit. Many people also take the buses, like the 72, 74, and 76 that go to Valley Blvd., or go up Huntington Dr. and fan into the San Gabriel Valley. It is also not that hard to take connections into the Westside.



*Metro Gold Line - Chinatown Station dedication in July 2003. -Metro Library and Archive*

- To learn more about historic Chinatown and current exhibitions at the Chinese American Museum, visit <http://camla.org/>
- To schedule a historical tour of Chinatown, visit <http://www.chssc.org/>
- To learn more about the Los Angeles Union Station Forecourt and Esplanade Improvements, visit [metro.net/lausforecourt](http://metro.net/lausforecourt).