

A vintage, sepia-toned photograph of a family of four standing in front of a dark-colored vintage car. The car is parked on a street, and a wooden building is visible in the background. The family consists of a man, a woman, a young girl, and a baby. The man is standing on the right, wearing a suit and tie. The woman is standing in the center, wearing a light-colored dress and a hat, holding a small trophy. The young girl is standing to the left of the woman, also wearing a light-colored dress. The baby is sitting in a stroller in the foreground, to the left of the woman. The photograph has a dark border, and the text is overlaid on the top and bottom of the image.

IMAGES
of America

MARYSVILLE'S CHINATOWN

*Brian Tom, Lawrence Tom, and the
Chinese American Museum of Northern California*

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CHINATOWN



The Chinese American Museum of Northern California is pictured above. Opened during the Bok Kai Festival in 2007, the museum is dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of the Chinese in America. The museum building is a Gold Rush building constructed in 1858. It is located on the corner of First and C Streets in the heart of the old Marysville Chinatown, the same intersection where bombs have been fired every Bomb Day for over 100 years. (Courtesy Brian Tom.)

ON THE COVER: The cover is a picture of Arthur M. Tom Sr. and Betty Tom, taken in 1936, standing in front of their car in the Marysville Chinatown. The baby is Arthur M. Tom Jr., who just won a baby contest held during the Bok Kai Festival that year. (Courtesy Lawrence Tom.)

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This book is dedicated to our parents, Arthur M. Tom Sr. and Betty Tom, who believed in an America that would live up to its promise of equality for all and a China that would regain its former glory. Arthur M. Tom Sr. and Betty Tom are pictured at the Pago Pago restaurant in the 1940s. The restaurant was owned by a family friend, and the Toms often went there in the evening to relax after a long day. (Courtesy Brian Tom.)



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Many of the photographs came from our cousin Gordon Tom, who has been a photographer for over 50 years. In addition, he preserved many of the photographs taken by our late uncle Hom S. Suey, a professional photographer who took pictures in the 1920s and 1930s. Gordon has been an immense help in putting this book together. He has the distinction of being the last Tom in Marysville and has been the tour guide for the Bok Kai Temple for over 40 years.

Brian would like to thank Charlotte Cook, who read and commented on the text. His daughter Katherine Tom also read the complete text and made suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

The Marysville Chinatown is the last Chinatown of Gold Rush California. It still has an active temple, three Chinese associations, and the old Chinese school building. And every year, as they have done for the past 150 years, they still fire the “bombs” on Bomb Day (Bok Kai Festival), the second day of the second month of the lunar year.

The Marysville Chinatown has survived the horrors of the anti-Chinese movement led by racists who were determined that “the Chinese must go.” It has survived the official reign of terror, when the full weight of federal, state, and local governments was used to exclude and expel the Chinese from America. It has survived even the effects of a diminishing population base as their sons and daughters left town to seek better opportunities in the urban centers of the state.

The Marysville Chinatown has survived because the inhabitants, descendants of the original Chinese pioneers in California, will not give up. They sense the historical importance of their home and understand that if their Chinatown disappears, the last link to the beginning of Asian history in America will be lost forever.

So every year, the Chinese of Marysville unpack the “Gum Lung” dragon, make the bombs for Bomb Day, sweep out the temple, and prepare to celebrate another year in Old Gold Mountain.

THE CHINA BACKGROUND. In 1850, when the Chinese pioneers helped build Marysville, China produced 33 percent of the world’s gross national product. But China was a country going through immense change. Its productive power would soon diminish as westerners sought the riches of China. England was a leader in that effort. It started the Opium Wars in 1839 in the name of “free trade” so English merchants could sell the deadly drug in China.

The Cantonese, who were almost all of the early Chinese pioneers that came to America, have a history of being independent from the central government because of their distance from Beijing, the nation’s capital. “The mountain is high, and the emperor is far away” is a favorite proverb. They think of themselves as the true Chinese, living far to the south, away from the barbarian invaders from the north. As the true Chinese, it would be up to the Cantonese to save the nation when the nation was in danger.

Canton (Guangzhou), the capital of Guangdong province, is a major seaport and the political and commercial center of the Cantonese people. For 80 years before the first Opium War, Canton was the only Chinese port open to trade with the West. As trade with the West grew, Guangdong began to develop the infrastructure to handle the increased trade. This trade along with a highly developed agricultural base and light industry made Guangdong one of the richest provinces in China.

There is a special place in Guangdong called the “Four Counties” or Siyi (Szeyup), which include Taishan (Toishan), Kaiping (Hoiping), Xinwui (Sunwui), and Enping (Yanping). Eighty percent of the early Chinese pioneers came from these four counties, half from Taishan alone. The land where the Siyi people live is in a beautiful part of Guangdong with rich soil, abundant rice paddies, and productive orchards. Because of the land and climate, the local farmers are able to harvest two or three crops of rice a year. The variety of fruits, melons, and vegetables grown there is a source of pride for the local residents.

Like all Cantonese, the Siyi people are well known for being confident, adventurous, and open to new ideas. Their stubbornness is legendary. They refuse to give up even when a situation appears

hopeless. This stubbornness is grounded in their history. When the Mongols invaded China, the Song dynasty armies retreated to the south. After a decade of fighting, the Song Dynasty made a last stand in Siyi. Knowing the end was near, the Song dynasty prime minister Lu Xiufu strapped the Song boy emperor to his back and leaped into the South China Sea near the present-day Taishan Xinwui county line. With the death of the emperor, the Song forces disbanded. Many stayed in Siyi. Even today, Siyi families with the surnames Chew, Jew, and Jue claim descent from the Song royal line. "Never surrender" became part of the history of the Siyi people.

History was to repeat itself when more barbarians, this time the Manchus, invaded China in 1644. Again the ruling Ming Dynasty retreated to the south. Again the resistance was most fierce in Guangdong, with major battles taking place in Taishan. After defeating the Ming Dynasty, the Manchus established the Qing Dynasty, which was still in power in 1850 when the Cantonese first started coming to America. Knowing the rebellious nature of the Cantonese people, the Manchus imposed political restrictions against them. The Manchus knew that when the revolution came, it would be led by the Cantonese people.

THE GOLD RUSH AND THE COMING OF THE CHINESE PIONEERS. The California Gold Rush in the middle of the 19th century was an important event in world history. It marked the beginning of globalization, when transportation and communications had evolved to such a state that one event could impact the whole globe. People from all over the world joined in the California Gold Rush. Americans from the eastern part of the United States came. The British, French, Spanish, Swiss, and Germans joined in. From the southern hemisphere came Chileans, Peruvians, and Australians. Sonorans and Hawaiians took part. From the largest continent of all, Asia, only the Chinese came, and of the Chinese, only the adventuresome Cantonese.

The gold discovered in California was immense; equally important, the gold was "free for the taking." In Guangdong, a circular listed the attractions of California: "[The Americans] want the Chinese to come. . . . It is a nice country, without mandarins or soldiers." Finally there was a country where the Cantonese would not be persecuted by mandarin officials. It didn't take long for them to make up their mind to join the greatest gold rush in the world. The early Chinese pioneers to America were not disappointed. California during the Gold Rush was a free and surprisingly egalitarian society. Everyone was a pioneer with the pioneer's spirit of treating people by their contribution to building a new society.

CHINESE PIONEERS IN AMERICA. When the Cantonese came to California starting in 1849, they encountered a land such as they had never imagined before. They had come from a place that had been settled for over 1,000 years; every rock had a name, every tree an owner. Suddenly they were in a land where there seemed to be no boundaries. Gold was free for the taking. But it wasn't only the gold. The wealth of the long California coastline had been untapped; the forest uncut and the rich soil of the central valley undisturbed. Everywhere they looked there was opportunity. They quickly went exploring, first in the gold country of California, from the southern mines to the northern mines, then later to the Trinity Mountains. They opened restaurants from one end of the state to the other. Still later they expanded their reach to Oregon, Idaho, Washington, Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico. Pushing farther, they were soon in Canada and Alaska.

Prevented by the Manchu overlords from organizing political groups, the Cantonese in California formed tongs. Each member of the tongs swore an oath to "Fan Qing, Fu Ming"—"Overthrow the Qing, Restore the Ming." It would not be long before the worse fears of the Manchu despots were realized.

In the gold fields, the Chinese soon made their presence known. Their food and medicine were superior compared to that of other miners. Boiling water for tea kept them healthier than many who drank water directly from creeks and streams. And their clan and tong affiliations meant they could form large partnerships of more than 100 men to mine the more difficult sites that other miners could not handle. In time, the Chinese miners became a major force in the mining

camps of California. In 1860, a full 25 percent of the miners in the Golden State were Chinese. By 1870, more than half the miners in California were Chinese.

In the first two decades of their coming to America, the Chinese built over 30 Chinatowns. More than 90 percent of the Chinese in the state lived in these small-town Chinatowns. In every Chinatown, they built temples, introducing Buddhism and Taoism to North America. They brought their skills in farming, started the fishing industry, and opened restaurants; they had made a home for themselves in the Golden State.

THE ANTI-CHINESE MOVEMENT AND STEREOTYPICAL HISTORY. The golden age in California for the Chinese would not last. The transcontinental railroad, which the Chinese helped build, would prove to be their downfall. Once it took a pioneer to make the journey to California, but with the completion of the railroad, the masses could come with just a ticket and a week's time. California was soon flooded with immigrants, many newly arrived from Europe.

One of the myths about race relations in California has been that there was a unified "white" race that started the anti-Chinese movement. But the truth was more complex. There have always been two European American positions on the Chinese question: the "pioneer" position, which was pro-Chinese, and the "racist" position, which was anti-Chinese. The pro-Chinese position was taken by businessmen, clergy, diplomats, manufacturers, and those who believed in equality. The anti-Chinese position was taken by the working class, mainly those who were newly arrived from Europe, public officials who depended on the working-class vote, and newspapers that voiced the position of the working class.

America is a country founded on the ideal of equality and freedom for all. Reaching that ideal has not been easy. The history of America has been one of integrating the "lower-class" whites into the "upper-class" whites. This was America, the melting pot. In 1870, the newly arrived Irish were in the lower class. Their leaders knew that in order to become accepted by the upper-class whites they had to play the "race card." Led by Denis Kearny, an Irish immigrant, they played the race card masterfully.

It was during the anti-Chinese movement, started in the 1870s and continuing for half a century, that the stereotype against the Chinese was created. The movement was ostensibly based on competition for jobs, but in fact, it was based on an appeal to race animosity and the creation of a racial stereotype that would allow the lower-class whites to gain the acceptance of upper-class whites. The stereotype the racists created depicted the Chinese as semi-slaves, drug fiends, and misogynists. They were of the coolie class that came from the poorest part of China. They were only interested in working for low wages and saving enough so they could return to China. They could never assimilate into American society. The racists created this stereotype so they could convince the general population to discriminate against the Chinese. Against all evidence to the contrary, it worked. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. A part of the American dream died that year; the dream that America was a freedom-loving land that welcomed everyone.

The Marysville Chinatown was the commercial, social, and political center for the smaller Chinatowns that surrounded it. When the anti-Chinese movement erupted, the smaller Chinatowns were attacked by 19th-century terrorists led by groups like the Order of Caucasians. Chico, Red Bluff, Oroville, Redding, and Wheatland, up and down the northern valley, killings and burnings were visited upon the Chinese. The Marysville Chinatown, founded by tough and hardy miners, became a place of refuge. The Chinese knew they had to make a stand there. If the racists were not stopped in Marysville, the next stop would be the port of San Francisco for the trip back to China. The Chinese in Marysville did not falter. They welcomed their compatriots from the smaller Chinatowns fleeing from murder and arson. They armed themselves, preparing for a last stand, should one become necessary. They remember the words of their ancestors: "Never surrender to the barbarians."

BUILDING A CHINESE AMERICA. The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act was a major blow against the Chinese in America. But they did not give up their dream that the greatest democracy

in the world had a place for them. The Chinese fought back in the courts, with an undying belief in the American justice system. They engaged in civil disobedience. When Congress passed the Geary Act in 1892, forcing every Chinese person in America, citizen or not, to carry an identification card, almost every one of the 100,000 Chinese in America refused to obey the law. As part of the Chinese defiance of the Geary Act, in 1894, for the first time in a Bok Kai festival, the Chinese in Marysville refused to fly the American flag.

Chinese Americans believed they were entitled to be part of the American dream, so they created the paper son plan, a method of claiming entry to America through false documentation that ensured the racist goal of excluding and expelling them from America would not succeed. For a time, it seemed that the racists had won. Decade after decade after the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese population in America decreased so that by 1920 only 60,000 remained. The Chinese acquired the distinction of being the only immigrant group in America to see their population dwindle. Without the paper son plan, in another few decades, the Chinese in America would have vanished.

One of the goals of the anti-Chinese movement was to force the Chinese to return to China by depriving them of a way to make a living. Racists passed laws that restricted the work the Chinese could do. One of the ironies of the anti-Chinese movement was that proponents said the Chinese were taking work away from European American workers. But in fact, the exact opposite was taking place. The Chinese had arrived in California first; it was their jobs that were being taken away by the newly arrived immigrants to California. As the Chinese were forced out of industry after industry, they adjusted. They opened restaurants, laundries, and herb shops, all small independent businesses that did not rely on being hired by the government or European American businesses. Slowly the Chinese built a foundation for survival in a hostile land.

One area where Chinese Americans excelled was in education. Starting around the dawn of the 20th century, they began entering the best universities on the West Coast. They did so even though their high school teachers told them it would be a waste of time as no one would hire them when they graduated. For years, even into the 1930s, no jobs were available to Chinese American college graduates. A graduate with a doctorate from MIT ended up working in a San Francisco Chinese furniture store. Many graduate engineers worked in restaurants. Only with the start of World War II did the race barrier start to fall. For the first time, Chinese American college graduates could apply for jobs with the state and federal governments. Then in the 1950s, private employers started to hire Chinese Americans. Some areas of employment took longer. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that a major law firm in San Francisco hired a Chinese American attorney.

During this period, when they were fighting for their survival in America, they never forgot their homeland. When the reformers Kang Youwei and Liang Qichiao came to America in the early 1900s to learn about American democracy and raise funds, they were given a warm welcome and much-needed financial support. When reform of the imperial system no longer seemed possible, the revolutionary Sun Yat-sen came to appeal for the help of Chinese Americans. At every stage during China's turbulent modern history, Chinese Americans sent money and people back to help China develop into a new nation.

RACISM DEFEATED; A NEW CHINESE AMERICA. With the entry of the United States into World War II, China and America became allies in the fight against Fascism. Chinese Americans volunteered in large numbers to serve in the armed forces of the United States. Within two years, in 1943, America repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act and Chinese immigrants could become naturalized citizens. The racist idea that America had no place for the Chinese had been rejected.

Though the glass ceiling exists in many aspects of American society, the efforts of the Chinese American pioneers have led to a better life for all Chinese and Asians in America. The ideal these pioneers believed in—that America, the greatest democracy in the world, had a place for the Chinese—is starting to be realized.

—By Brian Tom

One

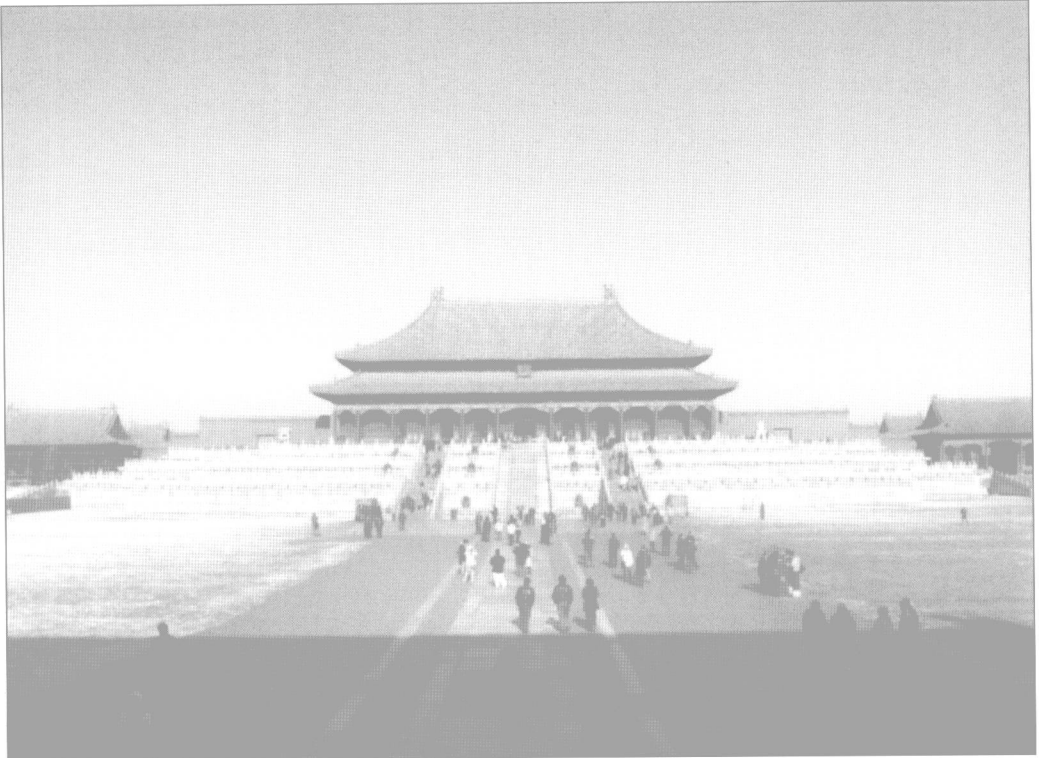
THE CHINA BACKGROUND

In the middle of the 19th century, China was still one of the richest countries on earth. But that would soon change. England started the Opium Wars so they could trade the opium they grew in its colony of India for the luxury goods of China. Flooding China with the deadly drug was a major factor leading to an impoverished China toward the end of the 19th century.

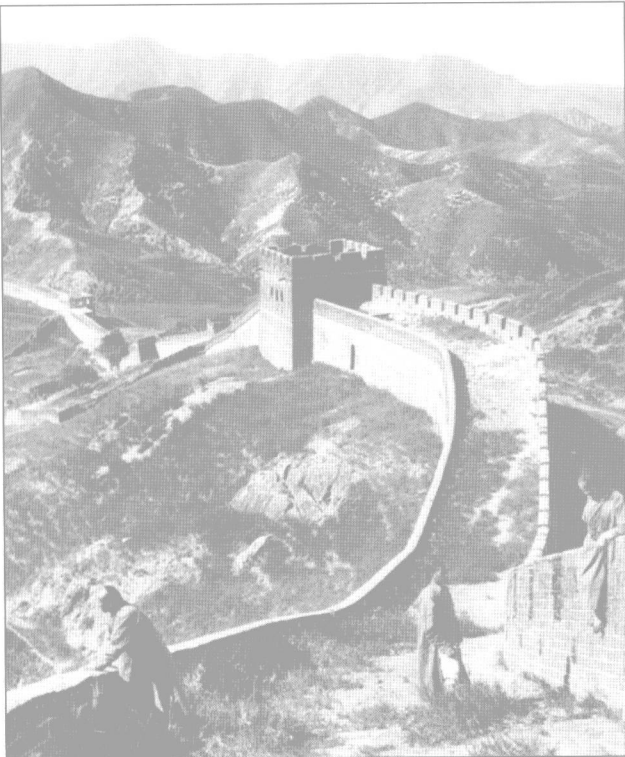
China in 1850 was ruled by the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty and had been for over 200 years. When the Manchus invaded China from the north, they drove the Ming Dynasty armies south, until they finally reached Guangdong, the home of the Cantonese people. The Cantonese people put up a fierce resistance. In the end, they were no match for the barbarians of the north. The Qing Dynasty, recognizing that the Cantonese would try to form a resistance movement overseas, passed a law to prevent them from going abroad.

For 200 years, the Cantonese dreamed of the day when the mandate of heaven would pass from the Qing Dynasty. When the Qing was defeated in the Opium Wars, the Cantonese saw it as a sign that the time was near. When the Cantonese learned in 1849 about the Gold Rush in California, they saw this as another sign: gold, free for the taking, in a country that valued political and religious freedom. It would be the perfect place to organize people and raise money for the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty.

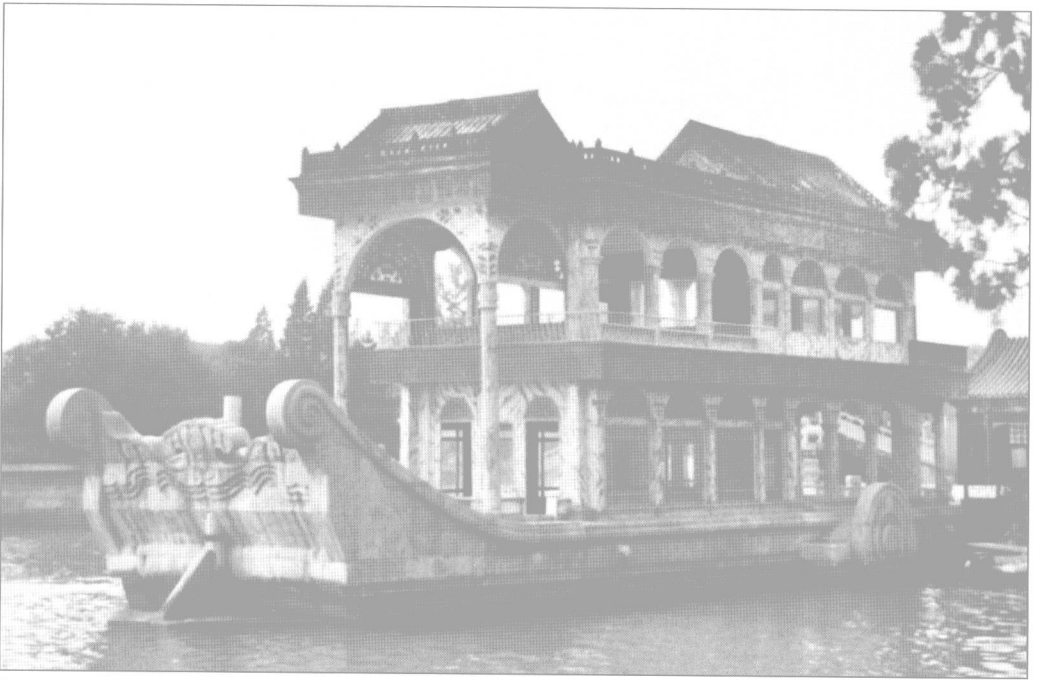
The Siyi (Szeyup or “Four Counties”) part of Guangdong is an important historical part of China including Taishan (Toishan), Xinhui (Sunwui), Kaiping (Hoiping), and Enping (Yanping). It is here that important battles were fought when the Song and Ming Dynasties fell first to the Mongols and later to the Manchus. The Siyi people have always been aware of the role they have played in the history of the Chinese nation. More than any other area, they sensed the need for the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty. More than 80 percent of all the Chinese pioneers to America came from these four counties.



The Forbidden City in Beijing was the Chinese Imperial Palace from the early 15th century until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. It is the world's largest surviving palace complex. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)



The Great Wall was a symbol of China's strength and unity. It was rebuilt during the Ming Dynasty but was ineffective in stopping the Manchu invasion in 1644. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)



In 1893, money set aside to modernize the Chinese navy was diverted to restore the Marble Boat at the Summer Palace, another indication that the Qing Dynasty was unable to respond effectively to the challenge from the West. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)



Guangzhou was always considered one of the academic and intellectual centers of China. This is a picture taken in 1873 of the cubicles in Guangzhou where the imperial examinations were given. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)

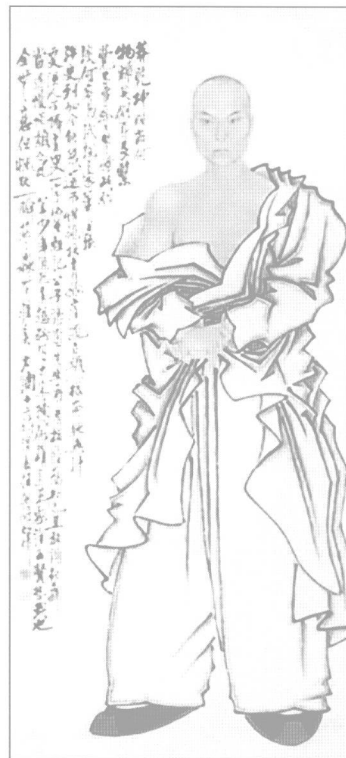


The Temple of Heaven, built in the 15th century, symbolized the relationship between heaven and earth. By the mid-19th century, when this photograph was taken, the Qing Dynasty was unable to maintain it properly. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)



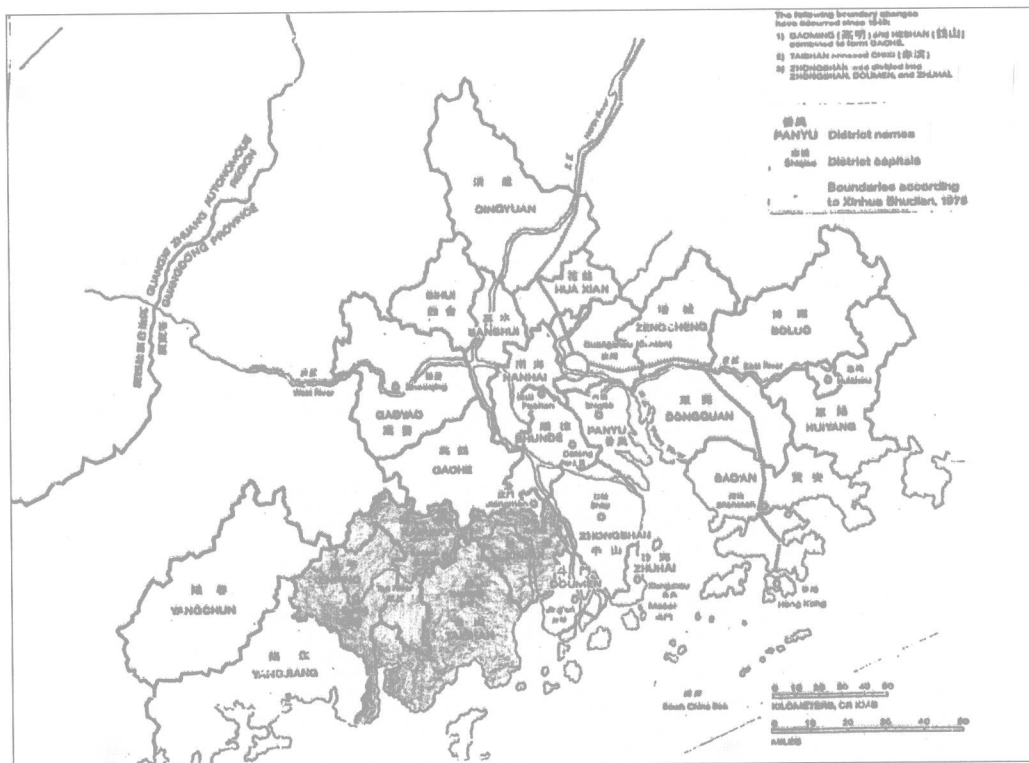
Pictured is a traditional Chinese painting by Wang Shih-min, painted in the 17th century. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institute.)

This self-portrait by Ren Xiong, painted in the mid-1850s, was a reflection of the rapid changes in Chinese society during that time. Even today, it seems strikingly modern. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)



Shangchuan Island, a part of Taishan County, was one of the first places westerners landed when they came to China in the 16th century. St. Francis Xavier died there in 1552. This memorial chapel was built in his name in 1869. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)





Almost all of the pre-1965 immigrants from China came from the Siyi (Sze Yup) Four Counties part of Guangdong province. The Four Counties (shaded) are located about 50 miles from Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong province. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)



Led by a Cantonese, the Taiping Rebellion started in Guangxi province (located northwest of Guangdong province) and headed in a northeasterly direction to engage the Qing Dynasty forces located to the north. (Courtesy Chinese American Museum of Northern California.)