POSTCARD HISTORY SERIES

San Francisco's Chinatown

Robert W. Bowen and Brenda Young Bowen

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San Francisco's Chinatown

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In this card labeled, "Greetings from Picturesque America" and "A Quartette from Chinatown, San Francisco," the four children are seated next to a vignette of Miss Liberty poised in front of an American flag and eagle. This card was part of a series of Private Mailing Cards published in 1898 by Arthur Livingston of New York. As the series title suggests, these four Chinese youngsters dressed in holiday attire represented an important aspect of the growing diversity in America.

On the Front Cover: Despite more than 50 years of exclusionary laws and persistent efforts to chase the Chinese out of San Francisco, San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1930s was a vibrant, bustling neighborhood of restaurants, retail establishments, and apartment dwellings, as seen in this J. K. Piggott postcard of Grant Avenue at the corner of Sacramento Street. (Authors' collection.)

On the Back Cover: Gum Lung, the golden dragon, climaxed the night parade in celebration of California's Diamond Jubilee, marking 75 years of statehood, on September 12, 1925. Although the dragon was a negative, malevolent symbol in Western culture, the dragon was regarded by the Chinese as a formidable creature with the power to favorably influence their lives. The hand-held dragon would be the highlight of all of San Francisco's Chinese New Year parades. (Authors' collection.)

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Lum Sing On, Lum Chan Shee, and Young Sel Ding and in loving memory of Lewis Do Lung Young and Anita Lum Young.

Twelve-year-old Lewis Do Lung Young arrived at the port of San Francisco on May 3, 1923, aboard the USS *President Pierce*. During his early years in America, he worked as a cook's helper for a wealthy family alongside his grandfather Young Sel Ding in addition to attending school.

Contents

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During the last 40 years, considerable scholarly research has been done on the history and stories of Chinese Americans. Books by Thomas W. Chinn, Philip P. Choy, Him Mark Lai, Judy Yung, John Kuo Wei Tchen, and Anthony W. Lee provided historical information to the authors and were references that we relied upon greatly. A special thank-you to Arcadia Publishing, particularly to our editor, John Poultney, for sharing our vision for this project and for providing friendly assistance and support.

—The authors

Lastly I must express my heartfelt gratitude to my maternal grandparents, Lum Sing On and Lum Chan Shee, and also to my father, Lewis Do Lung Young, for their courage to emigrate to America and their tenacity to stay and create a home for themselves and their descendants.

—Brenda Young Bowen

Introduction

An anonymous writer recommends Chinatown in a 1940s scenic view card tour booklet: "San Francisco, Where Occident and Orient Meet. In the heart of the city, clustered on steep pitched streets, lives the largest colony of Chinese outside of the Orient. With startling contrast to surrounding American structures, the architecture becomes Oriental in character. Pagoda-like buildings line the streets and in store windows are displayed strange foods, art treasures of carved ivory, teak, porcelain, and gorgeous silks. Wise globe trotters save their money for San Francisco's Chinatown."

Only 50 years earlier, the 1893 guidebook, "Hints For Strangers," provided with compliments of photographer Isaiah West Taber, described San Francisco's Chinatown: "West of Kearney to Powell, North of California to Broadway in all about twelve blocks of what was once an important business part of the city as the city as the size and solidity of many of the buildings testify. Population 20,000; rapidly decreasing. Joss Houses, theatres, restaurants, curio shops, opium and gambling haunts, underground dens of filth and infamy. The streets, stores, and restaurants can safely be visited by ladies in daytime, but for night visits to 'the Infernes,' a reliable guide is necessary and can be obtained at first class hotels."

Among all the various nationalities and ethnic groups residing in San Francisco since the days of the Gold Rush, the Chinese seem to have aroused the most hostility as well as the most curiosity. Despite years of adversity, the historic Chinatown neighborhood remains the commercial, residential, and cultural center of the city's Chinese community. The district continues to attract numerous local visitors and tourists every year.

A visitor might ask why there is such a large Chinatown in San Francisco. The 1844 Treaty of Wanghia established the right of immigration between China and the United States. For Americans, it was an opportunity to develop trade and establish evangelical missions abroad. For Southwestern China, a land devastated by floods, droughts, and large-scale famine, the treaty gave Chinese an opportunity to go beyond their borders to seek fortune and hope for a better life. The first Chinese to arrive in San Francisco came as merchants and contract laborers who settled only a few blocks from the wharf, in the vicinity of Clay Street and Dupont Street (now Grant Avenue). When gold was discovered at Sutter's Creek, waves of fortune seekers from the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia headed for California. Ships leaving Canton, China, in the southwest region, carried thousands of sojourners to California, or *Gum San*, the Land of the Golden Mountain. By the end of 1850, there were nearly 8,000 Chinese in California, and the following year, the number jumped to nearly 25,000.

It was a mostly male society, with only a handful of women making the journey. Unwelcome in the gold fields, the Chinese miners were forced into other occupations, including fishing, manufacturing, agriculture, laundering, and cooking. Many chose to return to San Francisco, where, in 1850, they could find work as household servants, earning $12 a month, or as cooks, earning $15 a month, and they could live in a community of like immigrants.

Chinese merchants catering to the needs of their own countrymen established stores along Sacramento, Dupont, and Clay Streets. The city's non-Chinese were already calling the district "Chinatown." The Chinese themselves, predominantly from the Guangdong (Canton) province in China, would call their district "the town of the Tang people, Tang Yun Fow," after the dynasty that Chinese perceive to be the most glorious age of China.

In effect, Chinatown became a self-contained village within a city because Chinese were restricted by language and racial discrimination from completely assimilating into San Francisco at large. A Chinese citizen never needed to venture outside Chinatown for any of his needs. This, in effect, helped to preserve the culture from being easily diluted.

More than 12,000 more contract laborers from Canton came to California in the 1860s when Charles Crocker hired them to work on the western half of the Central Pacific Railroad. For $26 a month, the Chinese took on the most dangerous jobs. When work on the railroad was completed in 1869, the Chinese had no work. Many returned to San Francisco, where there was community and where they worked long, hard hours in low-paying jobs, all the while facing discrimination, harassment, and violence.

Throughout the years of adversity in the 19th century, the Chinese of San Francisco—especially the children, the street scenes, and the distinctive architecture—were nevertheless considered favorite subjects of Western artists and photographers. Unfortunately, derogatory, vicious, and stereotypical cartoons and illustrations appeared on trade cards and in periodicals. Other images, including the work of local photographers, were more benign. From the earliest days of the Gold Rush, Chinese sojourners regularly visited commercial photographers dressed in their best to have inexpensive carte-de-visites made to send home to China. Photographers such as Lawrence and Houseworth, Carleton E. Watkins, Henry Bradley, William H. Rulofson, and Isaiah West Taber began documenting Chinatown on stereographic view cards and 7.5-by-5-inch cabinet cards.

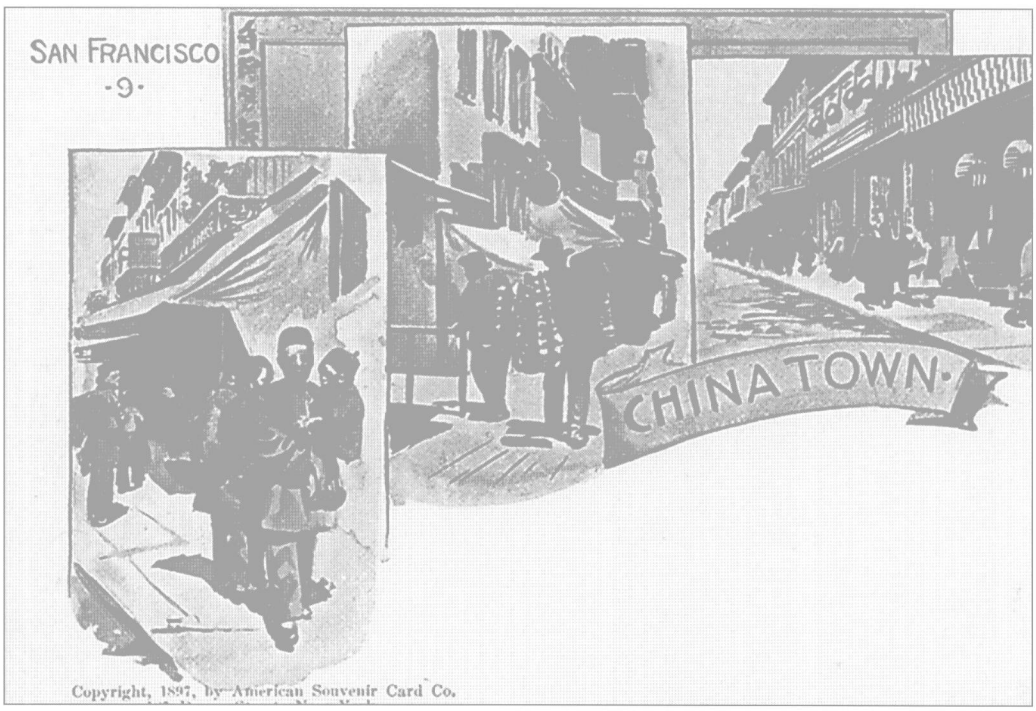
I. W. Taber knew how to appeal to the tastes of Western tourists of the 19th century. He photographed Chinatown in depth, marketing his pictures in popular albums to the city's visitors. Taber, and the better known Arnold Genthe, who arrived in 1895, were outsiders photographing the Chinese, unknowingly forming many of the stereotypes of the Chinese community.

The tradition of marketing images of San Francisco's Chinatown was cemented in 1898 when Congress authorized the private mailing card, a 5.5-by-3.25-inch card with an illustration on one side costing only a penny's postage to mail. The golden era of postcards coincided with the growing emergence of Chinatown as a tourist destination.

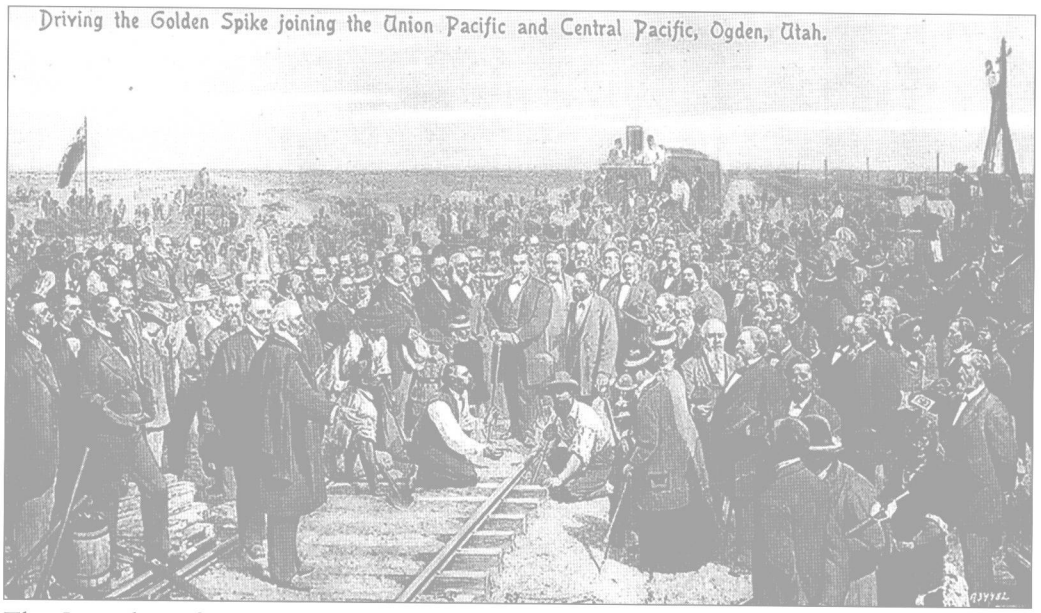
The chapters of this book will provide a provocative look at Chinatown in the first half of the 20th century as it was typically portrayed on picture postcards of the time. Also included are postcards created by the Chinese community, which, no doubt, better represent the community as a whole.

One

Creating Images of Chinatown

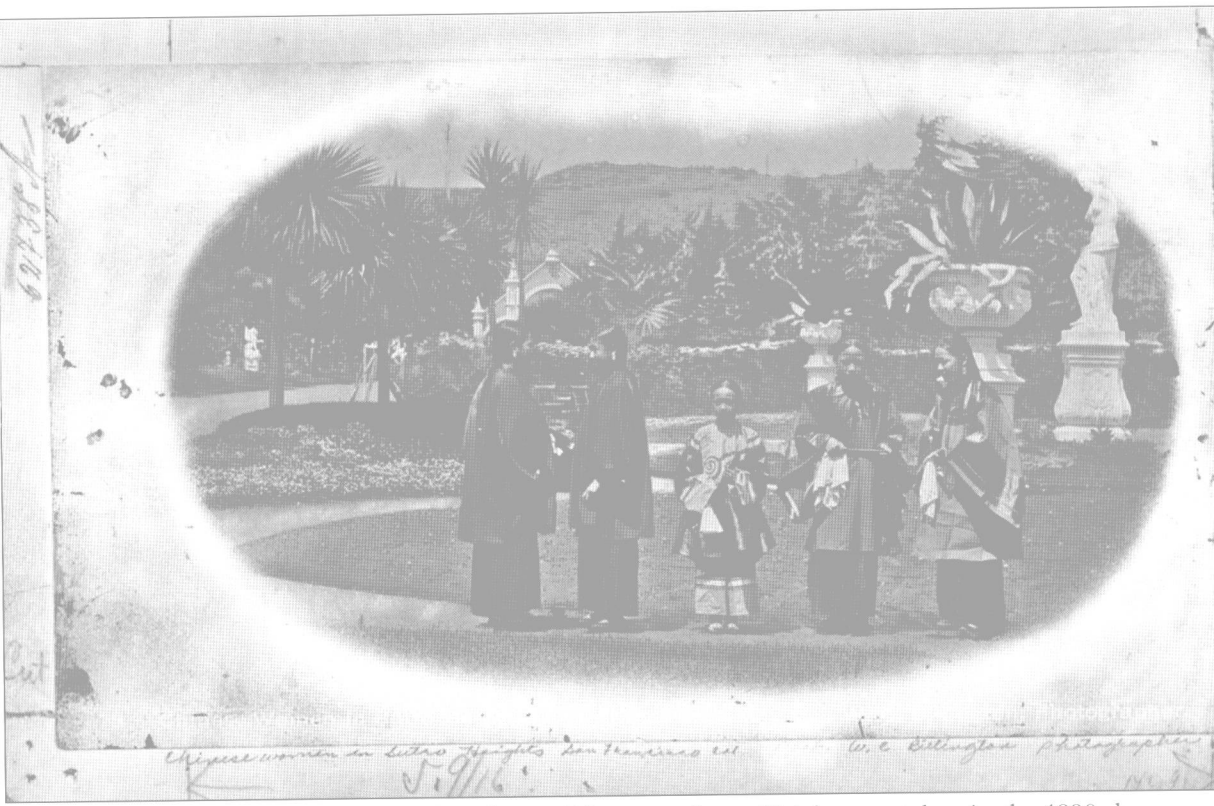


This American Souvenir card labeled "Chinatown," published in 1897, is one of the earliest examples of a card with illustrations of San Francisco's Chinatown. It was number nine in a 12-card set devoted to San Francisco. The card is made up of three illustrations that appear to be watercolors copied from photographs. It has been said that picture postcards provide a window to look back at the past. Postcards are of historical significance, although they may reveal more about the artists, photographers, and publishers than the actual illustrated subjects. Postcards were printed by the thousands to be sold to the masses. Publishers tended to have a preconceived notion of how a subject would be depicted, reflecting the attitudes of the times. Various printing techniques were used to make postcards more appealing for consumption by the general public. Generally the publishers didn't worry about the veracity of the composition.



The Central Pacific's Chinese laborers placed the last railroad ties at Promontory Point, Utah. Two workers can be seen in the center of the painting just behind the central figures in the photograph. The grand event was commemorated on a 1909 postcard published by M. Rieder of Los Angeles. The lithographic card was printed in Germany, where many postcards at the time were printed because of the high quality of the work. Nine colors were used in a time-consuming process using limestone plates to re-create the event.

The title of this card is "Chinese Women at Sutro Heights." The public was welcomed at Adolph Sutro's landscaped gardens overlooking the Pacific, and these young ladies seem to be enjoying their outing. The two in dark clothing are probably *mui tsai*, young household servants. Publisher E. P. Charlton and Company was a 5, 10, and 15¢ store at 943 Market Street.



The original photograph of the Chinese Women at Sutro Heights was taken in the 1890s by W. C. Billington of the Cliff Photograph Gallery. The image was reproduced several times over the next 30 years by at least five different postcard publishers. While the two *mui tsai* are always shown in dark clothing, the three women on the right appeared in a variety of different colored attire. These postcards were produced using a photogravure process. First the original black-and-white photograph was sepia-toned or hand-colored. The printer would separate each color by re-photographing the image using filters. Every color would be blocked out except the one being printed. The process would be repeated for each and every color. Black ink was the last one to be printed after all the other colors were finished. The printer would run the paper through the press for the first color used, let the paper dry, and then run the next color until all the colors were printed on the page. This was a tedious process.

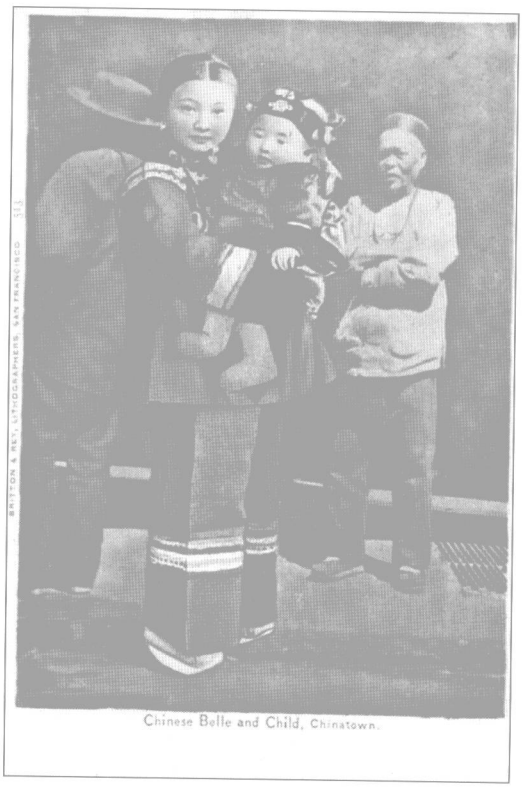
This postcard is labeled "Scene in Chinatown, Hanford, California." This M. Rieder, German-made card for M. Hefton of Hanford appears to be a fairly accurate rendition, but in actuality, the store was the Sam Hop Company, a general import store, located at 815 Clay Street in San Francisco.

"A Chinese Store" published by Souvenir Publishing Company of San Francisco is the same Sam Hop Company shown above, except that five of the men pictured have had their appearances altered or, in some cases, were replaced by someone else entirely. Publisher Edward M. Mitchell recycled the image again for the Fresno Market, re-labeling it as a "Chinese Store, Fresno, California."

Photographer Charles Weidner captioned this pre-1906 earthquake postcard, "Chinese Slave Girl–Chinatown." On a later version of the same image, Weidner changed the caption to read, "Chinese nurse–girl without home after fire, April 18, 1906."

Another example of cut-and-paste, San Francisco lithographers Britton and Rey created what they thought would be a more appealing picture by cutting the girl and baby from their original austere surroundings in a photograph and pasting them into a lush, Western-style arbor and garden setting. The new title was "Chinese custom of carrying children, Chinatown."

This extremely popular image appeared on a variety of postcards from the early 1900s to the late 1940s. Over the years, the young woman was identified as both a "Chinese slave nurse girl" and "the young mother."



Chinese Belle and Child, Chinatown.

In "Chinese Belle and Child, Chinatown," the Britton and Rey lithographers created a bit of melodrama by pasting the image of the young woman and child over another photograph of a stern-looking man and another man with his back turned.

The original photograph taken by the Goldsmith Brothers shows a woman and two young girls crossing an unidentified street in Chinatown. Men standing on the corner observe the trio as a Caucasian woman with a parcel under her arm walks in the opposite direction.

This manipulated postcard titled, "Picturesque Costumes, Chinatown, San Francisco, California," has four children included in the street scene in addition to a lantern, hanging from mid-air, and a new storefront that is not flush with the other buildings. The horse and wagon, the woman with the parcel, the drain and street debris have been removed.