



Healing Wounds in Chinatown Through Art

The new Pao Arts Center rises on Chinatown land previously seized by the city of Boston.

By Kristin Toussaint

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The Pao Arts Center will be an art and culture hub for the Chinatown neighborhood. Photo: Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center

New urban developments have ushered in gentrification throughout Boston, but one neighborhood, Chinatown, has been hit especially hard.

But the Pao Arts Center is a project that, though new, wants to reclaim the neighborhood and allow Chinatown to offer the culture, support and community resources Asian-Americans have relied on for decades.

The Pao Arts Center, spearheaded by the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, opens on Saturday, May 6, at 99 Albany St. — land that was once taken by the city of Boston through eminent domain in the 1960s. Hundreds of Chinatown homes were destroyed, and residents were displaced so the city could construct a highway ramp.



Mei Ching's Fantasies of Spring is one exhibit at the Pao Arts Center. Photo: Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center

The land became available again after the Big Dig and recently became One Greenway, a housing complex with retail space available to organizations that will benefit the community, like the Pao Arts Center.

Giles Li, executive director of BCNC, said the changes in the '60s were a difficult time for the community. He is hopeful that the Arts Center will offer a way back into Chinatown for those who were forced out.

“Here’s something welcoming them back with open arms,” he said. “Art is the best way to heal from a wound like that.”



*A woman taking part in a printmaking class with Boston Artist-In-Residence, Salvador Jiménez-Flores, at the Pao Arts Center.
Photo: Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center*

The center, in partnership with Bunker Hill Community College, will offer arts education programs and classes, host visiting artists, feature a residency program and serve as a space to exhibit work from community artists.

“It gives artists an opportunity to engage with the residents of the Chinatown neighborhood,” Li said. The art classes and events then, in turn, allows those who live there to “engage with Chinatown not just as residents, but as creators of art.”

Even though the Center is focused on arts and culture, Li said that it will fill other needs as well, as a true community space, like connecting residents to social services and to each other — whether or not they currently live in Chinatown.

“Chinatown has meant a lot to a lot of people,” Li said, “not only residents, but members of Chinese immigrant families who live in other parts of the city or even outside the city.”

“For me, I think Chinatown has played a really important part in my own family's well-being in this country — my grandparents and my mom sought services here, found friends in social circles here,” he said. “As Chinatown becomes, essentially, less Chinese, less immigrant, less working class, we still want to hold on to what made Chinatown so important and make sure that doesn't disappear.”

The Center has been more than two years in the making. On Saturday, all that work will culminate in a grand opening that kicks off with a ribbon cutting ceremony at noon. Classic and contemporary Chinese art performances will follow, from opera to beatboxing to a concert by Boston-born singer-songwriter [Kevin So](#). Get more information on the opening [here](#).



People view the art hanging in the Pao Art Center galleries at a sneak peak opening. Photo: Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center