



On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store

April 27-October 27, 2019 at CCC Design Store / Chinese Culture Center, San Francisco, curated by Alice Wu

About the Exhibit

On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store is styled as a hybrid of gallery and retail, created especially for the CCC Design Store at the Chinese Culture Center in San Francisco. Guest curator Alice Wu envisioned the museum gift shop as a storytelling platform. Alice invited contributors from San Francisco, New York City, and Los Angeles to bring their retail concepts to San Francisco Chinatown through shoppable installations and to share personal experiences of what it's like to run a storefront.

This CCC Design Store exhibit invites visitors to discover the fascinating backstories of these enterprising spaces, and to shop from a hand-picked selection of art and design goods.

Exhibition Contributors

On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store begins with the story of artist **Leland Wong**, born and raised in San Francisco Chinatown. He and his family lived in a loft above his father's Grant Avenue curio shop. Leland Wong is shown in fellowship with these innovative art and design-focused enterprises in New York and Los Angeles Chinatowns: **Amy Li Projects / Diana Ho aka From Here to Sunday** (NYC), **Lions Den** (LA), **Choose Chinatown** (LA), **Ooga Booga** (LA), **Pearl River Mart** (NYC), and **Wing On Wo & Co.** (NYC). Some are active, some are defunct; all present specific and personal experiences of growing up Chinese American in the United States.



Leland Wong strikes a pose in front of his installation at CCC

What's On View

The exhibition mixes shoppable merchandise with archival materials supplied by the contributors and personal histories of Chinatown experiences.

Items on display include paintings, drawings, books, zines, tee shirts, pins, traditional and contemporary ceramics, tea, candy, vintage paperbacks, and more.



Ooga Booga's selection for CCC

Asian American Voices

The featured enterprises represent highly individual aesthetic visions that prioritize a sense of place and the many ways of being in community in Chinatown.

Just as Leland Wong has focused his art practice on the representation of Asian American experiences, the Chinatown storefronts of Fueng Wah, Amy Li Projects, Choose Chinatown, Lions Den, Pearl River Mart, and Wing On Wo serve as vibrant and vital spaces of discovery for visitors to connect with both local and transnational culture. They engage, showcase, and sustain Asian American voices.



A gallery visitor enjoying Wing On Wo's installation at CCC

A Celebratory Approach

On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store is an exhibition celebrating:

- perspectives from Chinatowns across the United States
- intergenerational dialogue
- independent retail
- the artist as entrepreneur



Choose Chinatown, a project by Ray Tseng. Image courtesy of Ray Tseng.

Leland Wong and Fueng Wah Company

Leland Wong exhibits recent paintings alongside vintage inventory from his father's curio shop Fueng Wah Company. Wong's relationship with San Francisco Chinatown has always been reflected through his forty-plus years of art and community activism.

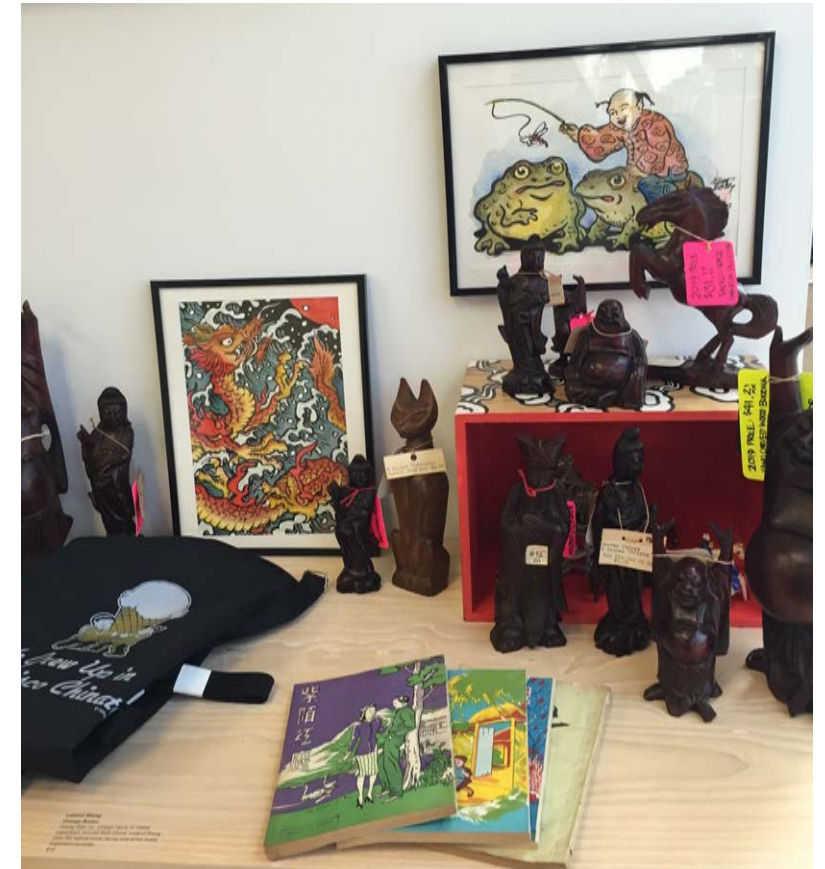


Top image: a view of Fueng Wah, 1960s. Photo courtesy of Leland Wong. Bottom: On the wall, Leland Wong's paintings of immigrant Chinese railroad workers; his grandfather was a sojourner who came to the U.S. to work on the Transcontinental Railroad and eventually returned to China.

Leland Wong and Fueng Wah Company

Leland Wong (b. 1952) is best known for his hand-screenprinted posters, illustrations, and photographs focusing on Asian American life. He was born and raised in San Francisco's Chinatown, where his father operated Fueng Wah Company (1942-1970), a Grant Avenue curio shop for tourists. The Wong family lived in a loft in the store. Alongside the souvenir trinkets, novelty items, and eclectic Asian imports, the elder Wong sold his own calligraphy, prints, and paintings at the shop. Leland helped his parents run Fueng Wah until the shop's 1970 closure. Leland cites his father's encouragement and the experience of growing up in the store as important in his decision to become an artist.

While the Fueng Wah novelty items surrounding him in his youth had a great influence on Wong's waggish aesthetic, his experiences as a young man tracks through the years of the Civil Rights Movement, urban riots, Vietnam War, and college campus protests. Increasingly conscious of social problems in Chinatown and among Asian Americans, Wong became deeply involved with community organizations Chinatown North Beach Youth Council, Kearny Street Workshop, and Japantown Arts and Media, creating artwork to promote their events and to express social justice concerns.



Vintage pulp fiction paperbacks, aprons illustrated and silkscreened by Leland for local social club We Grew Up in San Francisco Chinatown, and teakwood carvings are flanked by Leland's colorful ink wash paintings riffing on traditional Chinese themes.

Leland Wong and Fueng Wah Company



The installation is continually restocked with a fresh rotation of new and vintage inventory.

The original 1960s typewritten tags were augmented with new inflation-adjusted prices.



Leland Wong
Incense Burner
Fueng Wah Co. vintage stock 1960s incense burner, imported from Japan.
\$20

Amy Li Projects and Diana Ho

Amy Li Projects (NYC) - Amy Leo's art gallery endeavor Amy Li Projects cohabited with her father's He Zhen Snap Button Co. ground floor storefront from 2013-2018. In the front room, Amy cleared the button stock and equipment, installed gallery walls and lighting, and exhibited artwork from local and international artists.

He Zhen had begun in the early 1980s on Elizabeth Street. Though in an area full of sweatshops, Mr. Li's was the only Chinatown operation with the equipment to apply snap buttons to textiles. He Zhen later moved to 166 Mott Street, where it remained until Mr. Li's 2018 retirement.

For the *On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store* exhibit, Amy Leo invited artist Diana Ho to create an installation for CCC.



*Photos of Amy Li Projects
Courtesy of Amy Leo*

Amy Li Projects and Diana Ho

Diana Ho is an artist and founder of Brooklyn store From Here to Sunday. Ho's installation includes paintings, prints, multiples, and a tee that reads DON'T ASK ME WHERE I'M FROM.

"When I was growing up, I attended New York Chinese School on Mott Street, and while the actual classes certainly were not my favorite thing, spending time in Chinatown became a comforting ritual. More Saturday hours were spent walking around exploring shops in the area than instructional hours, and Chinatown quickly became an inseparable part of my identity. The work is a collage of seemingly disparate objects, but collectively form a vignette of my warmer associations with Chinese School. Simultaneously, the work also addresses the roots of some of the struggles common to many Asian Americans, myself included, when it comes to existing in dual identities - from pursuing less traditional career paths to perpetual foreigner syndrome to representation in American media. Although I was not particularly aware of it at the time, thumbing through CDs at Chinese music stores, taking in all the knick-knacks at curated gift shops like Pearl River Mart, and walking through every Canal Street vendor, shaped the way I interpret these ongoing issues of identity. These everyday objects and foods have become emblems of a uniquely Chinese American experience." - Diana Ho



Amy Li Projects and Diana Ho



Download and print:
[Amy Li Projects Zine](#)
[Diana Ho Zine](#)



Lions Den and Choose Chinatown

Lions Den and Choose Chinatown (LA) – Ray Tseng ran the cult sneaker store Lions Den from 2005-2010 in Los Angeles Chinatown. He also co-founded another venture, Choose Chinatown. Both stores were pioneers of the independent retail landscape.

Ray grew up in San Gabriel, which according to the 2000 Census, boasted 48.9% Asian residents, making it the sixth most-Asian neighborhood in Los Angeles County.

For the *On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store* exhibit, Lions Den and Choose Chinatown were represented by a selection of archival tee shirts (not for sale), reproductions of zines, buttons, and ephemera from the store as well as a limited edition reprint of Choose Chinatown tees.



Choose Chinatown. Image courtesy of Ray Tseng.

Lions Den and Choose Chinatown



錢禮敬
LIONS DEN



Interview with Ray Tseng

Interview with Ray Tseng, CHOOSE CHINATOWN + LIONS DEN

What is Lions Den? What is Choose Chinatown?

Lions Den was open 2005-2010 and Choose Chinatown was open 2008-2010. Lions Den sold mostly streetwear and sneakers. We produced some of our own t's. We tried to have smaller unknown brands at Lions Den and it was actually hard for a relative unknown like me to secure premium accounts with national brands. Clothing brands we carried: Stussy, Alife, 10 Deep, Umbro, TBG, Leroy Jenkins. Shoes we carried were: Alife, Puma, New Balance, PF Flyers, Umbro.

At Choose Chinatown, we sold WKND from Cheap Monday, some of our own t-shirts, and t-shirts from friends. Our friend Ellen Nguyen sold her Modern Lovers line out of our store at the time; I don't think it is around anymore.

We had a local club party at what was then the Mountain Bar once a month usually. We had some art in our store from a friend Shail Shah.

Where were the stores located?

Lions Den was originally on 711 New High St. in Los Angeles Chinatown. We moved around 2008 to the space designed by All That is Solid; the address was 945 Sun Mun Way and it was in the plaza known as Central Plaza. The original Lions Den was pretty out of the way and although it meshed with our kind of underground Chinatown aesthetic, it was really hard to run a business with that constraint.

My first location was kind of idealistic and I chose the place to represent the "real" Chinatown, but that didn't work out business wise. Before I opened the first store, me and my friends used to hang out regularly in Chinatown because of the popular hip-hop night Firecracker at the Quon Bros. Grand Star Jazz Club. This was followed by other hip-hop club things such as Soul Sessions by Chad Corros who owned another store in Chinatown called Flock Shop.

Choose Chinatown was located at 441 Gin Ling Way which was also in Central Plaza just down the way from Lions Den at Sun Mun Way. Ooga Booga was also in Central Plaza.

How did you choose the name Lions Den?

It is Lions Den without the apostrophe. I know it's not grammatically correct, but it just looked better as a logo that way. Some additional post hoc justification, slang, spelling as a way to convey informality.. I had this Chinese neon sign made that was a translation of the rap lyrics: money, power, respect that also don't quite make sense in Chinese.

The reason I chose the name Lions Den or the concept behind the store was kind of like the Hip-Hop brand FUBU: For Us By Us. I was a youngish, naive person who was really into streetwear and sneakers in the early aughts. I noticed that when you went to meetups, camped out in front of stores, went to forums like Niketalk, etc. that Asians were majorly overrepresented. It's similar to if you go to a store like Supreme today, the large chunk of patronage is Asian clientele. My perception was that while Asians were the main consumers of streetwear/sneakers that they were not represented in who the shopowners were or the producers of streetwear. The idea of Lions Den was to address that and the name was kind of related: territory, neighborhood. The store was a solo venture, but I had a lot of help from friends. A friend, Joel Chang, helped with the design of the first store and most of my graphics and design stuff was done by Sun An and Harsh Patel.

How did you come up with Choose Chinatown?

The Choose Chinatown store came about because we started making these Choose Chinatown t-shirts and stickers that a lot of people wore and put around. We sold a lot of them, more than 100 t-shirts I think. The design was by Sun An and was a reference to the 80s Choose Life t-shirts. It was just a way for us to promote Chinatown in general. After our success with those shirts, we had an arrangement with the jeans brand Cheap Monday to sell a special collection they produced at the time called WKND. It was like a higher end concept line from Cheap Monday. We got the Choose Chinatown space to sell that WKND line out of. I opened the store with Robin Izsak, who I am married to right now!

Where do you call home / where did you grow up? Currently, I live in the DC area, I am working on a PhD and that's why we live here. We are planning a

move to NYC/Brooklyn in 2 months though. Growing up my family lived all around the SGV (San Gabriel Valley), but I ended up going to high school in San Marino.

Did you grow up coming to the Chinatown where you eventually opened up shop(s)? What was that like?

Yeah we did. My mother's family is all from Vietnam and came over after the Vietnam War. I don't know the details exactly, but there was some kind of community/placement stuff that my family was involved with in Chinatown. My uncle Steven used to have a toy stall in Chinatown back in the 80s. Later on, as I grew up our family dispersed throughout the SGV like many others. We lived in Monterey Park, San Gabriel, and other areas before ending up in San Marino. My father was an Anesthesiologist and also worked in the Chinatown "French" hospital (now closed). This area is just known as Chinatown; I think the history of New Chinatown or when Union Station was built on Old Chinatown was soooo long ago... everyone just calls the area I'm referring to Chinatown. It's mostly shopping, but with a sizable residential population. There are a lot of nursing homes and residential situations for elders in Los Angeles' Chinatown.

One of the themes I tried to push in the store was the LA Chinese experience. We made a lot of SGV stuff which is a little different than Chinatown, but like many in LA I consider SGV or Monterey Park the actual or de facto Chinatown. Like Flushing in NY.

- Ray Tseng as told to Alice Wu, March 2019
On Growing Up in A Chinatown Store
CCC Design Store, Chinese Culture Center
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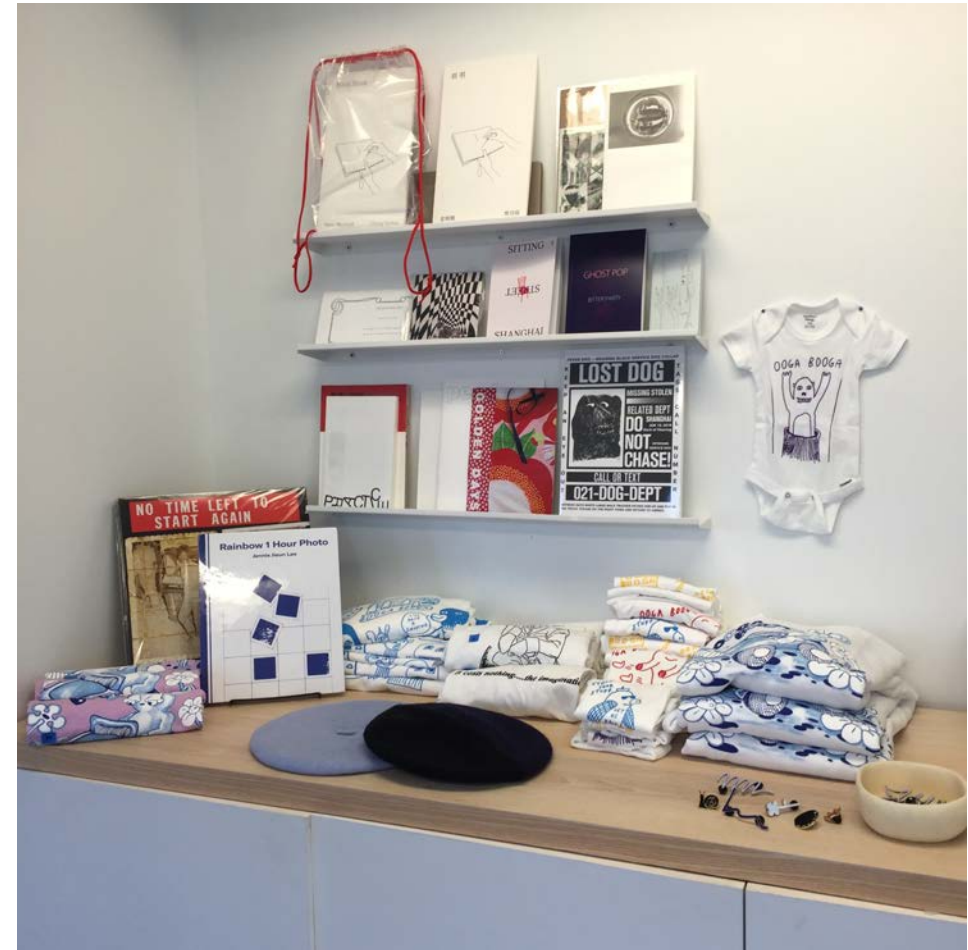
Ray Tseng's photos of local business owners were made into a limited edition zine for the exhibition.

Download this Ray Tseng interview zine [here](#).

Ooga Booga Store

Ooga Booga (LA) – Since 2004, Wendy Yao has operated Ooga Booga from a tiny space on the second floor of a Los Angeles Chinatown mall, and continues to garner an outsized international reputation for the shop's selection of books, zines, and art objects.

Ooga Booga's selections for *On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store* includes records and CDs produced by California artists, hats and enamel pins, graphic tees, sweatshirts, and onesies, handmade books, books by small independent publishers from Hong Kong, Berlin, and Shanghai, and printed ephemera.



Pearl River Mart



Pearl River Mart (NYC) – This iconic Asian emporium started as a "friendship store" in the early 1970s when U.S.-China diplomatic relations were frozen and trade between the two countries was embargoed. Over the next five decades, owners Ming Yi and Ching Yeh Chen built Pearl River Mart into one of NYC's most beloved shopping institutions. Now helmed by daughter-in-law Joanne Kwong with three locations in downtown Manhattan, the store features innovative products created by Asian American entrepreneurs, an art gallery for Asian American artists, and event programming including talks, tastings and performances.

Pearl River Mart's story is told via specially selected products and display text.

Pearl River Mart



Pearl River Mart writes:

"In 1979, the U.S. normalized relations with China, launching a global shift in manufacturing and exporting. A short time later, Pearl River was no longer the sole provider of Chinese wares and began carrying goods from around Asia, such as the maneki neko, or "waving cat." Originally a Japanese symbol of luck, these cats can be found in stores around Chinatowns all over the country, beckoning visitors to enter, and over the years has become Pearl River's unofficial mascot, lending its fortunate visage to tote bags, T-shirts, onesies, and more."



"In the early 1980s, relations between the U.S. and China continued to improve. President Reagan visited China with the hopes of improving diplomacy in the light of a growing economic relationship. Meanwhile, Pearl River's business continued to grow, becoming a place where customers returned regularly for now-classic items such as Bee & Flower soap, tiger balm, White Rabbit candy, Botan rice candy, and jasmine tea."

Pearl River Mart



Custom denim vests for Pearl River Mart's shop associates, and bottles of traditional loquat syrup throat medicine

"In 1986, the store moved to its largest space to date, 15,000 square feet at the corner of Canal and Broadway.

In 2003, Pearl River moved again, this time to 477 Broadway, a 30,000 square-foot space in SoHo, 20 times larger than its first store on Catherine Street. It carried over 20,000 items, including a substantial home goods selection, becoming for many New Yorkers the go-to place for home decor, whether furnishing their first apartments or celebrating special occasions such as Lunar New Year.

In 2015, facing a rent increase of almost five times, Pearl River announced its closing. The grief in the city was palpable: not only was Pearl River a favorite store to many locals, it was, in a way, a second home.

The outpouring of grief and good will surprised the Chens. Buoyed by this, they decided to reopen just a year later in TriBeCa under new leadership: their daughter-in-law, Joanne Kwong.

Over the next two years, they opened a second location in Chelsea Market, the iconic urban food hall in the Meatpacking District, and a third in the esteemed Museum of Chinese in America. All the while, they have continued the founders' original mission of celebrating cross-cultural exchange as well as the expansiveness and reach of Asian and Asian American culture by collaborating with artists, designers, and brands who are inspired by the store and its legacy of friendship, including Wonton in a Million, Kee's Chocolates, Silver Needle Tea Company, and Opening Ceremony.

The river, as they say, rolls on." - Pearl River Mart

Wing On Wo & Co. and W.O.W. Project

Wing On Wo & Co. and W.O.W. Project (NYC) – Mei Lum is a community activist and the fifth generation owner of her family's over-century-old porcelain shop. W.O.W. has recently established a community initiative called W.O.W. Project which hosts an artist residency, youth programs and ongoing free community events in the storefront space.

For CCC, W.O.W. sent a special display cabinet created from repurposed wooden shipping crates. The ceramics include both contemporary artists and traditional hand-painted serveware.



Wing On Wo & Co. and W.O.W. Project



Views of Wing On Wo in New York City Chinatown. Photos by Alice Wu. Wing On Wo continues to sell inventory from generations of buying trips to Hong Kong and China, alongside contemporary Asian American ceramic artists. The shop also hosts events, community meetings, and artists in residence.

Wing On Wo & Co. and W.O.W. Project



Classic Cabbageware charger, handpainted in Hong Kong, 1960s or earlier, based on 18th century patterns



Porcelain dumplings by artist Stephanie Shih



Contemporary fish vase and Lucky fu dog, custom for Wing On Wo

Wing On Wo & Co. and W.O.W. Project

street food was abundant and everyone waved hello to one another on the streets. Do you currently live in Chinatown or nearby? Yes, I live a very old school shopkeeper lifestyle and live in the apartment right above the shop. How would you describe the neighborhood / surrounding businesses where Wing On Wo is located? Mott St. was the main thoroughfare and the heart of the neighborhood when it was first established in the 1920s. The feeling of Mott St. is still very much the same with some of the oldest longstanding storefronts still anchors in the community – Ho Hop, Hop Kee and Nom Wah Tea Parlor. My favorite long standing business did recently close, Fong Inn Too.

the oldest tofu shop which served up some of my childhood classics – doufu fa, doujiang, liangfen.

What are your favorite things about the neighborhood?

I love how our neighborhood elders give so much life to our neighborhood park, Columbus Park. When you walk by you can hear groups of seniors singing and playing Chinese instruments and if you're lucky you can sneak a peek behind an elder's shoulder at a heated Chinese poker game. I also am inspired by the younger generation who are taking over their family's businesses and/or starting their business ventures in Chinatown. This is giving a new vibrant energy to the neighborhood that is really exciting.

Wo. Like many of the first Chinese immigrants at the time, my great grandparents migrated from Tolosan/Atashan and made his journey to the US in search of a better life. On my dad's side, my grandfather migrated from Hakasan market in Chinatown. Our family has deep entrepreneurial roots in the neighborhood. What was Chinatown like for you when growing up? When I was growing up, I experienced Chinatown through my grandparents' eyes who were and still are very much embedded in the fabric of the neighborhood. Looking back at Chinatown then versus now, I see it as a romantic time when Chinatown felt like a small town in a big city where everyone knew each other, storefronts were run by families, and the neighborhood was a mix of old and new.

Please share your impressions of San Francisco Chinatown.

My first time to SF's Chinatown was in 2017 when I traveled with Diane Wong, a close friend and collaborator of the W.O.W. Project's. We were fortunate enough to go on tours of Chinatown with both Dorothy Quock and Norman Fong and listen to their stories rooted in the neighborhood. Meeting and talking with Dorothy and Norman about their relationship to SF's Chinatown really informed my experience and impression of SF's Chinatown. I love the feeling of the alley ways and are inspired by all of the intergenerational activism and advocacy work that is being done by CCDC and CPA.

- Mei Lum, as told to Alice Wu for On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store

managing the shop with a hope that By making a statement that the oldest operating store in Chinatown was here to stay others would be inspired to stay put in the neighborhood as well. Where did you call home / grow up? I grew up just two blocks away from the shop in Manhattan's Chinatown. M.O.W. has been my second home and a space of grounding and exploration of my Asian American identity. I'm so excited to be opening up our space for others to do and experience the same. When did your family come to the U.S.? Where did they move here from? In my mom's line, our family came to the US in the 1890s with my great-grandfather who immigrated as a merchant and established Wing On

On Growing Up in a Chinatown Store
CCC Design Store at
Chinese Culture Center

April 27-October 27, 2019

Asian and Asian diasporic artists. Through our community initiative, the W.O.W. Project, we have been spearheading different arts and cultural programming in response to the rapid neighborhood changes that have been happening in our neighborhood. We offer an annual storefront artist residency program, open mic nights, screenings, talks, poetry readings, a youth art and activism program as well as a youth internship program. What would have happened with the W.O.W. Project if you hadn't started? In early 2016, we came to a pivotal moment with the storefront – my grandmother was ready to retire and shutter the business after forging its growth for over 50 years. I decided to step into the role of

An Interview with Wing On Wo & Co. (W.O.W.)

For people not familiar with Wing On Wo/The W.O.W. Project, can you describe what the store sells? What kind of art do you show/programming do you present?

Wing on Wo sells a collection of porcelain handpicked by both my grandparents during their annual trips to Hong Kong from the late 70s through the early 2000s as well as pieces that I have sourced alongside our Director of Product, Nate Brown – some of which are custom made by the shop and others by Chinese and Asian American ceramicists – all of which you'll find here on display. We are passionate about staying true to the tradition of our porcelain legacy while also bringing in new energy by supporting individual

Download this Mei Lum interview zine [here](#).

Acknowledgments

This exhibition is made possible by the generous contributions of:

Leland Wong

Ray Tseng (Lions Den, Choose Chinatown)

Amy Leo (Amy Li Projects)

Diana Ho (From Here to Sunday)

Wendy Yao (Ooga Booga)

Joanne Kwong (Pearl River Mart)

Mei Lum (Wing On Wo)

Hoi Leung, YY Zhu, Jenny Leung, and CCC staff
(Chinese Culture Center)



Artwork by Leland Wong