

Intro to MIAP
Prof Howard Besser
Xin Zhou

“We landed/ I was born/ Passing by”
Anthology Film Archives
Fri. Jan. 24 - Sun. Jan. 26 2014
Curators Lesley Yiping Qin, Lynne Sachs, Bo Wang, Xin Zhou

Whether you see Chinatown as a place or a state of mind, a purgatory or an oasis, a shrinking immigrant community or an expanding business district, its presence in our cinematic imagination is enormous. Situated north of New York City’s Wall Street, east of the Tombs, west of the old Jewish Ghetto, and mostly south of Canal, the neighborhood that began in the mid 19th century has maintained its distinct character – savory, hardscrabble, succulent and cacophonous.

“We landed/I was born/Passing by” explores a provocative array of images of the community beginning in the 1940s straight through to the present. By embracing the perspectives of grassroots activists, performance artists, conceptual visionaries, home-movie makers, punk horror devotees and journalists, the series raises questions about how we look at the neighborhood and how its representations have reciprocally shaped our imagination. Who lived in Chinatown at the beginning? Who lives here now? How and why has it changed? What language best describes Chinatown? Whose voices do we hear?

Inspired by the fabulously observant 1960s poetry of Chinatown's very own Frances Chung, this five-part film series looks at the streets, desires, shops and struggles of an iconic community that only begins to reveal its stories when the most obvious outer layers are pulled back. Comprised of documentaries, archival footage, home video, literary readings, photography and performance, the series rings in Chinese New Year by opening a window to both early and contemporary conditions. Through it all, geography, memory and observation compress and expand the imaginary and the real of this beloved section of the Big Apple.

The title of this series is divided by "/" into three sections. "We landed" generally refers to the first generation of immigrants who travelled to the land by water or air and settled as newcomers, who may hold strong nostalgia to their native land and didn't necessarily plan to stay here for the rest of their lifetime. "I was born" is more about the second generation of immigrants who were born and raised in this place or space, and are shaped by both the space they live in as well as what they are told of their "native land" by the parents. As the world becomes more globalized and the difference and disjuncture of the imagination becomes not that clear. The third section of the title, "Passing by" discusses more about the outsiders who literally pass by the district of New York City or sometimes stop by for the cheap yet yummy snacks such as fried dumplings.

Lynne Sachs is the initiator of this project and her recent experimental documentary, *Your Day is My Life*, tells stories of the Chinese immigrants' life in this neglected community. Later joined are three Chinese who studied or is still studying film in the States. Lesley Yiping Qin, a former MA student of cinema studies at NYU Tisch, is currently the Program Associate at the New York Asian American Film Festival, and Bo Wang is an artist and filmmaker who makes Harun Farock style essay film. I'm a writer and curator of experimental media, still enrolling in the cinema studies MA program at NYU Tisch. Four of us put the entire film series together.

The line-up of this film series consists of 5 programs, including 17 film and video works and performance by 11 filmmakers and artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark, Jem Cohen, Shelly Silver, Lynne Sachs, Tom Tam, Yau Ching, Miao Jiaxin, etc. Filmmakers in attendace include Lynne Sachs, Jem Cohen, Shelly Silver, Eric Lin, Corky Lee, Miao Jiaxin, Alan Chin, Corky Lee, etc.

Two Cold Nights in New York Chinatown

Part of the Chinatown Film Project commissioned by the Museum of Chinese in America, Jem Cohen's *Night Scene in New York* is a close nocturnal observation of the people and lights of this urban milieu. In contrast to

Cohen's beautifully shot yet vernacular street scenes, conceptual artist Gordon Matta-Clark's black-and-white video work expresses a more distant gaze on an (un)familiar community, offering an ambivalent and imaginary take on the same cityscape. Shot in the early 70s, Matta-Clark's constantly panning shots move in between buildings in the area, with the Empire State Building always hovering in the background thirty blocks away. This was a time when restaurants were still open at midnight for gamblers seeking food in the early morning hours.

Voyeur Chinatown	Gordon Matta-Clark	1971	60
Night Scene New York	Jem Cohen	2009	10
Frances Chung poetry reading			

The Touch of an Eye

The view from above, the bird's eye view can be omniscient and detached, playful and wicked. In her restrained yet endlessly sensual ciné essay on loss and presence, Shelly Silver's *Touch* takes us on a journey that begins with the psyche of an enigmatic son who returns as both insider and outsider to a Chinatown from which he escaped, as a teenager, as fast as he could. Celebrated 1960s community activist Tom Tan left an indelible mark on New York City's Chinatown. To our great surprise, he also shot irrepressibly

inventive experimental films of the world he fought so hard to defend. Tan's pixilated glimpse of a boy on a roof gives voice to a child's sense of flight and the realization that he will never have wings.

Boy on Chinatown Roof	Tom Tam	1970s	3
Touch	Shelly Silver	2013	68

Chinatown Problematics

How can realities be engaged if the idea of a place has already been mediated by a sense of otherness and displacement? It all began with the name "Chinatown", a specific place that can simultaneously be found in many cities of the world. This program responds to specific questions around visualizing New York's Chinatown. *The Trouble with Chinatown* was originally aired on WNBC in the early 1970s as a survey of social and educational problems. In February 2013, a ten-minute "exposé" on CNN covering the "dirty, dangerous firetrap" conditions of 81 Bowery Street sparked a report from an Arizona viewer to the New York Fire Department and led to the eviction of all of its tenants, people who could not afford another place to live. We can link the tenants' reactions today to those in Tom Tam's silent film *Tourist Bus Go Home*, a 1969 documentation of Chinatown protests against tourism, which

today is a word that is almost synonymous with the neighborhood experience. Shelly Silver's *5 Lessons and 9 Questions about Chinatown* interweaves fragments of neighborhood lives with questions of history, change, a sense of belonging and home. This program will be followed by an artist talk by photographer Corky Lee, an activist in the Asian and Pacific American community for the past forty years.

The Trouble with Chinatown/ WNBC-TV		1970	26
Tourist Bus Go Home	Tom Tam	1969	12
5 Lessons & 9 Questions About Chinatown	Shelly Silver	2011	10
CNN report on 81 Bowery St Eviction & Protest		2013	3 (or more)
Photos and artist talk by Corky Lee			

Bowery Street Playbill

Quotidian life is mummified, provoked and embodied in this eclectic playbill of Chinatown. We begin with Eric Lin's quietly rueful look at the closing-down of Music Palace, the last Chinatown movie theater on Bowery Street. This poignant vanishing of the communal film experience contrasts with Ming Wong's reenactment parodies of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* and its

persistent obsession with profiling Los Angeles' Chinatown as a lawless enclave. From the upfront self-mocking of "Chinese Paper Sons", to two lesbians' munching menus in *I Am Starving*, to following random grocery shoppers home for dinner in *The Trained Chinese Tongue*, everyday experiences constantly negotiate the personal - whether it be verbal or corporeal. Interspersed are two observational films of Chinese New Years, one a home video of a street celebration during World War II and the other a pristinely shot documentary from 1960, *The Year of the Rat*. And finally, Chinatown born photojournalist Alan Chin will provide an artist's vision of the neighborhood through his candid, sharply rendered insider's eye.

Music Palace	Eric Lin	2005	9
Home Movie of Chinese New Year Parade at time of WWII		1940s	4
Making Chinatown - a multi-media art project	Ming Wong		TBC
Paper Son	Bryon Yee	1997	TBC
I Am Starving	Ching Yau		12
The Trained Chinese Tongue	Laurie Wen	1994	20
The Year of the Rat	Jon Wing Lum	1963	14
Photos by Alan Chin		1970s	10

A Time of Two Square Miles

Mixing literary readings and videos, this program investigates movement in both public spaces and insular, domestic environments in the two square miles of Chinatown. With the active presence of the camera, immigration experiences are translated into local visual terms without losing the nuances of immediacy and historicity. At first merely watched and later banished, Shanghai-born performance artist Jiaxin Miao carries his suitcase between two strange locations - a restaurant in Chinatown and Zuccotti Park – and then boldly hangs and sprays colors onto roast ducks. Galvanized by flickering and fast forward motions, revered political activist Tom Tam's intimate camera work captures the communal life of a health fair in Chinatown's Columbus Park. Lynne Sachs' hybrid documentary provides a longer format visual study of movement. Set in rented shift-bed rooms in Chinatown, seven performers tell their own stories while transforming their everyday movements into dance. As their monologues patch together a historical picture of the Chinese diaspora, the camera curiously lingers on bodies, hands and faces. At some point, the performers are challenged to leave their shared, self-supporting world. After traveling ten thousand miles to get here, what is it like to go five miles further? Excerpts from novelist Ha Jin and poet Frances

Chung, who belong to two different generations of Chinese-American writers, will also be read.

Ha Jin's Novel reading			10 min.
Chinatown Street Festival	Tom Tam	1970s	5
Chinaman's Suitcase	Jiixin Miao	2011	6
Your Day is My Night	Lynne Sachs	2013	65
Frances Chung's Poetry Reading		1960s & 70s	10 min

Outreach besides the normal channels of Anthology Film Archives

Crossing-programming with several ongoing exhibitions at the Interference Archive and the Museum of the Chinese in America

Serve the People: The Asian American Movement in New York at

Interference Archive

December 5, 2013 - February 23, 2014

Serve the People: The Asian American Movement in New York charts a history of Asian American activism, organizing, and cultural production in the 1970s, the first exhibition to focus on New York as a center of this national

phenomenon. Through posters, leaflets, newspapers, film, and music, *Serve the People* shows how Asian American identity was shaped by reclaimed histories, revolutionary politics, feminist awareness, third worldism, and community organizing. The culture created by young activists and artists in the movement embodied their ideals, speaking to the excitement and urgency of the time.

A Floating Population at MOCA

December 13, 2013 - April 13, 2014

In *A Floating Population*, photographer Annie Ling uses her camera as an entry point to establish a deep connection with the people and spaces of Chinatown. Ling, who photographs for the *New York Times*, rejects the stereotypes and surface impressions that characterize so many images of the neighborhood. She spends time with those she photographs - immigrants and the elderly - both alone and with their families, photographing them with intimacy and complexity. MOCA will be presenting 3 bodies of her work: “81 Bowery” (selections of which were published in the *New York Times*), “Shut-Ins,” and “Tenements.”

Portraits of New York Chinatown

December 13, 2013 - April 13, 2014

Portraits of New York Chinatown was initiated as an oral history project by artist Tomie Arai and scholar Lena Sze as MOCA prepared to move into its current home in 2009. The project addressed the vital question of MOCA's own role within the communities of Chinatown, Little Italy, and SoHo through interviews with 27 neighborhood residents and community leaders. At the core of these conversations were the ever-present concerns of gentrification and displacement. Out of this material, Arai will develop interpretive 'portraits' based on the content of the interviews.

Print availability

Home Movie of Chinese New Year Parade at time of WWII, about 4 min.

Filmed by James Yip TYPOND from his office at 40 Mott Street - NYC

From Douglas Chu 2/21/96, VHS

This piece was discovered in MOCA's archive in New York Chinatown. There is a clear moving image catalog in the archive but there is no information on their website. My original task was to find some home videos made by the Chinese immigrants, than showing only artist films in this film series. However, for researchers and curators who are not affiliated with this archive, you have to try your luck before arriving there. So a minor suggestion for

MOCA is that they can start to think about a digital project and post some of the content of the archive online for better access to the public.

And I was originally charged 50 dollars per minute for a public screening of this piece, if it's showing at a non-profit organization. Later they reduce the fees to 75 dollars after I contacted the curator of exhibition at MOCA, but this charge was still surprising, and reveal that this archive does not have much experience working on projects outside of the institution and there should more projects to interact or even intervene with the professionals at the archive and make them more open and experienced to work with people from the outside.

Final Thoughts

Before the project kicks off, our imagination of the Chinatown is that it's an entire community, since none of the collaborators in the projects were born or raised in the local scene. The combination of the curators are a Jewish filmmaker plus three "authentic" Chinese who are somewhere between visitors and immigrants. For me, 2014 might be the final year in the States if I can't find a permanent job within 12 months. However, as the project proceeds and as we had more conversations with different fractions of people in this big community, we start to grasp a bit of the local politics and the

history of this community. We try to bring multiple points of view and present films made in a spectrum of time and space and looking forward to the project to be realized in one month.