

Lewis Hine Documentary Update From Boston's Chinatown

At the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), people know me as the "Alphabet Lady." For the spring and summer, my work is dedicated to a visual literacy workshop series called the "Alphabet Project," which I teach, share and implement throughout the eight departments of BCNC. Simply put, the Alphabet Project aims to create an environment in which participants can appreciate their community through images and words. Our final products explore new and creative viewpoints of each department, with hopes that these fresh perspectives sharpen and deepen BCNC's understanding of its work, purpose and mission within the Chinatown community.

As part of the Alphabet Project, my students take photographs – charged with exploring and expressing their feelings through imagery. After spending time discussing photography and experimenting with our cameras, my students are set loose around BCNC and Chinatown to capture their own "alphabet." These collected alphabets will be arranged and rearranged as more participants collaborate and share their work – our final exhibition is set for May.

Last Thursday, my class of about a dozen students from BCNC's afterschool program embarked on the photography exercise. Armed with disposable cameras, they rushed out to the Chinatown streets to capture the deep yellows and purples of a sunny afternoon. As I chased after them, my feet settled between the two stone lions of the Chinatown Gate. My camera snapped on the four gold characters carved into the stone above me – claiming this space as proudly Chinese – as the first wave of Chinese immigrants did when they settled on this street more than a hundred and forty years ago.

But this Gate – a gift from Taiwan – arrived in the 1970s, not the 1870s. The Gate stands not as an imperial-period importation, but a symbol of the Chinese civil war. In fact, Boston's Chinatown officials were not permitted to assemble the Gate until in the 1980s, lest it strain the diplomatic relations being forged by Nixon and China's rulers. For most of Boston's Chinatown of that time, comprised of immigrants with memories of escaping the Communist takeover of China, the Gate was – and is now – a blaring symbol of political resistance.

Beyond the Gate, turning onto Tyler and Harrison Ave, Chinatown's public image remains loyal to the Nationalist movement. Most storefront signs are written in Traditional Chinese characters – a disappearing form ever since Mainland China adopted a Simplified style under the People's Republic. All restaurants and stores conduct business first in Cantonese, which is almost unintelligible to speakers of China's official language, Mandarin. Strings of Taiwanese flags hang from lamppost

to lamppost. And when troops of lion dancers performed on the streets for the New Year's festival, the costumes were in the Nationalist-standard, Guangdong style.

Chinatown is able to maintain this cultural and political defiance due to a handful of powerful family associations, run by some of the community's oldest and largest bloodlines. These associations, which draw their sociopolitical roots from the outlying provinces surrounding Hong Kong, continue to control Chinatown's public image.

But things are changing. Since the early 1990s, more and more immigrants from Mainland China have been assimilating into Chinatown – buying groceries, seeking services and applying for jobs. In the past few years several restaurants have opened with an entirely Mandarin-speaking service staff. And for the most part, Chinatown is adapting to this new wave of immigration – observing the political, linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences if only to meet the diversifying needs of Chinese goods and services. Take for example my host organization, BCNC, which offered its very first English as a Second Language course (ESL) for Mandarin-speakers in 2009.

But some things are not changing – and this is where my camera is rolling. For most retirees that pass under the Chinatown Gate, their efforts to preserve their cultural identity – unique to their generation and experience – remains the same.

Twice a week, about two-dozen retirees meet at the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association for the Chinatown Senior Ballroom Dancing club. Women slip into glittery heels as men sort the sign-in sheet and song selection. As the music starts to reverberate into the old wooden floorboards, feet begin to shuffle to the rhythms of foxtrot, waltz and rumba. Most of these dancers learned ballroom when they were growing up in Hong Kong, when it was British colony. Their movements are meticulous yet effortless – evidence of years of practice and a passion for dance. Ballroom is a labor of love – lost on their “Americanized” children and grandchildren, or so they tell me. It was a staple of their youth and a proud example of their distinguished Cantonese history. Ballroom is a beloved pastime from a culture and context truly of China's past.

What so distinguishes Chinatown's retirees also isolates them. Today, as the seniors pass under the Chinatown Gate, fewer things in Chinatown are reminiscent of the Motherland in their memories. New restaurants flash signs in Simplified Chinese characters. Their grandchildren speak better English than Cantonese. As Chinatown hastens to change, ballroom remains a powerful and beautiful demonstration of one generation's experience – frozen in time.

My work with Ballroom centers on the colors and the sounds that swirl in the dance hall. I am focused on portraiture and oral history. I record and capture in time to the retirees' gentle welcome – slowly hearing their stories and earning their trust with each dance.

Trust is gradual in Chinatown. My dependability and regularity are only starting to give me access to the community's unspoken subjects and stories. I am a dance enthusiast at Chinese Ballroom; a photography teacher for elementary schoolers; an American citizenship tutor for retirees; a homework helper for ESL students; a cooking instructor for immigrant mothers; a Mandarin language student; a Tai Chi pupil; a videographer; a photographer; a listener. Every day I listen – and every Tuesday I listen at Tufts Medical Center.

Every Tuesday, from the back room in a dark hallway at the Pediatric Center, a young boy named Tszkin lies on a bed to take in his weekly dose of medicine. Tszkin and his family emigrated from Hong Kong to the United States in 2001. He has Hunter syndrome – a painful and slow-working disease which will soon take his life. Tszkin is blind and nearly deaf – he no longer has control of his legs. He lost the ability to speak when a breathing tube was put in his trachea in 2009. His mother mostly communicates to him through touch. Most patients with Hunter syndrome die before age fifteen. I was there when Tszkin celebrated his fifteenth birthday – and he shows no signs of fading away. He is a special case.

Tszkin is a special case not only at Tufts Medical but also in the greater Chinatown community. Children with disabilities are often a hushed and hot button issue with immigrant parents. One teacher at the local elementary school speaks up for these families – and often fights legal and linguistic battles to ensure that more Chinese-speaking children attain a meaningful life in Boston.

I have joined this teacher and BCNC in the struggle to bring more awareness to children with special needs – case by case. I am focused on Tszkin because of his mother – because of the full life she strives to give him. I watch and listen as Tszkin fights good days and bad. I record only when Tszkin and his mother are ready to be heard – but I listen, always.

My work as the Lewis Hine Fellow has taken these three forms. I am a teacher and a student, an observer and a participant. I have assumed roles and responsibilities directly and indirectly related to these three subjects – that connect me to Chinatown's strong undercurrent of politics, family and change. And so I diligently work – from underneath and beyond the Chinatown Gate – to uncover the powerful visuals and voices that shape this dynamic community.

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