

CHINATOWN

A PORTRAIT OF A CLOSED SOCIETY



GWEN KINKEAD

...splendidly detailed. . . . Engrossing reading. . . . Gwen Kinkead [is] an observant and curious journalist . . . with keen eye and sympathetic ear." —*NEW YORK TIMES*

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A Portrait of a Closed Society

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PREFACE

When I began this book in 1989, I received a call from one of the Chinese-language newspapers in Chinatown, asking why I was writing about the community. Was it because of the "Asian invasion"?

Well, in part. I had become curious why I never heard or read anything about Chinatown. It was the proverbial puzzle—a booming community splitting at its seams in a giant metropolis, but completely unknown to its neighbors. It didn't seem possible for such an anomaly to exist. And why was it mute?

For reasons described in the first chapter, researching this book was like opening oysters without a knife. More than once, I felt like quitting. I didn't because it was also like reading a detective story. Behind every door was a clue to the mystery. I was hooked.

Asian-Americans are the fastest growing minority in the United States, and the least enfranchised. They are also the least understood. Few Americans know anything about the many Asian communities expanding around the country—the Koreans in Queens and Los Angeles (L.A. has more Koreans than any city except Seoul), the Cambodians in Phoenix and Milwaukee, the Vietnamese in San Jose and suburban Washington, D.C., for instance. Neither side makes the effort. As a result, violence and racism against Asian-Americans are increasing. Vincent Chin, a Chinese autoworker in Detroit, was beaten to death in 1982 in retaliation for Japanese auto imports into America; in 1988 a Chinese restaurant worker in North Carolina was murdered in an act of anti-Asian animus. In Chinatown one day, an older white couple and their friend, a white woman in her thirties, latched on to me as that rarity, a white face in Chinatown, and erupted. "Chinese are the worst," the wife said. "I've seen the Irish,

the Italians, the Spanish, the Puerto Ricans, the blacks, and the Chinese come through here, and there's no comparison. Ninety-nine out of a hundred are the world's worst people! They don't help each other. I was walking with my grandson yesterday and an elderly woman fell. We ran across the street to help her. Five Chinese kept right on going! The father of a tenant in our building was beaten up in the foyer and the son wouldn't go down and help him. My husband had to chase his attackers.

"You're talking to the only white people left in the neighborhood. It's like we don't belong here."

The friend, who had been nodding her head in agreement with this diatribe, spoke up. "They put their garbage out in city garbage cans on the corners and the rats run in and out."

"Filthy!" chorused the older woman. "All their food comes from basements—aaaggh! You look down in there, the food's on the floor—aaaggh! They eat dogs and cats, you know. I'm not pulling your drumstick!"

"Walk through Chinatown," her husband advised me. "You're not in the United States. You're in Hong Kong."

Sadly, these white people assumed I thought the same as they did because I am white. More and more Asians will emigrate in the next decades, profoundly changing our society. They will bring their skills, capital, and culture, and we have to do better than we have done to remain one nation. Americans have things to learn from Chinese. Frugality, for instance. Respect for elders. Chinese can learn that they can't have it both ways—they cannot charge mistreatment and racism and, at the same time, refuse to talk to outsiders, or vote, or lend a cup of sugar to their neighbor.

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My foremost thanks are to Robert Gottlieb, the former editor of *The New Yorker*, for encouraging this research and for publishing much of it. I am deeply grateful to my father, Eugene Kinkead, a *New Yorker* editor and writer, for going before me and showing me the way.

Scores of people in Chinatown spent many hours assisting me over the course of two years of research. Many wished to remain anonymous. Their courage in breaking Chinatown's code of silence was moving and heroic. To my sources in the tongs and the gangs, many thanks as well. Sergeants Mike Collins and Mike Wagner of the New York Police Department taught me to read the streets. Former Jade Squad chief James McVeety shared his years of experience with me. Nancy Ryan, chief of the Trial Division in the Manhattan District Attorney's office, did likewise, then checked the manuscript for accuracy. I am indebted to Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau and to the prosecutors in the Eastern District of New York. Assistant U.S. Attorney Beryl Howell's voluminous court papers provided a vivid picture of Chinatown's underworld that was as intriguing as a novel. Catherine Palmer, the foremost prosecutor of Asian heroin cases in the country, was wonderfully helpful, as was Charles Rose of the Eastern District. Geoffrey Doyle, supervisory special agent in the Federal Bureau of Investigation in New York, provided invaluable assistance. So did Richard LaMagna and Al Gourley of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Peter Lee, Paul Lee, and Paul's aunt suffered my many questions. Through their tales, Chinatown's past came alive. Peter Kwong, author of several fine books on Chinatown, provided useful suggestions and contacts. That infectiously funny man, Charlie Chin, for

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many years with the Chinatown History Museum, gave me insight into the complexity of Asian culture.

I am particularly grateful to Robert Lee, the Chen family, Mr. Lin, the Kong family, and Leslie Lim. They agreed to stand out. As Leslie Lim said, finally deciding to tell me his name, "This is America, right?"

Connie Pang, my translator, was good company, day and night. My father-in-law and Harvey Smith labored to help me computerize this manuscript. My husband's kind and loving encouragement bolstered me always.

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THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

PART ONE

CHINATOWN

At the southern end of Manhattan is the largest Chinese community in the Western Hemisphere. The crooked streets of one of New York's oldest ghettos smell of salt and fish and orange peel. This booming, chaotic little piece of China, overflowing with new immigrants, is a remarkably self-contained neighborhood—virtually a nation unto itself. To a degree almost impossible for outsiders to comprehend, most of its inhabitants lead lives segregated from the rest of America.

The new arrivals overwhelming Chinatown are part of the biggest wave of Asian immigrants in American history, the consequence of a momentous change in immigration policy several decades ago. In 1965, Congress replaced laws that had for more than eighty years barred many Chinese—and, for half that time, almost all Asians—while admitting large numbers of Europeans, with equal quotas for every country. From the Eastern Hemisphere, the new laws gave a preference to immigrants with valuable skills or those uniting with their families. Since then, Asians have become the leading immigrants. Chinese, the second largest Asian group, after Filipinos, to immigrate under the new law, head straight to New York, their first choice among cities in the United States. With some fourteen hundred people arriving every month, Chinatown has burst out of its former confines below Canal Street, sprawled into SoHo, revitalized the Lower East Side, and spawned satellite communities in Brooklyn and Flushing, Queens. About a hundred and fifty thousand Chinese live in Chinatown, and another hundred and fifty thousand live in the outer

boroughs. In addition to immigrants from Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, Chinese from Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Cuba, South America, and the Philippines have come, bringing their various dialects. Northern Chinese and Taiwanese speak Mandarin, while those from southern China speak Cantonese. Many of the new immigrants cannot understand one another. Cantonese, who were among the first settlers, complain of being strangers in an all-Asian stew. Still, the residents make their way around Chinatown's two square miles of tenements with little mutual rancor.

They have turned Chinatown into the city's clothing manufacturing center. Its nearly six hundred factories have an annual payroll well over \$200 million. It is also an important jewelry district now, turning over \$100 million in gold and diamonds a year. Its three hundred fifty restaurants draw tourists and conventioners. And it has become the center of Chinese organized crime in the United States. The Justice Department ranks Chinese organized crime as the principal rival of the Cosa Nostra, and in some lines of business, it has supplanted the Cosa Nostra. The French Connection, the old heroin-smuggling route from Turkey to New York by way of Marseilles, has been replaced by the Chinese Connection, which begins at the Golden Triangle, the area where Laos, Thailand, and Burma meet, and continues, generally through Hong Kong, to Chinatown. Half of the heroin smuggled into this country is under the control of organized crime in Chinatown.

The portal to Chinatown is Mott Street. At the intersection of Mott and Canal is a concrete building with a pagoda roof and several of the painted balconies characteristic of Chinese architecture. This building houses the tong, or fraternal association, of the On Leong, the Chinese Merchants Association. Down the street and around the corner, on Pell Street, is a brick building with green fire escapes and a large green sign bearing gold calligraphy. (Green symbolizes growth; gold symbolizes prosperity.) This is the Hip Sing tong. A block east, on Division Street, is the Tung On. These three organizations, and another on East Broadway called the Fukien American Association, are referred to by both residents and law enforcement officials as the Chinese Mafia. Their members run social events and support community activities, and some sanction crimes that keep Chinatown in a stranglehold. Each tong is affiliated with a "standing army," a gang of

between thirty and a hundred members. Much of the activity that goes on around these streets no one ever hears about and no one ever reads about; most of it is not reported even in Chinatown's four Chinese-language daily newspapers. The crimes that take place here are often so serious and so bizarre that the area sometimes resembles Hong Kong at its wildest. In Chinatown, there is a social order so ruthless that its very existence seems to be against the law, but, because the area is so isolated from the rest of society, most of the people who live here accept it as normal.

For months, I roamed the streets, trying to find people who would talk to me. For a long time, no new immigrants would speak to me. I was a *low faan*, an object of fear, distrust, indifference. Any outsider in Chinatown is called a *low faan*, which is short for *guey low faan*, or "barbarian"—a term that has been in use since the community's beginnings in the 1870s. Chinatown's inhabitants are largely first-generation—eighty percent of them are foreign-born, half of these having been here fewer than five years—and they are as ethnocentric as the first Chinese who settled Mott Street. "Because you are a barbarian, we don't have to care too much about you," one resident candidly told me. "Because you are a barbarian, some of us may be scared of you—we don't know your language, why you are the way you are." Others assured me that *low faan* had lost its pejorative meaning and merely conveyed the superior exclusiveness with which Chinese have regarded all outsiders for centuries. "Did you understand when Chinese call white people *bot guey*, 'white devils,' or *guey low*, 'foreign devils'?" an elderly resident asked. "It's not meant to insult or dishonor. We say *low faan* so much, we refer to all whites as 'demons'—because we think it's the right term for them. Their noses are so huge and their eyes so blue. Chinese are unlike others—they think China is the center of the earth." Eva Tan, who was a special adviser on Asian affairs to New York's Mayor Edward Koch, says, "Don't forget, foreigners forced China to open up and be ruled by gunboat diplomacy. We have been living for years with foreigners looking down on us. You must have heard of the famous signs at foreigners' hotels in China: CHINESE AND DOGS NOT ALLOWED." Long-term Chinatown residents, remembering the racism that treated Chinese worse than dogs in this country, use *low faan* with the sting of bitterness. New immigrants, to whom Chinatown represents a chance

to rise out of poverty, use it matter-of-factly, descriptively, to mean "non-Chinese." The universal use of *low faan* in Chinatown was my first sign of its closed and secret life.

I particularly wanted to talk to Chinatown's "invisible" people, the new immigrants working in its garment shops and restaurants, who speak no English. With the help of my translator, Connie Pang, a Columbia University graduate student from Hong Kong, who, like all educated Hong Kongese, speaks both Mandarin and Cantonese, I slowly found people whose confidence I was able to gain. Very slowly. One merchant talked to us because every Friday for a month I had passed her store and smiled and waved at her young niece, who was newly arrived from Canton, though the niece had said that she herself had no time to speak to me. The merchant, after getting used to the sight of me, decided that I must be interested in her business. I was the first white person she had spoken to in twelve years of living in Chinatown. Another resident agreed, after four or five invitations, to have dinner with Connie and me because I'd met his daughter and admired her cheerful spirit. He, too, had not had a conversation with a white person since arriving in Chinatown, six years earlier. Chinatown's professional class is large—the local business directory lists a hundred and forty-four lawyers, fifty dentists, and more than a hundred accountants—but many of its members wanted no part of a *low faan* with a notebook. One prominent lawyer ignored my phone calls for a year and a half before he said hello. I got used to having people hang up on me, walk away from me, give me "white eyes" (turn up their eyeballs and show me only the whites of their eyes, which is the Chinese way of ignoring strangers), and duck my questions with the handy excuse, in English, that they spoke no English. In one of Chinatown's oldest stores, I asked a clerk when it was built and got a stony stare. I asked again. The same stare. I asked at another store, down the street, and got an explanation: "Oh, they think you're the tax lady or the government inspector." So few whites hang around Chinatown that any who do are assumed to be there on police or government business, and people shut off automatically at the sight of a white person—especially one asking questions.

Low faan have gotten this reception for years. My father, a reporter for *The New Yorker*, was sent by editor Harold Ross to report on Chinatown in the thirties. Residents passed him from one person

to another. "Go see Tommy Lin, he'll speak to you," they advised. Tommy Lin had not the slightest interest in talking to my father about anything but benign matters like *mui kwe lu*, the potent Chinese liquor flavored with rose petals, and passed him to Peter Su. Peter Su referred him to Harry Leong. After weeks of this, my father gave up.

Until he retired recently, Emile Bocian was the editor of the Chinese-language daily the *United Journal*, and one of the few Caucasians living and working in Chinatown who are accepted by the community. Bocian made a little noise like a snort when I asked him why only two or three white people had studied the community in the last hundred and twenty years. "The reporters get lost," he said. "They get into quicksand and they disappear. Unless Chinese know the interviewers, they won't talk. That's why you have Chinese interviewing Chinese. The Chinese laugh at the stories that come out of Chinatown. Most are inaccurate." Of the many parts of the world in which I had done reporting, none surpassed Chinatown for its difficulty—neither South Africa, where phones are tapped and the government restricts the news, nor the Amazon, where at least people who have never seen a white reporter enjoy talking.

Teachers, social workers, police, census-takers, letter carriers in Chinatown all report similar difficulties. New immigrants have come from societies where terror taught them to keep their heads down and their mouths shut. The Chinese from Southeast Asia, for instance, were often the first to be kicked out of their countries in the political turmoil that arose in that region after the Second World War. In nearly every one of those countries, Chinese controlled the retail trade, and often the economy, but refused to assimilate, and they were widely resented. According to *Strangers From a Different Shore*, by Ronald Takaki, a historian at the University of California, Berkeley, Chinese in Vietnam constituted seven percent of the population but controlled eighty percent of the retail trade. They spoke Chinese, sent their children to Chinese schools, and lived in Chinatowns. They were always targets of discrimination in Vietnamese society, but they suffered disproportionately as the Communists nationalized the economy. Fifty thousand Chinese from Vietnam—boat people, mostly—are estimated to have settled in New York City since the late 1970s. Thriving again as small business owners, they don't want to risk more discrimination here by standing out. Other ethnic Chinese, including,

recently, a great many from Malaysia, are undocumented and afraid to tell strangers their names. Still others, notably Fujianese, from China's Fujian Province, have been smuggled in and are terrified of any notice. "You have to be like a hunting dog," one weary Chinese census-taker told the *New York Times* in 1990 as she trudged about the tenements in Chinatown, finding everywhere illegal aliens living in unmarked apartments. Perhaps one of every five people in Chinatown is there illegally.

Far and away the largest number of new arrivals are from the People's Republic of China. Under the 1965 immigration law, each country in the Eastern Hemisphere has a quota of twenty thousand immigrants per year. In 1982, three years after the United States established full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic and broke off formal ties with Taiwan, the People's Republic was also given a quota. The mainland Chinese in Chinatown are mostly from farms, and they especially shrink from contact with other people—even from other Chinese. "They don't want people to know them," one Chinatown resident told me. "The government uses the people against each other in China. That's how it gains its information—even within families. I've been waiting for several years for some to return my friendship." Peter Lee, a reporter who has covered Chinatown for a decade, said, "This is a new and foreign thing for us, this freedom of expression and freedom of speech. The June 4th movement was fought for that. If one and a half billion people in China don't have those freedoms, then we don't have them here, either. It's not in our culture; it's not in our blood."

Scholars believe that at least eight hundred thousand people died in Mao Zedong's campaigns of the early 1950s to liquidate the landowning class, silence dissenters, and root out corruption, and that more than twenty million died in the famines of the late fifties and early sixties resulting from the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Half a million are thought to have been killed in the Cultural Revolution, and perhaps as many as a thousand in Beijing in the Tiananmen Square massacre and its aftermath, with several thousand more imprisoned in China's vast gulag system for supporting the pro-democracy movement. Four decades of political upheaval since the Communist Revolution of 1949 have given immigrants a horror of speaking their minds, taking a stand, or asserting an opinion—and,