

# Chinatowns: Sprinkling the World with Chinese Culture

Chinatowns can be found virtually all over the world. These “towns” are ethnic enclaves of the Chinese people and are also considered as significant centers of tourism as well as commerce. While some of them only focus on commercial tourism others serve as actual working and living centers for expatriates from China.



A Chinatown can range from a slum to a modern up-to-date development with all the strapping of a good life. In recent times some investors have revitalized blighted rundown towns turning them into economic and social hubs.

## Back in History

Chinatowns have a very long history, some are said to have existed as early as in 1600s. These include Hoi An in central Vietnam and Binondo in Manila, others such as the Chinese quarter of Jakarta in Indonesia known as Glodok were founded in 1740s. Mexico City has the oldest Chinese center in America and is said to be established in the 17th century.

Generally, trading centers predominantly run by Chinese men and their spouses existed for years in Southeast Asia. The signing of the treaty of Peking which opened the border for free movement allowed mass emigration to other parts of the world. Early immigrants primarily came from coastal regions such as Fujian, Guangdong. The Qing government of China was largely unconcerned about the emigration since most of the people who traveled out were socially considered as traitorous to China or undesirable.

In Europe early Chinese settlements were founded by seamen who jumped on a ship and began offering services to mariners. By then the UK considered China as one of its unofficial empires. This enabled many Chinese men to be hired as merchants, which contributed to the growth of Chinese communities in Liverpool and London. Over the time they spread throughout adjacent cities operating laundries and other essential businesses.



Africa has its own share of Chinatowns; South Africa hosts the largest Chinatown as well as the largest Chinese population compared to other African countries.

### **The Oldest Chinatown**

Binondo Chinatown based in Manila, Philippines is the oldest center that was established in the 1590s. It is located across the river from the city of Intramuros and was positioned in such a way that the colonial rulers could keep an eye on the Chinese settlers. These settlers revolted in 1603 and about 20,000 Chinese nationals were killed, however this did not stop more of them from coming to settle here thus making it a thriving Filipino capital.

The best place for a visitor to begin a tour of the center is on Carvajal Street. From there you can explore the Binondo church built in 1596 as well as visit Café Mezzanine for popular hopias ube pastries in Ongpin Street.

There are several major Chinatowns in the world and opinion is divided on which one is the largest. While some agree that the center in San Francisco is the largest town outside of Asia others argue that the Singapore center has the largest concentration of the Chinese population.



### **The Beauty of the Chinese World**

As you travel the world you are likely to encounter the following features in a Chinatown:

Paifang

These are large red arch structures at the entrance of the towns which are sometimes accompanied by lion statues on each side of the paifang to welcome visitors. Most of these structures have Chinese inscriptions and were donated to particular cities as gifts from the People's Republic of China. They can

be seen in the San Francisco center as well as the long neglected town in Havana, Cuba. Some paifang span an entire intersection while others are smaller, they are mostly made of steel, wood and masonry.

#### Chop suey and chow mein eateries

These restaurants are usually lit by neon signage; they serve chow mein or chop suey especially for the benefit of non-Chinese customers. These dishes are served in standard barbecue eateries as well as in take-away restaurants.

#### Herbs, ginseng and animal parts

It is very common to find small herbs and ginseng shops in almost every Chinatown. These products form part of the traditional Chinese medicine. Other products sold in these shops include lizards, sea cucumbers, deer musk pills, pangolin pills, bear bile pills and rhino skin pills.

#### Dragon and lion dances

Travelers are likely to enjoy the dragon and lion dances which are performed in Chinatown every Chinese New Year. This festival is considered important since it scares away evil spirits and brings good fortune to the entire community. These dances are also performed when the Chinese are celebrating the opening of a new business such as a bank or a restaurant.

Date: 2012-12-31

Article link:

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