

The Mary L. Fifield Art Gallery at Bunker Hill Community College presents

# WEN-TI TSEN

## HOMETOWN





Chinatown, Harrison Ave., Boston, Mass. ca. 1907-1915

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# **WEN-TI TSEN**

# **HOMETOWN**

**Re-presenting Boston Chinatown as a  
Place of People-Then and Now**



# About the Exhibition

**"Everyday has to be a meaningful day... everything is alive."**

This is the philosophy that public artist Wen ti-Tsen shared in an interview he gave during the summer of 2019.<sup>1</sup> By then, he had already become a familiar figure at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC), starting with his 2017 exhibit at the Pao Arts Center, *INSIDE/ OUTSIDE: Portrait of Vivian Lee*, that engaged our faculty and staff in the crafting of oral history. Then through *Pilgrim Father, Illegal Son* (his first installed exhibit in BHCC), he created multiple opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to have deep, meaningful conversations about the immigration experience in America. *Home Town: Re-presenting Boston Chinatown as a Place of People – Then and Now*, offered us a third time to encounter Wen-ti and his work.

*Home Town* was a powerful, grounding experience for us at BHCC. An astounding installation of twelve historical photos, enlarged and transferred onto wooden sheets as life-sized, standing, painted figures of Chinese immigrants who settled in Boston more than a hundred years ago. The installation featured a carefully selected group of resident figures that first "came back home" to Chinatown in 2016 when each figure was placed in a specific public area of the community. In BHCC, however, the old-time residents "visited" our campus as a group. All housed inside the Mary L. Fifield Art Gallery, their commanding ancestral presence provided the anchoring foreground for photo portraits of current city dwellers hung on the surrounding walls. As we descended the ramp leading to the gallery, many of us were stunned, perhaps even initially frightened, by the

three-dimensional feel of this community intently staring at us, the power of their collective gaze evoking a sense of reverence and awe. We met their eyes, greeting each one of them quietly in our hearts, one by one: the Man with a Fan, the Two Sisters, the Three Young Military Men, the Wong Children who lost their home on Hudson Street, one who later rose to be a leader of the community. Occasionally, we looked away and glanced at the faces of present-day residents on the background walls, their relaxed and casual demeanor against the backdrop of old Harrison Street providing a respite from the weight of the past. But our eyes continually returned to our visitors, whose quiet presence conveyed agency, as though telling us, again and again, “We are here. Don’t ignore us. Don’t ever forget us.”

It must have been a novel experience to encounter these residential figures when they stood in different places around the Chinatown neighborhood. But in the BHCC Gallery, these residents stood as one group and conveyed resounding power. They captivated audiences, most notably our students who found themselves shifting from looking at the life-sized figures that stood in formal pose, to the more carefree faces on the walls smiling down at them. As the students’ sense of time disappeared, overtaken instead by a deep understanding of meaning and connection, many of them realized, “We are here because they built a path for us. We thrive because they persevered. We continue because they came. To plant seeds – to forge unity – to create community.” Our students were gripped by the potential of their power, the power of conveying their own immigrant stories, the power of creating community – through the connection they felt with the Chinese immigrants who once lived in the city that is now their home.

As a community artist, Wen-ti brought visibility and life to immigrants from the ordinary working class who were previously rendered invisible, whose rich histories others have tried to obliterate by mindlessly pursuing highway projects in the name of modernization and gentrification. Wen-ti made the cultural wealth of the Chinatown community more accessible to everyone in our College, enabling us, together with our students, to access our own rich histories of migration, persistence and resilience and the shared aspiration to also re-present the places where we came from, the places where we currently live, as places of real people deeply rooted in community. By using his art to make every day meaningful and alive, not just for himself but for us as well, Wen-ti’s *Home Town* did so much more than just give us the opportunity to appreciate Chinatown as a community – it also gave us the chance to value, honor and continue the legacies of our own communities.

**Maria Kathleen Puente**

Professor, Department of Behavioral Sciences,  
Faculty Project Director, AANAPISI Grant &  
Writing Team, Chief Editor, 2020 NECHE Self-Study

<sup>1</sup>. Ling Mei Wong (2019). Artist Wen-ti Tsen reflects on immigration and aging. *Sampan newspaper*.



*Bostonian Society*

# HOMETOWN

This project is to show the importance of a home for the Asian Americans in the Northeast. The twelve standing figures are derived from the archives of the Chinese Historical Society of New England. Together, with a series of photo portraits of current residents, workers and visitors, they demonstrate the continuing presence of a people's community in Boston's Chinatown for 125 years.

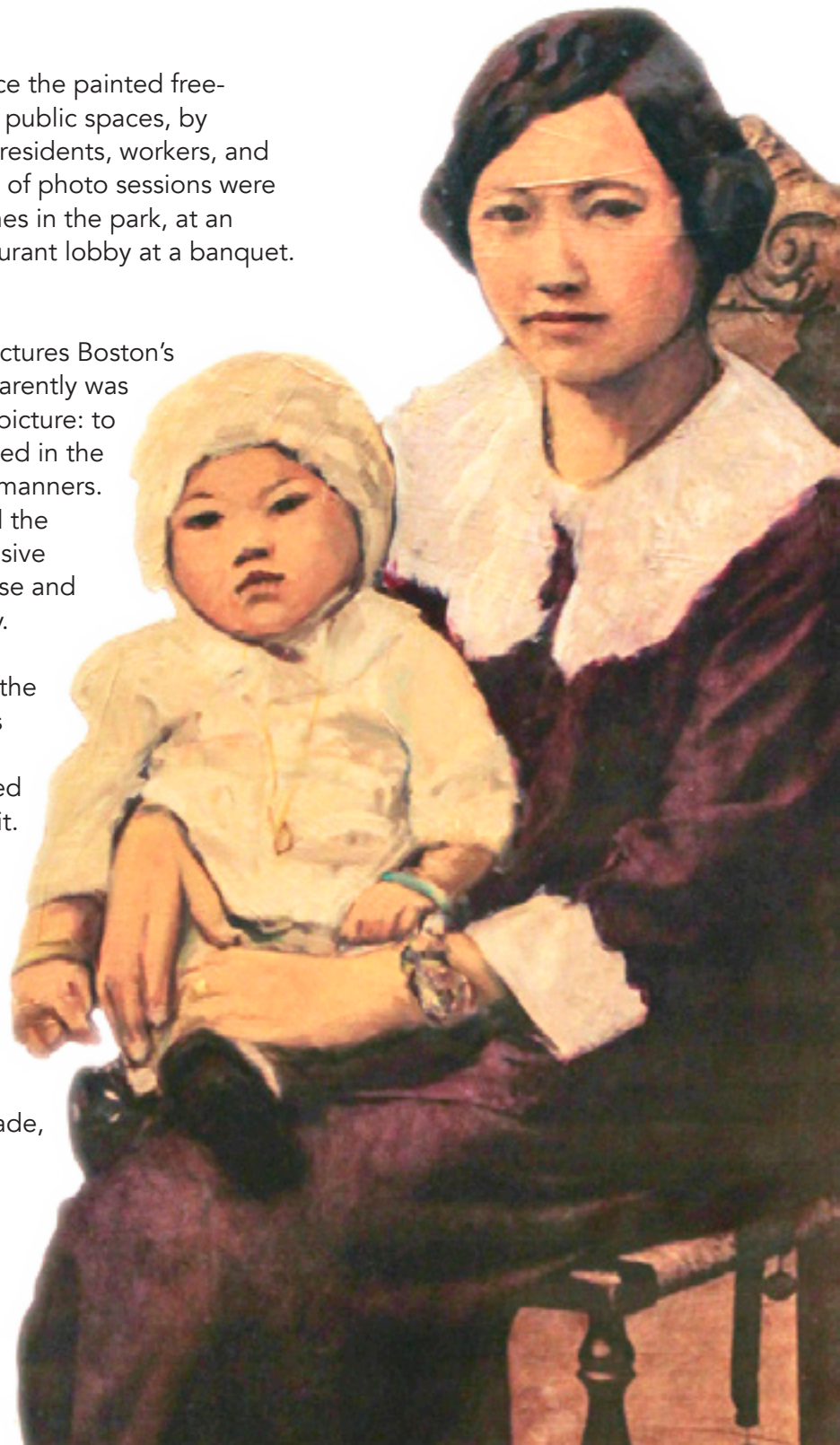
Another part of the project was to counterbalance the painted free-standing historical figures located temporarily in public spaces, by collecting a set of photo-portraits of the current residents, workers, and visitors in the contemporary Chinatown. A series of photo sessions were organized and set up at various sites: several times in the park, at an elementary school at pickup time, and at a restaurant lobby at a banquet.

### **The Backdrop**

The Harrison Avenue postcard that was found pictures Boston's Chinatown around 1910. The photographer apparently was not able to catch any Chinese pedestrian in the picture: to satisfy tourists, several Chinese figures were added in the foreground, hand drawn in grotesquely racist manners. Since the image of the postcard served very well the purpose of enlarging it for a backdrop, the offensive figures were replaced with more dignified Chinese and other pedestrians transposed from the periphery. True, though it is no more likely for a quotidian Chinese to be dressed in full regalia standing in the street than the cartoon figures, it, at least, shows some decorum. The backdrop was commercially fabricated, and it can be rolled along and popped open with the facility of setting up a trade exhibit.

### **The Portraits**

Once the backdrop and the cobblestone ground piece were in place, passers-by were randomly approached and invited to be photographed. The only instructions given were to look directly into the camera, and to think of themselves as someone rather special. Photos of about 275 people, or groups, were made, and none were eliminated.





*Bostonian Society*



# About the Artist

## WEN-TI TSEN

Wen-ti Tsen is a painter and public artist. He was born in China, lived in Paris and London before coming to the U.S. to study at Boston Museum School. Since the mid-1970s, after living and traveling for several years in different countries, he has been engaged in making art that explores cultural connections. It takes the forms of paintings and mix-media installations made in the studio; large-scale sculptural works in public places; and community art projects working with grass-root organizations.

His public works include "Dream Catching", a bronze-and-steel sculpture along the 400-ft. façade of Boston Arts Academy; "Pilgrim Father/Illegal Son", a 60-foot oral-history graphic mural that contrasts, and parallels, the lives of a current undocumented Chinese worker and of William Bradford of the Mayflower.

In the studio, he recently completed a series of six 4'x8' paintings, titled "Concord NH", that depicts the daily living, as Americans, of two old friends from Beirut, who settled in Concord many years ago.



# In the Artist's Own Words

The Chinese first came to Boston in the late 19th century when Chinese laborers migrated east, away from racial persecution in the West after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. The people settled in a residential area in the city when many of the better offs were moving to the outskirts. For decades, due to racial discrimination, the Chinese were restricted in their livelihoods mostly running laundries and restaurants. To avoid competition with each other, the shops often had to be located in distant and isolated towns all over New England. For them, Boston's Chinatown served, once every few months, as a refuge and a connection to "home". It became, through most of the 20th century, the economic and social fulcrum for the Chinese of the region, and, later, as other immigrants arrived, for most Asians.

In the late 1960s the major threats to the community started when the City claimed blocks for highway construction. In the 1980s, in the name of urban renewal, the City zoned large residential areas for demolition to be replaced by commercial and institutional developments. The community fought back, arrested some of the plans and diverted the land to the construction of mixed-rent housing for long-time residents.

In recent times, a new threat arises as a new professional class, desiring to live closer to work and play, started moving back into the city. Both property values and rents increased sharply, with the consequent heavy pressure on displacing neighborhood housing





in favor of high-cost, high-rise, luxury coop buildings. This poses further danger for Chinatown to be able to remain as a viable place for long-time residents and businesses, and continue as the locus of the area's Asian population.

This project is to emphasize to the community and the public at large the importance of maintaining a home for the Asian Americans in the Northeast. The portraits of the 12 figures and groups were selected from the archives of the Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE). They show the continuing presence of people in Chinatown during the past 125 years.

Hometown: Re-presenting Boston Chinatown as a Place of People was setup as an art project in the streets and public spaces of Boston's landmark neighborhood to draw attention to the gentrification and other developments of the last 40 years that continually threaten the historical nature of Chinatown.

Another part of this project was in collecting sets of photo portraits of current people "residents, workers and visitors" posing in front of a backdrop of Harrison Avenue, Chinatown as reproduced from an actual printed postcard of the same location, circa 1910 postcard.

This project is funded by the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) Creative City Program in partnership with CHSNE. The artist's assistant is Jasmine Lee; and the captions are provided by Professor Wing-To of Bridgewater State University.

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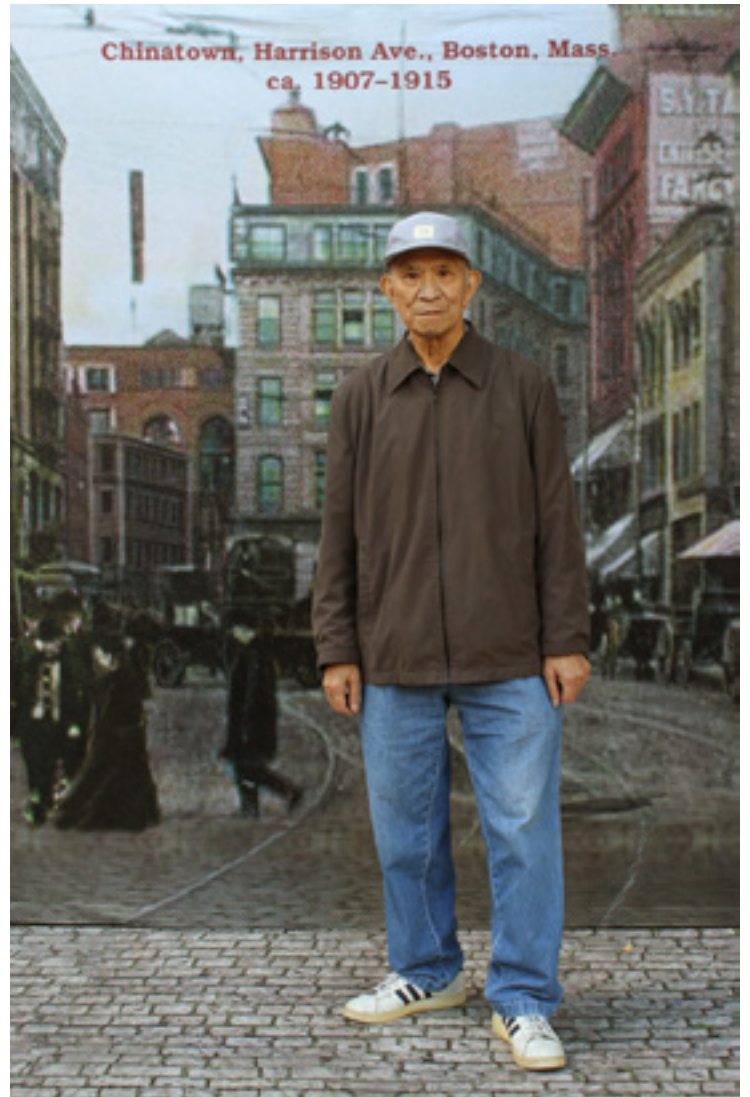




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# Reflection Exercise

## "Coming to and Living in America" Experiencing Yosso's Model of Cultural Wealth

In this activity, you will be given the opportunity to imagine the narrative of one of the life-sized figures in the Homecoming exhibit and draw out their cultural capital. You will also have the opportunity to reflect on your own cultural capital.

### Part I:

1. Choose 1 historical figure that interests you, someone who you think would be good to 'interview.'
2. Try to imagine entering into the world of that character. Now imagine having a quiet conversation with this figure. Pretend that you are asking your chosen character the questions below and listening carefully to his/her responses:
  - Why did you leave China to go to the U.S.? Did you leave any family behind in China when you came to America? Did you remain in touch with them and why?
  - What was it like for you to be an immigrant? How were you treated by other people? What were your living conditions like? Your working conditions? How did you communicate with others – did you have to learn the English language and how easy was that for you? What were your positive and negative experiences as an immigrant in America?
  - What helped you survive in America, and eventually, what helped you to thrive here? What inner strengths did you draw upon? What resources were available to you that provided you with support and the courage to go on? (The last two questions refer to your character's forms of cultural wealth.)
3. Write down the responses you imagined 'hearing' from your respondent in the space below:
  - Why did you leave China to go to the U.S.? Did you leave any family behind in China when you came to America? Did you remain in touch with them and why?
  - What was it like for you to be an immigrant? How were you treated by other people? What were your living conditions like? Your working conditions? How did you communicate with others – did you have to learn the English language? What were your positive and negative experiences as an immigrant in America?
  - What helped you survive in America, and eventually, what helped you to thrive here? What inner strengths did you draw upon? What resources were available to you that provided you with support and the courage to go on? (The last two questions refer to your character's forms of cultural capital.) You can also use the Cultural Wealth Wheel as a supplementary tool.

## Part II:

Now reflect on the same questions, this time by shifting the focus to you and your family's immigrant story, and write down your notes below:

- Why did you or your family leave your country to go to the U.S.? Did you leave any family behind in your country when you came to America? Do you remain in touch with them and in what ways?
- What has it been like for you to be an immigrant here in the U.S. (or for your family to be immigrants here in the U.S.?) What do you like about living here? What challenges have you had, or continue to have? What is it like for you to work here, to study here? What is it like for you to communicate with others in America? Did you have to learn how to read, write and speak in English, and what has that experience been like for you?
- What helps you and your family to survive and thrive in America? What inner strengths do you draw upon in difficult times? What resources are accessible to you that provide you with the support you need? (The last two questions refer to your forms of cultural capital.) You can also use the Cultural Wealth Wheel as a supplementary tool in answering this question.

If you are not an immigrant or you no longer know your family's immigrant narrative, you can answer the following questions (Again, you can use the Cultural Wealth Wheel as a supplementary tool):

- What is it like for you to live in America? What do you like about living here? What are your greatest difficulties and challenges living in this country?
- What helps you to survive and thrive in America and why or how so? What forms of cultural capital do you have that you consider to be your greatest sources of cultural wealth, strength and support? How have they helped to sustain you or to get you where you are today?
- How can America help you lead a better life? What can your College do to help you become proud of your own cultural wealth, or what should it NOT do? What can your community do; the political leaders of the state of Massachusetts; the political leaders of the U.S.?

## Part III:

Use the additional questions below to deepen your reflection or for additional group discussion:

1. What did you learn about Chinatown and its people from the Homecoming Exhibit? What did you imagine were their struggles, challenges and difficulties? What did you imagine were their strengths as individuals and as community? What forms of cultural capital did they probably rely on in order to survive and thrive in America?
2. Was your or your family's immigrant story very different from the Chinese immigrants who eventually settled in Chinatown? How so?
3. Is your cultural capital very different from the cultural capital of the Chinese immigrants who came to America?
4. What did you learn about yourself and others through this activity?

Reflection Exercise compiled by **Maria Puente**, Professor of Behavioral Science and Chair of AANAPISI Grant and Related Programming at Bunker Hill Community College, Boston

# Enriching Student Learning at BHCC

## Wen-Ti's Home Town

Over the course of the exhibit, several faculty and staff used Home Town as an opportunity to enrich student learning at BHCC in several ways: as a warm-up activity prior to an actual trip to Chinatown that provided living context for the community's current strengths and continuing challenges with gentrification, as a programming tool to create conversation and build a sense of community and visibility among new students of Asian descent, and as an assignment that was integrated into course curricula.

One such example was a reflection exercise compiled by Dr. Maria Kathleen N. Puente, Professor of Behavioral Sciences and Project Director of the AANAPISI Grant and Related Programming at Bunker Hill Community College. In her introductory course Principles of Psychology (PSY 101), Prof. Puente designed an activity titled, Why Chinatown Matters to All of Us: An In-depth Experiential Exercise of Our Cultural Wealth, to deepen student understanding of how human behavior and mental processes are shaped by one's culture (the main proposition of the cultural perspective in Psychology) and further, to help them identify and use the cultural capital they possess to succeed in life.

Prior to the activity, Prof. Puente gave a brief lecture on how students can use a model of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to become aware of the different forms of cultural capital that they carry as they navigate their initiation into the college-going culture. The actual activity was then run in the next class at the Art Gallery. Students were asked to focus on one of the life-sized historical figures in the exhibit and imagine the personal narrative of their chosen character/s by addressing questions such as, why they left China to go to the U.S. and what was it like to leave their family behind; the challenges they faced as immigrants in terms of finding work, being treated differently, learning a new language, etc. What helped them to survive and thrive in America? They drew upon their inner strengths and resources. After Prof. Puente's students shared these imagined narratives in class, they were then asked to 'flip' the questions and this time answer them with their own personal immigration narratives. At the end of the exercise, students were asked to write a reflection paper on what they learned about Chinatown and themselves through the activity.



Out of this one activity student reflections revealed richly textured accounts that showed how their interaction with the exhibit helped them not only to appreciate and connect the role and history of Boston Chinatown's ancestors with their own narratives, but also recognize and become more firmly grounded in their own cultural wealth.

Students who were first and second generation immigrants found that they shared common experiences with the Chinese immigrants who came before them centuries ago. Wendy Diaz wrote:

I learned a lot about Chinatown from the Home Town exhibit. Chinatown is a very strong community full of culture. They support each other in whatever way they can. The Chinese people living there faced a lot of discrimination, that's why they built a community just for themselves. They struggled to live outside the community because the Chinese were not liked at that time. They were seen as lower-class citizens. But just because they were seen as such did not mean they weren't strong individuals. The people living in Chinatown were hard working and smart investors. They saved up their money and opened up businesses or sent money back home to help their families. As a community they were connected, they supported each other. The residents of Chinatown relied on aspirational capital in order to thrive in America. They all wanted better futures.

My family's immigration story was similar to those of the residents of Chinatown. We all came here for a better future. Not only a better future for us but for the generations to come. My family's cultural capital is the same of those who lived in Chinatown. The Chinese along with my family both relied on aspirational capital. We all wanted a better future for ourselves.

From this activity I learned that everyone is different but that we all want the same thing in the end; to live happy lives with the support of our family, friends and the community. Most importantly we want to prosper, but it is important that in doing so you don't forget who you are.

Cam Florez, whose father initially left him and his mother behind to come to the U.S., shared the following reflection:

I've personally learned a lot about Chinatown. There were a lot of difficulties and challenges these people faced like racism, loneliness, and adapting to a new culture while mixing it with their own to create something they're comfortable with. Along with these, they also had to feel like outsiders but they pushed through





these difficulties together to build something that reminds them a little bit of their home back in China. Mixing both the American culture with their own, Chinatown became a home with courage, pride and comfort inside a community that had to face many challenges to flourish into what it is today.

As individuals, the Chinese immigrants seemed to have many strengths, from speaking their languages, to being hard workers and displaying determination and self-reliance. When they came together as a whole, they seemed to become stronger as immigrants and they voiced their needs together as a team. All these people desired the same things, from a better life, making a place feel like home...and support from the whole community made them feel safe.

My family's and my story are not that different from the Chinese immigrants. My Dad left my mom and I behind first until he could get us so we could be with him again...We came here not knowing anything, but we had dreams and goals and connected with a community that made us feel more comfortable as it was the Spanish community in East Boston. We settled into the community and my mom found friends and connections that she used to involve our whole family. My aunts and uncle lived here already and supported us like many of the Chinese immigrants had with their families they had here.

What I learned from this activity was that growing up as an immigrant, I have similar values and needs as many other immigrants...I have learned that despite having a different culture, my aspirations and dreams are the same as every other immigrant...Finally, I have learned that diversity makes up the U.S and you'll see immigrants and people from every culture wherever you go. That is the beauty of this country, learning and educating yourself with the different perspectives and cultures so you can explore yourself while accepting and exploring another's world.

Students who were born in the U.S. and came from families that had firmly planted their intergenerational roots and branches in America were also able to connect meaningfully with the exhibit. Thomas Pynchon shares his reflection:

Having experienced the Home Town exhibit and heard more about Chinatown, I've learned that there is a rich history that doesn't rise to the surface of conversation enough these days. Especially in the context of modern gentrification, the history of Chinatown and other neighborhoods in Boston is more important than ever.

I imagined the challenges these immigrants must have faced but couldn't begin to feel what they must've felt. To face adversity in a new country with little to no means sounds next to impossible to me. Despite this, I imagined their strength was gained from the problems they faced back home and during their journey here as well. Those experiences certainly determined to some extent how well they'd be able to deal with the problems facing them here. Their strength as a community was also a factor. Sharing culture and values as a mass migration of people, they were able to form entire neighborhoods, helping to build America and contribute to our diverse culture. Their cultural capital of goals, dreams and community support carried many of them to progress in the future, enabling them to survive and thrive.

My cultural capital is indeed very different from the cultural capital of the Chinese immigrants who came to America but is worth no more or less—it's just a different form of capital. Linguistically, I benefit from being a native English

speaker and have good communication skills...The support from my family financially and motivationally allows me to thrive as well. I am also well-accustomed to navigating the education system and can take advantage of all the resources I have available to me...For immigrants, they face challenges in these areas. On the other hand, their own methods, lifestyles, and the overall culture that they bring with them makes them a very important addition to this country. If we embrace these immigrants' way of living, we may be able to improve our own, and at the same time, help them.

Through this activity, I learned that all people have some form of cultural wealth. I also learned that...I too carry some form of cultural wealth and can use it to help others who may struggle to navigate American institutions and norms.

America can help me lead a better life by electing leaders who care about those suffering from the high costs of education and healthcare... On a community level, I would like to see the issue of gentrification be addressed. There is no reason people should be uprooted simply because of a rise in property value. Local leaders need to recognize individual, historic communities, their cultural worth, and how much of a positive impact it has on a city such as Boston. On a federal level, we need an administration that welcomes all people, and acknowledges the fact that cultures from all over the world are what have made this country so great.

Finally, Adrian Rockwell writes: From the Home Town Exhibit I learned that Chinatown was a peaceful, happy, and family-friendly community. The residents of Chinatown knew each other by name and the community was considered a safe place where children could spend hours outside playing. In the 1960s, some homes in Chinatown were torn down to make the Mass Pike Highway, causing many Chinese residents to be displaced. I imagine their struggles revolved around finding a new home and community that would take them in as residents...I imagine their strengths to be both family and perseverance. These individuals managed to make ends meet every day even without a home to call their own. I feel as though these residents relied on their familial, social, aspirational, and linguistic capitals in order to survive and thrive in America.

My family's immigrant story is different from the Chinese immigrants...but my cultural capital is not any different from theirs. We are all human and humans both depend and survive on aspiration, family, social, and linguistic capitals. These forms of capital help me push through with life in America and have become the inspiration for many other people as well.

Through this activity I have learned that I respect the hardships that immigrants must go through to become an American citizen. What I have learned about myself is that I am very thankful for being an American citizen because I am able to both work and gain an education at the same time. With the access I have to an educated and hardworking family I am pushed to not only succeed but to prove that race cannot stop me from achieving my goals.

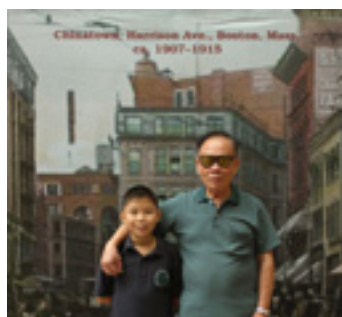
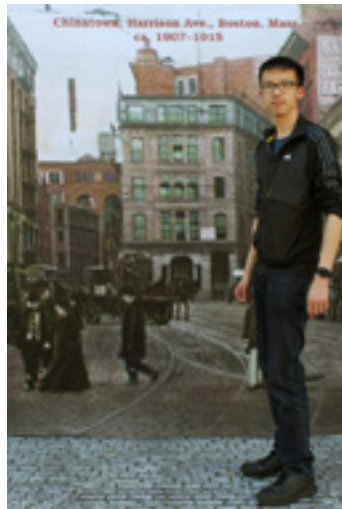




Photo by Melissa Blackall

# WEN-TI TSEN HOMETOWN

July 29 - September 27, 2019



**Charlestown Campus** | 250 New Rutherford Avenue, Boston, MA 02129 | 617-228-2000 | TTY: 617-242-2365  
**Chelsea Campus** | 70 Everett Avenue, Chelsea, MA 02150 | 617-228-2101 | TTY: 617-884-3293  
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