

WESTERN RESERVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A Virtual Tour of AsiaTown and Cleveland's First Chinese Community

Cleveland is a city of neighborhoods, defined not only by architecture, but by the cultures of the people who settled them. Whether created by new or old immigrants or migrants, their structures, signage, and commercial enterprises reflect a variety of ethnic identities, some dating back over 150 years and some relatively new.

This guided virtual tour of AsiaTown is one of a series of virtual tours being developed by the Western Reserve Historical Society to highlight the diverse heritages that make up our city. It is another step in our institution's mission to document and explore the history of a truly global city -- Cleveland.

We are working with people from and familiar with our ethnic neighborhoods. They are the best guides to the past and present of their cultural communities. Johnny Wu has crafted this tour of AsiaTown, a neighborhood that he knows well as a film maker, entrepreneur, and organizer who has done much to promote and discover the past and the present of one of our city's most vibrant districts. We are indebted to him for his time, expertise, and enthusiasm.

BEGIN YOUR TOUR HERE

Old Stone Church area

- **Start your tour with your imagination in full gear on Rockwell at Public Square just in front of Key Bank Tower. Travel west and then turn north onto Ontario.** The short two blocks between Rockwell and Lakeside were the first Chinese neighborhood in Cleveland. In 1880, there were only 23 Chinese and Japanese residents (they were counted together in the census) living in the city, and most of the Chinese lived along these two blocks where they operated restaurants, laundries, and small stores. Old Stone Church, a structure that remains from the era, had a "missionary" connection to some of the early Chinese. Most of the structures that were home to the Chinese were demolished for new buildings in the late 1920s. This was also the area where two Chinese merchant associations, the Hip Sing, and On Leong Tong had their headquarters. Periodic violence between the members of the two groups began in 1911 and continued into the 1920s. In 1925, the city safety director ordered the arrest of every Chinese male (over 700) in Cleveland. He also suggested that the Chinese buildings be razed as "health hazards," due to the concept of yellow peril, associating Chinese people with being dirty and dangerous. That prejudicial action brought international protest from the Chinese government and embarrassment to the city – and the city eventually apologized to the Chinese community.
- Did you know? The first president and founding father of the Republic of China, visited Cleveland during his exile years in the United States in 1911 at the Old Stone Church. On May 22, 2014 a delegation from Zhongshan, China, led by Vice-Mayor **Han Ze Shang** visited sister city Cleveland, Ohio, and presented the city with a gift – a bronze statue of Dr. Sun Yat-sen.



Courtesy of Cleveland 101 / Dan Hanson

- Yet Cleveland leaders did demolish this original Chinatown neighborhood through urban renewal efforts, building a US Parcel Post Building in its place.
- **At Lakeside turn left and drive to West 3rd. Go south on West 3rd to Superior and east back to Public Square. Take a right turn on West Roadway and make a circuit of the Square.** As you go along the parking lots (now to be replaced by a new Sherwin Williams headquarters) to the west of the Square, you will pass what was once the site of the “Golden Dragon,” the second Chinese restaurant in Cleveland established by Wong Kee. He had also established the first restaurant which was located on Ontario.

As you continue your circuit around the Square, turn right onto Superior and proceed east. At E. 21st Street turn left and go south to Rockwell. Turn right onto Rockwell.

Historic Chinatown



Photo courtesy of Cleveland Public Library



Courtesy of FreshWater Cleveland Magazine

- Located on Rockwell Avenue between East 21 and E 22nd street is the Historic Chinatown, this was once the home of the Chinese immigrants after they moved away from Downtown Cleveland. It was where noted historic restaurants like The Shanghai were located. When I-90 was constructed, it demolished much of the neighborhood, shrinking the Chinatown area to just this block.
- Notice the stone zodiac sculptures lining Rockwell Avenue, each representing zodiac animal of the Chinese calendar.



Photo by Matt Frieden, WKYC

- And the two Chinese merchant organizations: On Leong Tong Benevolent Society and the Hip Sing Tong are located there



Courtesy of Cleveland Public Library, inside of On Leong Tang on Rockwell 2nd floor

- Now, the area is populated with new restaurants including the Emperor's Palace. Marvel at the design of the restaurant the decor of which was completely imported from China through NYC. as well as that of some smaller businesses such as Sichuan Hot Pot Cuisine, and Smarty Pants, an early childhood education and learning center.

AsiaTown Asia Plaza

Return to Superior and continue east on Superior to East 30th street. Turn right onto E. 30th and drive south to its intersection with Payne Avenue, where the current AsiaTown is located.

Starting in 2019, East 30th Street has also become the “Stanley Eng Way.” Eng, who passed away in 2004 at the age of 78, was the driving force behind the Asian Evergreen Apartments, a senior living facility on Payne Avenue catering to Asian American residents. He also organized meal programs for seniors, started English classes for immigrants and served as liaison between Cleveland's Asian Americans and City Hall.

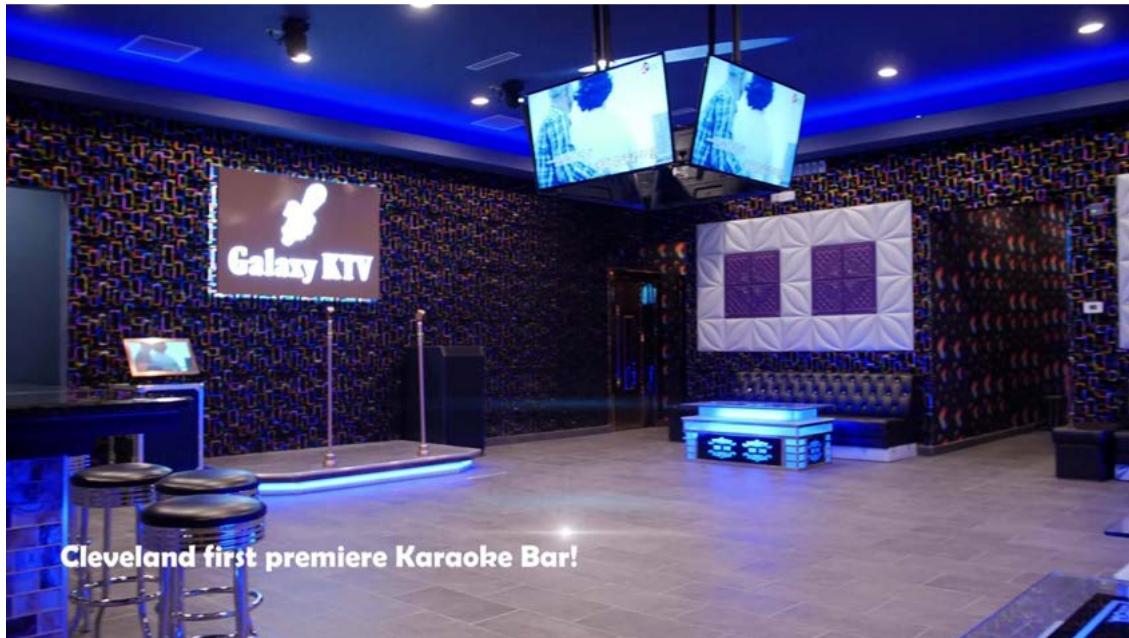


Photo by Wayne Wong with Mr. Eng's family and Councilman Basheer Jones, County Councilwoman Yvonne M. Conwell



Going South, on the northwest corner of Payne Avenue and East 30th is the location of the neighborhood's first indoor shopping center, the Asia Plaza.

- Asia Plaza was created by John Louie in 1988. John Louie, a lifelong Clevelander, and Tak Wai Ko believed that Greater Cleveland could support an Asian Market. John moved his existing store, Hall One, to this location.
- The complex is now managed by Steve Hom. The plaza has blossomed with businesses throughout the years, including a well-known Chinese restaurant, Li Wah, which has been a pillar within the community,
- Asia Plaza consists of three floors, the main floor with many popular shops and restaurants, including gift shops, a pharmacy, herbal stores, and services: Amthor Steel, ASIA ICHC, Asia Plaza Pharmacy, Ball Ball Waffle (established in 2019), Bayon Jewelry, CAIR, CHN Housing Network, Flower City, Great Wall Travel, National Life Group, R&R Gift Shop, Li Wah, Sister's Gift Shop (which also teaches Chinese Acrobatics), Steven Lu Investment Firm, Szechuan Cafe, Tak Yuen Tong, and Tracy Zhang
- ASIA's ICHC (Asian Services in Action 's International Community Health Center) makes healthcare more accessible to all, offering sliding scale services in any language.
- Asia Plaza later expanded to include an Asian Grocery store called Park-to-Shop which gets over 5000 customers per weekend from all around the Midwest.
- There are several businesses around Asia Plaza, including the area's only Karaoke TV Bar: Galaxy KTV, is located on East 30th right across from Asia Plaza. It opened about 3 years ago. It accommodates groups singing in their open space area and groups who wish to rent out private party rooms.



Golden Plaza and surroundings



Photo by Matt Frieden, WKYC

- Now, turn around in the shopping center lot and take E. 30th north to Superior, turn right and proceed east along Superior to see another hub of Asian businesses located between East 30th street to East 33rd.
- The Golden Plaza, located at 3030 Superior, is the home of several small restaurants and businesses, including Anna's Beauty Center (a Shisheido boutique and spa), Superior Pho, Ha Ahn Korean, All About You Hair and Nail Salon, CenterStar Leeth LTD, and Daisy Printing.
- On Superior, right at the corner of East 31st and Superior is another restaurant called #1 Pho and the LJ Shanghai restaurant which just opened in 2019. It is renowned around the area for its xiao long bao (soup dumplings).



- Just to the south on East 31st, you can find a newly renovated apartment building with 51 units, Mueller Lofts. Mueller Lofts is a restoration of the historic Mueller Electric Building, where the famous "Alligator Clips" still used in jumper cables today were invented and manufactured.

- On the northern side of Superior and East 33rd, is Stafanec's Barber Shop, they have been around the neighborhood for 50 years serving many Asian American clients.



- **Along E 34th (a one-way street from Superior to St. Clair)** is L G Auto Repair, a Chinese-owned body shop that many area residents use for car repairs.
- **Continue east along Superior.** On the north side at East 36th street is Tyler Village, home to a wide variety of offices, businesses, and organizations. It was once the headquarters of W. S. Tyler Company a major industrial manufacturer. Tyler Village is one of Cleveland's largest near downtown redevelopment projects. This historic business complex offers unique and customizable office and technology space for a huge variety of businesses. It is also the home to the Cleveland Flea, one of the area's biggest open air artisan markets. Businesses at the Tyler include Aztek, Fount, Gotta Groove Records, NuboHealth, VNTG Home, Byte Cafe, and many others.



Photo: Tyler Village

- Right across Superior is Korea House, a Korean BBQ restaurant, and Kim's Korean grocery store, offering staple Korean groceries to shoppers who travel hours to shop in this specialty market. They make their own kimchi and offer many varieties.



Asian Town Center



- **On the East Side of Superior just before E. 38th** sits Asian Town Center, another indoor shopping center with its main entrance is on East 38th Street. The original industrial building built in 1922 was used for warehouse and manufacturing, and most recently was the headquarters of Kichler Lighting Co. until the late 1980's when they moved to their new headquarters in Independence, Ohio. The building began its transformation from its industrial past to a mixed-use retail center in November 2003. Developed by the Duong family, Asian Town Center houses one of the largest Asian Supermarkets in Ohio, Asia Food Company, as well as authentic Asian restaurants, shops, an art gallery and dance studio, offices, and a health clinic. The Center is surrounded by beautiful landscaping, ornamental fences, and Koi Ponds. It was a complete renovation of the building inside and out. Asian Town Center has become a prime example of how Cleveland's past can be adapted to today's needs.
- Inside Asia Town Center, in addition to Asia Food Co., you'll find Pho Le's Vietnamese Restaurant, Great Wall of China Kung Fu School, and Bai Wai Herbal Store. The second floor houses Miega Korean BBQ, Negative Space Gallery, Viva Dance Studio, and Aikido Iaido School. Visit Negative Space for open mic and jam sessions, or check out a class at Viva Dance Studio!



Businesses on St. Clair

- **Continuing east on Superior, turn left and go north on East 40th**, stop at the corner of St. Clair Avenue and East 40th Street. Siam Cafe on the north side of the intersection transformed this former Red Barn Restaurant into a restaurant and banquet center and it is now a family favorite for Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese cuisine. On the South side (next to the gas station), is Bo Loong Chinese Restaurant, the oldest still-operating restaurant in the neighborhood, which has offered dim sum and banquet space for generations after it opened in 1986. Both of these restaurants have been the site for many wedding and Lunar New Year banquets.

- Turn left from East 40th onto St. Clair and drive west (toward Downtown), there are a few key restaurants including Crust at 30th and St. Clair and Slyman's at the corner of East 31st and St. Clair. Which is noted for its corned beef and is a stop for many political candidates seeking votes!

Ariel International Center



- Change directions (you can turn around in the parking lot behind Slymans) and go back east on St. Clair to East 40th Street and turn left going north. At the northern end of the road you'll find **The Ariel International Center**, an historic 68,000 square foot industrial building, located on 3 acres, overlooking the lake and the Cleveland skyline. The Center serves as a catalytic one-stop location for the promotion of International business development and International events in Northeast Ohio. It celebrates the region's global diversity and the contributions that diversity makes to the economic development of the region. The Ariel International Center is being developed by the partners of [Ariel Ventures, LLC](#), a mission driven, entrepreneurial, women-owned and minority firm founded in Cleveland in 2001. Ariel Ventures has provided finance, tax, IT and business advisory services valued over \$1.25 billion for renewable energy, real estate, small business, international business and economic development projects, which include public/private finance, tax credits and other incentives. The complex also includes several event spaces that are booked for weddings and parties throughout the year.

Payne Avenue

- Complete your tour by going back south on E. 40th. Turn right on St. Clair and proceed to East 30th. Make a left turn and go south to Payne and turn left to take a second but much closer look at AsiaTown and the surrounding area.
- Heading east along Payne you'll again pass through the core of AsiaTown where you will find many other businesses that are of interest.



- On the south side of Payne at East 31st street, you will find Good Harvest Foods Market Inc. opened on May 1998, a staple grocery store of the community that offers wholesale goods to many Asian restaurants in the neighborhood and Greater Cleveland region.
- Near Payne and East 32nd street, you'll see the Payne Laundromat, Wonton Gourmet & BBQ Restaurant, and the Downtown branch of the Cleveland Chinese Christian Church, established with support from the late Stanley Eng.
- **Continue on Payne, turn right on East 36th (going south)**, on your left you will arrive at the Man Kam Plaza, which includes Tink Holl Grocery Store and Szechuan Gourmet Chinese Restaurant.
- **Turn around and return back to Payne and follow it eastward.** At E. 36th and Payne you'll find several Asian American businesses, including Hudec Dental, *Erie Chinese Journal* and Shanghai Red, as well as two fashion boutiques, Pearlie Victorious and Styles of Imagination. This building also contains technology businesses and office space, as well as Burkle Hagan, a premier food photography studio.
- **Continue on Payne going east:** on the left is CA United Import Inc. located at 3611 Payne Ave, which is a supplier to area restaurants. Just beyond to your right is the Payne Commons (3710 Payne), which features popular storefronts, including Han Kabob and Grill, Map of Thailand, Dagu Rice Noodle and Koko Bakery, the neighborhood bakery where people from Pittsburgh and Columbus travel to get their weekly buns and deserts. This plaza also includes Sun Hair Salon, a Korean-owned hair salon.



Perkins Avenue

- **When you reach E. 40th Street, make a right turn and proceed south. If you make a short detour -- west along Perkins Avenue you'll come to the Asian Services in Action Cleveland Branch (ASIA) at 3631 Perkins. It is the largest health and human services agency serving the Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) community of Northeast Ohio. ASIA runs two federally qualified health centers —one in Cleveland and one in Akron—that specialize in linguistically and culturally competent care for immigrants and refugees. ASIA also provides all of the wrap around social services for this community to thrive in Northeast Ohio.**

Chester Avenue

- **Return back to East 40th and proceed south to Chester. Turn right and head west toward Downtown.**
- On the south side, at 3150 Chester, you will find the law offices of prominent immigration attorney Margaret W. Wong and her associates.



- There are two community development corporations working diligently to help support AsiaTown, which include MidTown Cleveland located at 5000 Euclid Avenue and St. Clair Superior Development Corp (serving North end of AsiaTown), located at Tyler Village.
- Serving the AsiaTown community, the Cleveland Police Department 3rd District is right at the corner, located at 4501 Chester Avenue.

We hope you enjoy this virtual tour and hope you can check them out next time you come out visit!

Updated news and additional info can be found at asiatowncleveland.org.