



RICHARD HOYEN

# THE GARDEN OF SURGING WAVES

STORY BY DWIGHT CASWELL

Astoria's newest park honors the culture and contributions of hard-working Chinese immigrants who were instrumental in the city's development.

THERE'S A NEW garden in Astoria, which wouldn't be news if it weren't for the fact that the Garden of Surging Waves is also an open-air museum that takes the visitor through more than a century of all-but-forgotten history: the contributions of Astoria's Chinese community.

It all began with an unintentional insult.

In 2002, Astoria mayor Willis Van Dusen invited Duncan Law, a prominent seafood researcher, OSU professor, and former Astoria city councilman, to attend the dedication of

the expanded Columbia River Maritime Museum. Law, who was born in Hong Kong in 1921, refused the invitation, pointing out that the museum had completely overlooked the Chinese presence in Astoria.

"I had no idea about the Chinese contribution," Van Dusen says, "until he refused to go into that building." Law apprised him of Astoria's forgotten history—including the fact that the town was originally established by John Jacob Astor as a trading post with Canton, China, in 1811.

The migration of Chinese to Oregon started when gold was discovered in the 1850s. In 1876, Chinese immigrants began to settle in Astoria, then the salmon capital of the world, and soon became the exclusive fish processors. They worked 10- to 15-hour days, for a dollar a day and board, and were so essential that the machines that replaced them in the early 1900s were called “Iron Chinks.”

The railroads came to Astoria in the 1890s, and again it was the Chinese who provided the labor. They also built the jetties at the end of the Columbia River, and the seawall that protects Astoria’s waterfront. By the early 1900s, Chinese businesses were significant contributors to the local economy.

Then fishing declined. To make matters worse, the federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had not only made further immigration impossible, but also prohibited the Chinese from becoming U.S. citizens. Although Astoria had once been 20 percent Chinese, by the 1930s few remained. Half a century later, their community was barely a memory.

#### HONORING THE PAST

With his new appreciation of the role of Astoria’s Chinese community, the mayor decided that the city

should build a Chinese commemorative park. He appointed an advisory committee; Duncan Law, who passed away in 2013, served as an inspiring committee member.

The committee’s initial idea was to build a classical Chinese garden, but they needed expert help. They looked for someone to advise the advisory committee.

The person they found was Portland urban designer Suenn Ho, a former Fulbright scholar and National Endowment for the Arts grant recipient. She had worked internationally, done urban design work for Portland’s Old Town/ Chinatown neighborhood, and

was on the board of Portland’s famous Lan Su Chinese Garden, the most authentic classical Chinese garden outside of China.

Ho told the committee that a classical Chinese garden would be expensive and take a long time. “I asked them, why a classical Chinese garden in Astoria? Oregon already has one. It wouldn’t be unique.” Not only that, the Astoria Chinese community has its own rich history to share, she said. “Why not acknowledge the past with a contemporary approach that reflects the value of the Astoria culture?”

Suenn Ho’s final design is an interpretive garden that incorporates symbolism found in traditional Chinese gardens with local history. The name of the garden itself

---

“WHY NOT ACKNOWLEDGE THE PAST WITH A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH THAT REFLECTS THE VALUE OF THE ASTORIA CULTURE?”

---



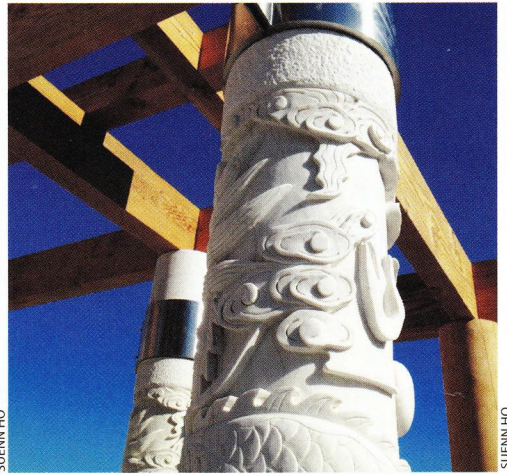
Chinese immigrants were a significant part of the Astoria community in the late 1800s and early 1900s. LEFT: Astoria Centennial Celebration in 1911. RIGHT: Regatta Parade about 1900.



SUENN HO



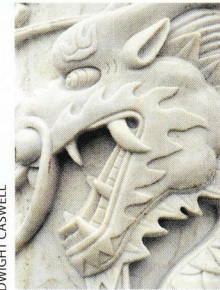
SUENN HO



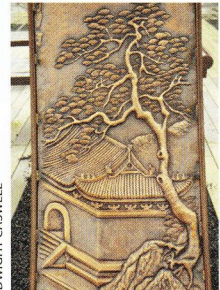
SUENN HO



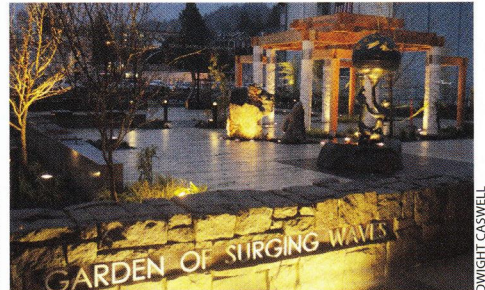
DWIGHT CASWELL



DWIGHT CASWELL



DWIGHT CASWELL



DWIGHT CASWELL

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: The Story Screen; cast bronze dragon lantern; dragon column; Garden of Surging Waves in evening light; detail from the Moon Gate; detail of dragon column; sturgeon mosaic.

is a nod to a Sung Dynasty garden, the Pavilion of Surging Waves, which has a double meaning of “blue water” and “hardship.”

Visitors enter the garden by passing through a modern rendition of the traditional Moon Gate, the spiritual and physical entry to the garden. Made of rusted steel inlaid with ornate hand-hammered bronze panels, it is set into the “Story Screen,” which represents the passage made by immigrants as they left China. Notice the three inscribed bronze scrolls horizontally intersecting the screen, which bear quotes from Confucius, LaoZi (Lao Tzu) and a 13th-century nursery rhyme still in use today. The screen also has quote after quote about life in the Astoria Chinese community.

“Many of the locals don’t want to talk about it,” Suenn Ho says, “It was too hard, too sad. So we said, ‘please tell us about your parents.’ A lot of the

quotes offered start with ‘my father’ or ‘my grandfather.’”

As you progress through the garden you symbolically follow the immigrant journey, coming to the Pavilion of Transition, with its eight hand-carved dragon columns. Here, the Chinese experience in the canneries is represented by a mosaic with three sturgeons encircled by a ring of stainless steel representing a can, and by a suspended salmon lantern made of translucent colored glass panels. A ninth dragon (nine is an auspicious number in Chinese culture) can be found as part of a donated bronze sculpture from Xian, China, at the Platform of Heritage.

The Garden’s design embraces Chinese values of education, family, and authenticity, and the materials in the garden pay homage to the toil of Chinese immigrants. Rails are set into the plaza to honor railroad laborers. Long concrete pavers represent the

wood plank floors of the old canneries. The timber structure represents the local industrial past and symbolically references the bracket engineering system (*dougong*) of traditional Chinese architecture. Twenty-four bronze timeline markers are embedded into five monumental concrete sculptural benches. Ho designed the garden to age in place gracefully and to recognize the endurance and resourcefulness of the Astoria community.

“It is an incredible honor,” says Suenn Ho, “to have a city and a community that worked so hard together to honor its story-filled history.” ■

#### WHEN YOU GO

The Garden of Surging Waves is located at the northwest corner of Astoria’s Heritage Square—the block bound by Duane, Exchange, 11th, and 12th streets, adjacent to City Hall. ([www.astoriachineseheritage.org](http://www.astoriachineseheritage.org))