

## *Chinatown Reunion 2012*

### *Celebrating “Chinatown’s 40’s, 50’s & 60’s Exceptional Generation” over Tea & Dim Sum*

The following is a typical conversation we might have had on..... *New York City Chinatown Exceptionalism*, while enjoying Tea & Dim Sum (**Yum Cha**) at *Lee’s Restaurant*, a popular tea house on the corner of Mott & Pell Streets in NYC’s Chinatown years ago, except it is now 50 years later. The subject of the conversation is the *“Exceptional Generation of Chinatown Kids from the 40’s, 50’s & 60’s”* who made a breakthrough in the *“Bamboo Barrier”*, existing at the time, through self initiatives with constructive encouragement & support from their respective parents and families to be the *“best you can be in life”*.

*“Greetings”* from the beautiful scenic White Mountains of New Hampshire where I would like to share a few reflections and observations on our youth while growing up in NYC’s Chinatown. Chinatown was a unique small community of *American Born Chinese (ABC)* and *Overseas Born Chinese (OBC)* population in the late 40’s and 50’s where everyone knew one another. All around us was the ethnic diversity of neighboring Little Italy, the Italian & Jewish Wards, and the initial influx of Hispanic-Puerto Ricans.

Chinatown provided the *social and family connected infrastructure* for all the Chinese in the greater NY Metropolitan area as witnessed by the *busy family activities* on Sundays’ and the Family Associations’ Banquets on successive Sundays’ following the Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations and festivities in the 40’s, 50’s, and 60’s. For young Chinese adults looking for a social setting and meeting new people, NYC’s Chinatown was a *magnet* for *socials’* and *sports’* activities for kids and young adults from the NY Metropolitan area; Boston, MA; Philadelphia, PA; Washington, DC; and Newark, NJ right across the Hudson River & as far away as Toronto and Montreal, Canada. As a result, there were many relationships developed during these *socials’* and *sports’* events with *dating, steady-couples, long lasting friendships*, and even *marriages* for these young adults from the Chinatown community.

I have always been curious of how some of our *“life Events” happened and how they*

*came about....*

Perhaps the answers can be found in our short Chinese American history in the United States and in the many positive timely external circumstances guiding us. I'm proud of the fact that many of us have taken steps *through education, hard work, ambition, and internal fortitude* to enter various professions, vocations, and businesses. Subsequently, we have been able to lead productive and comfortable lives in comparison to our parents. We all had our struggles and difficult times but we all learned from them and moved on in life to where we are today, with no handouts and entitlements.

In the Chinatown community, we had strong family values and close loving parents; a proactive family emphasis on education; proper church teaching and guidance; and good school teachers who helped frame our academic foundation and discipline for later educational, social, economic, and professional achievements. From my perspective, the negative American connotation of the Chinese laundryman, laborer, houseboy, Charlie-the waiter, etc. were all but eradicated in one generation by the successes & accomplishments made by the young adults who grew up in Chinatown and the surrounding areas.

This *transformation* did not happen overnight because I can still remember the tough social economic learning and working experiences of the late 40's and 50's. Perhaps a pivotal point was when a greater number of the Chinatown kids got accepted, by competitive exams, into the specialized academic high schools and a larger number of us went on to college to earn our degrees. On a comparative basis, the Stuyvesant High School ethnic makeup was 80% Jewish when I attended in the 50's...today it is 70-75% Asian. The student bodies at Hunter College High School, Brooklyn Technical High School & Bronx High School of Science also comprise a significant high percentage of Asian students. On the college level, Asians & Jews have the highest percentage/population ratio in attendance at colleges and universities

My educational growth path went from elementary school in Chinatown (smart kids) to 7th & 8th grades in Little Italy (**physical combat zone--racial discrimination & required self-defense**) and then on to Stuyvesant (**intellectual combat zone--high intensity cerebral competition**). Stuyvesant was where I received my introduction to the Jewish culture and the start of many lifelong friendships since 80% of the school was attended by Jewish kids. It was excellent *reality training* for the real world competition to follow in college and the professional challenges ahead. During the 50's timeframe, it was advisable for Chinese kids to consider a career in engineering, science, education,

business, or medicine since law usually required a well connected family name and network for entry and success in many law firms.

Up here in New England recently, a **Boston radio** talk show host commented that ***“if Harvard didn't have a reverse discrimination policy...Harvard's student body would be all Asians and Jews”***.

In addition, a news columnist made the following observation in a ***“Dumbing-Down of America”*** article:

***“If the racial gap in academic achievements persists for the next 40 years, as it has for the last 40, virtually all of the superior positions in the New Economy and knowledge based professions will be held by Asians and Whites, with Blacks and Hispanics largely relegated to the service sector”***.

Upon reminiscing back on our life in Chinatown, several questions that come to mind are: What were the ***events and circumstances*** that led our grandparents & parents, and families to settle in America and New York's Chinatown? The ***intriguing genealogy*** of why so many of the ***“Eng family lineage”*** all settled in Newark NJ and the surrounding NJ towns? Did our ancestors and families go through ***Angel Island*** in California or ***Ellis Island*** in New York for immigration processing?

Part of the answer may lie on the other side of the world in Asia in the mid 19th century, where the ***single biggest migration*** in China's history was taking place where millions of Chinese were leaving the country because of bad political, social, and economic conditions to go to countries in Southeast Asia, New Zealand, Australia, Philippines, Africa, West Indies, and the Americas.

The ***initial wave of immigration to America*** was only a little over 100,000 Chinese laborers who came to make their fortunes in the 1849 era gold rush and later helped build the transcontinental railroad. Today, there are about 4 million Chinese in the USA, which is a small portion of the Chinese overseas community of approximately 40 million. The millions of Chinese who settled in Southeast Asia and other countries over a period of time worked hard, achieved economic and professional success, and many prospered in business. The Chinese became wealthy and their children went to schools in Europe and America to prepare for careers in medicine, law, engineering, science, banking, and finance, etc..... ***Over the last century and a half, the Chinese entrepreneurs and businessmen ran most of the business and commerce in Southeast Asia, Indonesia,***

***Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Philippines.***

Back here in the USA, Congress had passed the ***Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*** which severely limited the number of immigrants into the country except for diplomats, merchants, and students. The *enterprising Chinese* found ways around the law to enter the country legally under the ***"Paper Family"*** concept but the numbers were much smaller than the millions of Chinese going to Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. In looking back on my own experiences, many of our parents' families settled in New York 's Chinatown must have come to America around the 1920-1930's such that our generation was in high school during the 40's & 50's. During this same time period, the Chinese Communist took control of China in 1949. Many Chinese students studying at American universities were anti-Communist and now they had to stay in the USA. These students received university fellowships to study for their advanced degrees. The majority of them became university professors and did scientific research at these schools. These students were joined by a ***second wave of immigration*** escaping from the mainland China and leaving Taiwan to study at American universities under scholarships. As these students received their advanced degrees, they also stayed in the USA as university professors or research scientists.

With the ***Immigration Act of 1965***, it opened up a ***third wave of immigration*** which included Chinese of all social economic groups and backgrounds. The Chinese population grew at a rapid rate and NYC now has three additional Chinatowns in other boroughs to accommodate the growing number of people. Although these *three waves of immigration* came at different times and for different reasons, they all shared common beliefs in *entrepreneurship*, *hard work*, *family unity*, *thriftiness*, and *education*. These attributes helped many Chinese achieve rapid success in America. The success of the Chinese in the USA, Southeast Asia, and other countries is a mixed blessing and curse at the same time. The *blessing* is a *secure and comfortable life* and the *curse* is *discrimination and prejudice* by the host country as exemplified by the ***attacks and purges on oversea Chinese in Indonesia and Vietnam***.

My college roommate from Thailand (*Daicha Pisitkasem*) wrote letters home to his family in *Thai* or *English*...*but...when he needed money*, his father insisted that the ***"request be written in Chinese"***.... ***otherwise no money***. His family migrated to Thailand from China and he was 3rd generation with the family changing their Chinese name to a Thai name to deflect any possible discrimination because of their accumulated wealth in businesses.

Certainly, here in the USA the Chinese have experienced their share of... *discrimination* and *prejudice* during all three waves of the immigration cycles and our generation learned a lot from the "street smart" lessons and experiences of New York City's diverse cultures & environments.

I was made aware of discrimination against Chinese Americans when I was in high school and worked in Chinese restaurants on weekends and during the summers where I met waiters in their 30's --40's, who were college graduates from schools like Columbia, NYU, City College...etc. They had experienced difficulties getting jobs after graduation while their white classmates received job offers. In order to sustain themselves and their families, they started working in the restaurant business. After a few years of unsuccessfully trying to get jobs in their fields of study, one can appreciate the difficulties of trying to get higher level jobs when one's resume shows recent work experience as being a waiter or a bartender. However, a number of these industrious waiters and bartenders went on to start their own businesses and in the long run were probably better off financially in the business world.....must be that *true Chinese entrepreneurial DNA in the blood*.

Our generation was fortunate to have studied engineering & science in the 50's & 60's when there was a shortage and high demand for engineers because of the dangerous "Cold War" situation with the Soviet Union. In turn, we should thank the Russians for launching *Sputnik* into orbit and igniting the "Space Age Competition" which further exacerbated the critical need for engineering and science graduates. Indeed, many of our generation were the recipients of these competitive high paying jobs.

Take a moment to read the late *Allan Yee's article* in the *2008 NY Chinatown Reunion Book, "WW-II, A Remembrance of the Trials and Tribulations"*. I first met Allan in the 60's at Grumman Aerospace Corp. where he was a RF Engineer on the *TFX* jet fighter. Allan arrived in the USA after World War II when he had to first learn *English* and earned degrees in *Electrical Engineering & Computer Science*. It is truly an amazing life journey for Allan who made it from a small village in China to America to eventually work on the design and development of "state of the art" *avionics* for the *TFX*. Allan's *social and organizational capabilities* came to light as *Chairman* of the *successful CCYC Silver Bay Conferences*' vastly enjoyed by all attendees. Allan was also one of the "original committee members" of the *NYC Chinatown Reunions*.

Although Chinese Americans are classified as a minority group, we have made *significant contributions* in the sciences, engineering, technology, medicine, finance,

education, and businesses contributing to the *intellectual, cultural, and material wealth of America*. It may be another generation before the population size increases to a level where there will be a higher representation of Chinese Americans/ Asian Americans in political circles to have a significant impact and become a major forceful influence on the policies of both political parties and the direction of this country. That day will indeed be the *tipping point...* where Chinese Americans/Asian Americans will be a *dynamic influential political force*.

Comparison Data on the *Relative Wealth Gaps* between *Minorities and Whites* in the USA:

Reference: Pew Research Center, 7/26/2011 (in 2009 dollars)

**Medium Net Worth of Households**

*(Household Wealth is the accumulated Sum of Assets minus the Sum of Debt)*

	<u>Hispanics</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Asian</u>
<u>Population %</u>	<u>(16%)</u>	<u>(12%)</u>		<u>(5%)</u>
2005	\$18,539	\$12,124	\$134,992	\$168,103
2009	\$6,325	\$5,677	\$113,149	\$115,103

The **2012 elections** may well be the *most critical election* in our life time since the future of this country will be determined by the President and the Party in power. We should all go out and vote for the right “social economic & educational policies and direction for this nation” to *reverse the decline in America*.

When we look back at our life in Chinatown and the greater surrounding NY Metropolitan area, our generation had a high percentage of smart, talented, and resourceful kids who were self motivated and driven through education and hard work to succeed in life. Our *small* Chinatown community produced a large number of success stories with our share of entrepreneurs, businessmen, and professionals. *The results are* a positive indicator of our many blessings and how we successfully managed life’s challenges to be the *“best you can be in life”*.

“*Project Tell your Story*” was presented by **Dr. James (Gan) Moy**, at the *Chinatown Reunions of 2008 and 2010* where anyone in our generation can tell his/her experiences/stories for today’s generation to see how life was in the old days’ (40’s, 50’s, & 60’s) growing up in our unique Chinatown community.

There are still many untold “*Tell your Story*” of *young adults (now-seniors)* from NYC “*Chinatown’s Exceptional Generation*” who took advantage of the incredible

opportunities and freedoms to pursue careers in businesses, vocations, and professions, to the best of one's ability in this great country.

Once again, while ***“Celebrating the Past”***, let us now ***“Enjoy the Present”*** and make the ***2012 Chinatown Reunion*** another *memorable one* among *friends old and new*. The ***“Best of Health”*** to all and let us *swing into action* for the festivities and *play* like we did in the 50's and 60's. Continue ***“Believing in the Future”*** to *preserve* the ***“Past”*** for *future generations* to *enjoy and sample a bit of nostalgic history*.

A note of ***“Appreciation”*** and ***“Thanks”*** to ***Gladys Chin***, our ***Social Director***, and her excellent team of ***Lillian Cheu, Barbara Chew, Dennis Coffey, Albert Leong,*** and ***Matthew Pon*** for their extensive planning and coordination to ensure another outstanding ***New York Chinatown Reunion-2012*** in Las Vegas, NV.

***Best Regards***

***Daniel (Danny) Lee***

***Division St.--Chinatown (1950's)***

***New York City, New York***

***January 2012.....Chinese Year of the Dragon, 4710***

***Harris Preserve***

***Nashua, New Hampshire***