

New York City Chinatown 1950's & 1960's Social Dynamics

Our social environment was unique and dynamic. Chinatown was the epicenter of social activities for Chinese American guys and girls in the 1950's and 1960's where there was always some social event or happenings on any given week or weekend for everyone, of different age groups, to socialize and meet new people. Teen Hops were held at the Transfiguration Church & Mariners Temple; dances followed immediately after basketball games at True Light Church; dances were held by the Chinese Student Societies at the various NYC college campuses; privately sponsored dances at the Mc Burney YMCA; dances at the Sino American Club & China Institute; and a sampling of nice private parties by invitation. There were the large hotel dances sponsored by the Jaycees to celebrate Christmas and the New Year. The Chinese Community Club (CCC) sponsored the Chinese New Year dances and many other family, social, and sports' events. The Chinese Christian Youth Conference (CCYC) held their summer and winter conferences up at Lake George and at the Berkshires for seasonal recreational/sports' activities which also provided an open opportunity to meet new people from all over the East coast and beyond.

How did all these social activities come about in a small community called Chinatown nested between Little Italy, SOHO and Tribeca and portrayed by the American press to be the *land of the fighting Tongs* and *opium smoking dens*. A tourist getting off the Grey Line tour bus in Chinatown was overheard saying "**how do these people live here**". Indeed, we did and made the best of it by producing an exceptional generation of successful Chinese American citizens and along the way we had lots of fun and laughs.

An overview of historical events will provide a perspective on the formation of Chinatowns in the USA since there was racial discrimination and bias against Chinese which made it difficult to assimilate into American society with the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, followed by America's phobia with the threat of the perceived "**Yellow Peril**". By necessity, for the common interest of safety, shelter, security, food, financial, and social well being, the Chinese people clustered together in Chinatowns. In these enclaves, the strength of our family unit led to the continuation of family associations (Lee, Chin, Wong, Eng etc.); people from the same region of China associations; and business associations which are all based in Chinatown. These associations provided a central place for people to spend time together to socialize and catch up on the latest news and events with other families and friends. *Care for Mahjong anyone?*

Following in this same tradition, the younger generation would follow suit in socializing and forming groups to spend quality time together in a social setting. Each group had a different origin and purpose: CCC, CCYC, CIC, Sino American Club, China Institute, Ging Hawks (L.I. Chinese Circle), Four Seas Club, Jade Club, and other smaller clubs of that period. However, the common goal was to socialize with friends outside of work, school, and family responsibilities for a little respite, relaxation, & recreation.

The social life in Chinatown 1950's & 1960's centered around several different groups that were already in Chinatown and many other individual guys and girls who came to Chinatown to meet new friends. The Chinatown group included the homegrown crowd (Mott-Pell-Doyer-Bayard St's etc.); the Chinatown peripheral street groups (Division-Henry-Madison St's etc...); and New Jersey groups. Then there were the guys & girls from the other NYC boroughs, other cities, other states, and even countries, (Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba) who all came to Chinatown to meet people socially and to develop new friendships. In their own local neighborhoods, they may have been considered different and outsiders while some were accepted and many were not accepted in their local social circles. When they were in Chinatown, these Chinese American guys and girls felt there was a feeling and sense of belonging socially and bonded by the same culture and customs. The natural tendency for them was to gravitate to people with the same outlook, interest, and common racial & cultural backgrounds.

It was from these groups and individuals (*Chinatown social community*) that made up the membership of the two larger Chinatown based social clubs at the time; namely: the Four Seas and the Jade Club. Both clubs had adequate nice facilities to accommodate reasonably large social gatherings and serve the recreational needs of the overall *Chinatown social community*. The Four Seas was located in the heart of Chinatown at 22 Pell St.; whereas: the Jade Club was located at 20 E. Broadway, where the current site is now occupied by the Golden Unicorn Restaurant. One can only imagine if the walls can talk about those memorable parties, dances, or just hanging out together and those interesting debates & conversations.

The Four Seas may have been formed in the early 1950's as I seem to recall Dick Lee and Victor Chin who were the first members that we had met at social events in the mid 50's. Since the Four Seas was right in Chinatown, it was convenient to attract the crowds to their central location for dances and other social events without having to travel uptown. The Four Seas' members were older than our group around Chinatown and our interest and social outlook were different at the time. The subtle differences were based on our experiences of having been to many dances uptown; the various colleges' dances; and the Four Seas social functions. With these differences in mind and the desire to have a place of our own, we decided to start the Jade Club in 1957 utilizing many of the lessons learned from the Four Seas model.

The Jade Club was a diverse group with members ranging in age from high school seniors to college students and graduates to guys and girls in the work force. We had parties, dances, and social activities tuned to our style of the time which attracted a membership to include Caucasians and Latinos. Chinese girls from Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, and the Washington DC area, interested in our Latin dancing style and reputation, were frequent visitors to the club. Dance lessons were given at dances or in private. On weekdays, one can see student members reading or doing homework at the club when stopping over in Chinatown on the way home from high school/college. All in all, it was a fun time socially and a great experience in learning organizational skills, teamwork, and leadership abilities for our future endeavors.

While our Chinatown neighborhood may not be a tony neighborhood like Park Ave or 5th Ave, we made the best of what we had and worked hard to ensure a balanced life style between work, school, and social activities. Our social life journey was greatly enhanced by our experiences gained from the club activities, parties, and dances over the years. Our Chinatown social dynamics and the experiences it has provided have been a humbling reminder of how blessed we are to be where we are today.

Two notable comments from the past to present:

A notable Four Seas member is **Tom O'Hara** who was learning Chinese in the 1950's. Today he is fluent in Chinese. **Tom, "Congratulations". Is it Cantonese or Mandarin or both?** Quite an accomplishment!

Two Jade Club members who deserve our deepest appreciation are **Danny (Skinny) Moy and Soy Chu**. They are in NYC twice a year to graciously host a delicious banquet in Chinatown with many Jade Club members and their friends. **Danny & Soy, "Thanks for your hospitality & generosity".**

These reunions take a lot of planning, scheduling, and coordination by Dick Chu & his team. On behalf of the attendees, please accept our "thanks" and your efforts are much appreciated. Do swing into action for the 2016 Chinatown Reunion (4/17-4/21/2016) in Las Vegas, NV. This is the 8th biennial one.

All the Best... Stay Sharp & Be in Good Health. Happy Chinese New Year 4714, Year of the Monkey... Daniel (Danny) Lee, Nashua, NH, February 8, 2016

(To quote my favorite **Star Trek Vulcan, Dr. Spock**: "Live long and prosper" *Was he part Chinese?*)