

## Denver's Chinatown and the Hop Alley Riots of 1880

Referred to as “Hop Alley” (a derogatory name given to the area), Denver’s Chinatown presided roughly between 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> Streets, on what is currently Wazee Street. Chinese immigrants began to make Denver a home after completing the Transcontinental Railroad. However, the attitude towards the settlers was quite unwelcoming. In October of 1880, tensions against the Chinese ignited a riot, spurring the abolishment of an entire population. Ironically, these were the very people that helped build access to the West from other parts of the country.\* So why tell this story on a flag?

To fly any flag makes a bold statement. Just as a flag is in a perpetual state of movement, so is the life of a city. Impermanence and flux are the only reliable constant. Racism and violence have become staples in current news, and the design of this flag brings historical context to the current population explosion in Colorado – what is the Colorado Asian-American experience? Who is telling their story? Are we aware of our ancestral history?

The style of this flag is based on traditional Chinese Lion Dance performance banners. Performers are introduced ceremoniously with a parade of banners preceding them. Lion dance welcomes luck and prosperity while banishing bad energy. It is commonly performed to celebrate the Lunar New Year, cultural events, and business openings.

On one side of the flag, the Chinese characters for Wa Zi (Street of the Chinese) call out a possible origin of the street name Wazee. The selection of the old-style calligraphy is intentional. The written Chinese language began as pictographs, and the symbol for human was a simplified drawing of a person. The use of this style of calligraphy is meant to remind us of the humanity in historical events.

A large yellow-gold background houses the messaging on the Wa Zi side of the flag. The red characters are outlined in black. Red – the national color of China and deemed the color of luck and power – surrounds the entire flag and represents the fire element, giving it boldness and energy. A flood of yellow-gold forms a background for the lettering. In Chinese culture, yellow is the color for prosperity and is often associated with power, royalty, and even heroism. Surrounding the yellow base, green dragon scales were painted to protect the intention and spirits of those who once lived in Chinatown. Green is a color of hope and growth. Dates and the word “Chinatown”, colored black, commemorate when the first known Chinese immigrants settled in Denver and highlight how quickly the settlement was built and destroyed. Black holds dual meanings of good and evil, stability and destruction.

On the opposing side of the flag, the English name “Hop Alley” is also outlined in black and intentionally features a red, white, and blue color scheme – meaningful in Chinese culture and sharing a connection to the American flag. On the outer edges of the flag, the flames burn the outer edge of the flag to depict the incineration of the community. White, the Chinese color for mourning, frames the blue and notes the date of the Chinatown Riots. In counterpoint to the tragic riot is the purity of the blue, a healing color in Chinese lore.

Perhaps now is the time when Denver’s Chinese population can heal its wounds and re-establish their place in the city.

### ***Elsa Carenbauer aka No Bones Left***

*\* For more information about Denver's Chinatown and efforts to strengthen Denver's Asian community, please visit <https://coloradoasianpacificunited.org/>*