Incheon Chinatown: Cultural Heritage of this Korea's First Chinatown

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**Introduction**

It is believed that the signing of China-Korea Treaty of 1882 planted the seed for the formation of Incheon Chinatown. Based on this Treaty, Incheon Port began the operation in 1883. In 1884, Chinese settlement was established in the neighborhood, so dozens of Incheon’s Chinese residents moved to this location to live. By the beginning of the 20th century, the Chinese population was amounted to around one thousand. Naturally the living community of this group was labelled as “Chinatown”, and this connection has been widely considered as the onset of Korean’s first Chinatown.

Over a century, toward the late 20th century, the status quo of this locality fell into a state of decline, so, as a result, the remaining Chinese residents seemed to have lived in an unsatisfactory condition. Therefore, Korean investors with Chinese descent, along with some local governments in China, worked out plans by using great environmental characteristics and rich historical base to redevelop this vicinity with a purpose of attracting tourists, and the original name of “Incheon Chinatown” has been left intact.

**A quick tour around Chinatown**

It is situated at Jung-gu District, in the outskirt area of Seoul. One of the convenient ways to access from downtown Seoul is taking Seoul Metro Line #1, and the ride takes about 1 hour. When the train reaches the last stop Incheon Station, Chinatown is across the street from the train station. The spectacular gold-embellished arch (aka: Paifang) is marking the entrance of this community. The region is positioned on a slope, so the whole area is zigzag, not straight blocks. Consequently, it is not easy to pinpoint its boundary. With this geographical advantage, visitors can enjoy excellent views of the Incheon Port after a nice stroll walking along alleys.

On weekends, it is a welcome tourist spot, and is heavily entangled with local Korean visitors and busy traffic. On weekdays this bustling scene can be much eased out, hence this time frame is highly recommended for making a visit if there is a choice on your side. What is also worth mentioning is its impressive illumination during nights. Besides the beautification for the streets, those lamps are also doing wonders to the magnificent scenery after the sun goes down.

Clearly this is not meant as a residential community any more, and, somehow, it is not a favorite tour site for Chinese ethnic people. For this reason, it is understandable that Chinese language is hardly heard everywhere you go in this district. Nevertheless, these facts should not discount the value that Chinatown is a destination for Chinese ancient history, Chinese culture, as well as modern Korean history, and, with the abovementioned Korea’s ties to China, this place also reveals a long history of relationship between these two nations. The stories associated with
the cultural murals, statues, and many facilities throughout Chinatown detail these aspects along with the importance of Chinese influence on Korean modern history.

You will definitely harvest tremendously in the subjects of Korean’s internalization with Japan, China, and the U.S.A, if you spend time reading (knowledge of Chinese or Korean is a must) the text of each landmark. Toward this aim, the following landscapes are suggested approaches for cultural and historical explorations, beyond their simple beauties.

**Notable landmarks**

**Chinese Paifang (Arch)**

In addition to the above-mentioned entry gate with Chinese words <中華街>, which was originally erected in the late 19th century, but went through major reconstruction in the early 21st century.

There are two other arches. Respectively they are named in Chinese as <韓中門>, located in front of Korean-Chinese Center; the other one is: <善隣門>, resided near Statue of Confucius. The funding for all of these paifangs was from Chinese investors or Chinese local governments.
A colorful district

Red is undoubtedly a signature color in this neighborhood because a heavy usage of red materials throughout is very obvious. From three arches; numerous lampposts; facades of huge buildings; walls of cultural murals; street vendors; even popular street snacks, redness is all over the town to be sighted. Besides this favorite, other bright selections at the color spectrum have also contributed to make this area famous for its pleasant visual effect.

Golden dragon, panda statues, and a panel of masks used in Peking opera

Dragon is a legendary creature; Panda is one of the most precious animals in the world; Masks for Peking opera are valuable art creations. It is no secret that China is the common thread of the above three matters. Nowhere else, China inclusive, in the world could they be happily sitting in one place for appreciation! This artwork is very innovative, and, to say the least, is absolutely eye catching and attraction for photographing.
Noodle museum and novelty in Chinese food

While typical Chinese food can be savored in some high-end restaurants targeted for tourists with food in mind in Chinatown, this ethnic community is also known for some “exotic” Chinese food.

(The picture shows one type of sweet flavored snacks widely available on street stands).

Besides, according to history, black bean noodles <Jajangmyeon, 炸醬麵 > originated from Incheon Chinatown, and they were brought to Korea by Chinese laborers working in the Port. As a result, a noodle museum, demonstrating the history and process of making those noodles, along with some fantastic exhibits, is a sought-after tourist spot. It goes without saying that Chinatown visit is incomplete for lack of having a bowl of Jajangmyeon and bypassing the museum without entering.

**Stone stairs**

Why has this seemingly ordinary structure become a landscape in Chinatown? It is on this ground that in-depth historical background among Korea, Japan, and China was swiveled from these simple stairways. This [link](#) is depicting in detail of the stories, if interested.

Stone ways were built along the line between Japanese concession in 1883 and Chinese concession in 1884. On the left, they were Chinese compounds; on the right, it belonged to Japan’s territory. Inasmuch as this stairway is also called: China-Japan borderline in Incheon and Chinatown has the honor of hosting it.

After a hard climb of over 100 steep steps to the top, more landmarks are unfolded in front of visitors.
Statue of Confucius and stone sculptures of Chinese Zodiac figurines

There are 12 Zodiac animals, and 11, except dragon, of them are not rare creatures in real life. To draw people’s interest and bring these figurines to the list of attractions of Chinatown, the designs of sculpture for each one need to be extraordinary or entertaining. From their motion, they seem to be sending comforting messages to visitors after their overcoming the “hardship” of climbing those steps, while also delivering welcome gesture.

Confucius has been respected as an iconic person in Chinese culture, so his statue was constructed there, next to the arch: <善隣門>, to serve as a reminder of Chinese cultural heritage. Both the arch and statue were donated by a Chinese local government, in which Confucius was born.
Murals Street

In addition to the above introduced landmarks, two amazing sets of cultural murals make the journey of stair climbing more worthwhile and bring the harvest of knowledge in Chinese ancient history and classical literature resulting from a trip to Chinatown to the climax. One is Samgukji Murals<三國志> and the other is Chu Han contention<楚漢志>. Seventy-six murals for the former, sixty for the latter, are glazed into titles on the walls to portray (in bilingual Korean & Chinese) the heroes and distinguished events from these two Chinese epic classics. They are really two grandiose masterpieces, and it is beyond words to describe them. Seeing is believing.

Jayu Park

The Park, designed by a Russian civil engineer in 1888, was the first park with western style in Korea. It is also known as Freedom Park, because it serves as a reminder of the history between Korea and the USA close relation during Korean War. There is a statue of General Douglas MacArthur in memory of his leadership in the efforts of saving South Korea from being conquered during Operation Chromite.
From the above descriptions, it is obvious that this park has very little to do with Chinese history, and it is also listed as Chinatown’s nearby tour site only. However, a pavilion, which is Chinese iconic architecture, has been built at the highest point of this park. Interestingly, it is inscribed with a Chinese name as <然吾亭> and is the only pagoda (not a single one in Chinatown) found in this neighborhood. Thanks to the high elevated location, it provides the best lookout point of Chinatown and the whole city of Incheon.

Songwoldong Fairytale Village
Same as Jayu Park, it is adjacent to (not part of) Chinatown. Regardless, the surrounding structure of this site is so splendid and can be spotted easily, so you may be attracted there before you start the visit to Chinatown.

In fact, this Village was part of Incheon government’s plan to revive rundown housing area, so it still functions as a residential district with renovated houses. In addition, this sector, alongside the street in different rooms, also features pictures of American fairyland stories such as: Cinderella, Pinocchio, Alice in Wonderland, Red Riding Hood, Wizard of Oz, and Disney film characters to entertain children and parents. This measure is a successful promotion, although complaints about the noise from the tourists are often heard.
Korean-Chinese Cultural Center

This four-floor Center, funded by Chinatown renovation project, is situated in the vicinity of Chinatown, with a gorgeous Chinese-Korean architectural building. It offers language learning classes; cultural lectures, and also features exhibitions, performance shows, and Chinese dress Hall, and other communication activities.

Conclusion

Incheon Chinatown came into being around 1884, so, with this founding year, it could be classified as an old fashioned Chinatown. Judging from the definition of this type of Chinatown, people expect to see, as a normal pattern, crowds of Chinese speaking people make a living there by running family-owned restaurants or small businesses in a relatively shabby environment, and visitors coming are mainly in pursuit of authentic Chinese food or purchasing bargain Chinese merchandise.

For those who have basic knowledge about the formation of Chinatown, a pre-set portrait of an old appearance is probably set in their minds before they set foot in Korean first Chinatown. Under these circumstances, they would certainly get caught by pleasant “surprise” with what this Chinatown presents to its visitors when it comes to the aspect of enrichment in cultural heritage.

As being described, the focus of Incheon Chinatown was apparently deviated from the approaches other traditional Chinatowns adopted. Moreover, it is evidenced that the perspectives, delineated visibly throughout the facilities, stay clear of the standardized cliché of immigration. In my opinion these extraordinary characteristics make this ethnic community unique and stand out in comparison with other Chinatowns around the world.
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