

FEATURE

Chinese Heritage in Astoria, Oregon

Adopted Astorian honors Chinese heritage

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Adopted at age 8 from the Guangxi province of China, Raina Christian said she recently become interested in her heritage. The incoming Astoria High School senior started learning Mandarin again, and started searching for a senior project she was passionate about.

“When the Garden of Surging Waves started, I remember being really fascinated that Astoria has such a deep Chinese history,” Christian said.

Christian connected her heritage with Astoria’s, and is organizing the area’s first Mid-Autumn Festival around the full moon next month for her senior project.

“It all kind of came together,” Christian said. “The garden was there, and I was asking about my heritage, and I was like, ~Why don’t I just put on a celebration to celebrate the Chinese heritage in Astoria. And I knew that one of the biggest holidays, “the Mid-Autumn Festival, or the Harvest Moon festival” was coming soon.”

A harvest celebration by ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese, the Mid-Autumn Festival is often seen as the second-most important holiday after the Chinese New Year in China and Tet in Vietnam.

Building Astoria

Christian said she was struck by the sheer impact of Chinese immigrants on Astoria when she researched their history



By 1880, Chinese immigrants comprised a third of Astoria’s population, wrote Liisa Penner in the Clatsop County Historical Society’s *Cumtux Magazine*. They were drawn as cheap labor to work in the many waterfront canneries.

“By 1880, the town took on a new look with streets leveled, docks reaching farther out into the river and buildings going up at an amazing rate,” Penner wrote. “Much of this was accomplished, literally, on the backs of Chinese who were forced to labor on city projects as a way of paying off a tax unfairly levied on them.”

The population started waning after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. By World War II, Chinese labor contractors were largely nonexistent.

Lighting up the moon

Christian contacted Suenn Ho, the designer of the Garden of Surging Waves honoring Chinese heritage in Astoria, for help designing an art installation for the festival.

After hearing Christian’s proposal and her enthusiasm, Ho said, she couldn’t think of anything more fitting for the space. “The

intention of the public garden is to have community members take ownership of it," she said.

Ho, who grew up attending the Mid-Autumn Festival in Hong Kong and has taught architecture for more than 20 years, helped Christian refine her art installation to a more vertically oriented display to hang along the garden's story wall.

On Wednesday, Christian walked into local eclectic Jeff Daly's underground workshop with boxes of white LED lights and red lanterns. She started constructing a full-scale model of her installation, slated to go up Sept. 13 to Sept. 17 in the garden next to Astoria City Hall.

Strands of LED lights will hang down like a curtain across 30 feet of the garden's story wall on either side of the circular moon gate. On each strand will hang six or seven red lanterns, along with another three yellow lanterns above the moon gate.

Christian has organized a pre-event at the Astoria Public Library 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Sept. 9 to promote the event. The event will include children's stories from "Thanking the Moon: Celebrating the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival," a book being donated to the library by Ho.

Honoring all Astorians

A community celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival is from 6 to 6:30 p.m. Sept. 16, the night of the full moon. The North Coast Chorale will play translated Chinese songs. Christian is also bringing in speakers with Chinese heritage to talk about their experiences in Astoria

One of the speakers will be local real estate agent Victor Kee, the son of Chinese immigrant Sing Hee Leong, a barber who served many of the region's laborers. When Christian reached out, Kee said, her idea brought up memories of his own childhood with his mother.

"I got to remember all the times come August or September, we'd get on the train, go spend a couple weeks in San Francisco."

Kee said he hopes the event will lead to a better archiving of Chinese history in Astoria. "I think all the ethnic groups of Astoria should be doing that," he said, warning that time is running out as older generations pass away.

"I'm just hoping to raise more awareness," Christian said. "I just think it's important to learn about all the groups that helped build Astoria."