

IMAGES
of America

CHINESE IN BOSTON

1870–1965

*Wing-kai To and the Chinese Historical
Society of New England*

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HARRISON AVENUE, c. 1907–1915. This famous postcard image portrays a street-level view of Harrison Avenue, north from Beach Street, in the heart of today's Boston Chinatown. Chinese pedestrians wearing traditional dress and a queue hairstyle are clearly visible in the center. Stores and shops, some of which were owned by Chinese, along with horse-drawn vehicles and electric streetcars, lined both sides of this commercial area after the street was widened in 1894. (Courtesy of Bostonian Society.)

On the cover: CHINESE IN BOSTON TRICENTENARY PARADE, 1930. In celebration of the 300th anniversary of the founding of the City of Boston, the Chinese community participated in the city's parade along the route of Boylston and Tremont Streets. The spectacle of public pageantry reveals a growing recognition of the Chinese presence in the city while leaving the illusion of civic participation among the marginalized Chinese population under the Exclusion Act. (Courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of New England collection.)

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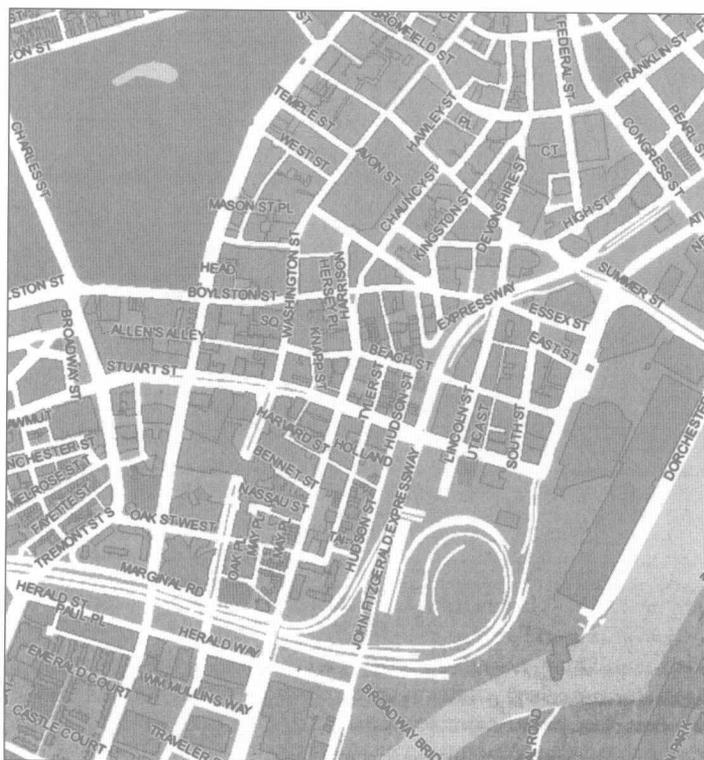
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MAP OF BOSTON CHINATOWN. The early development of Boston Chinatown was centered in a small area around Beach Street (shown here), Harrison Avenue (shown here), Oxford Place, and Oxford Street. It eventually extended its boundaries to Essex Street in the north, Washington Street in the west, Marginal Road in the south, and the Rose Kennedy Greenway in the east. (Courtesy of Boston Redevelopment Authority.)

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INTRODUCTION

Boston's Chinatown, while small in comparison to New York's and San Francisco's, has maintained a rich history as a vibrant commercial and residential community in the same locale since its initial settlement in the late 1870s. Its continuity in preserving some of the traditional architecture and streetscapes, as well as its enduring character of family and community life, distinguishes Chinatown in Boston as a more coherent community than most others on the East Coast. The local legacy of Chinese Americans is visible both in the ongoing presence of Chinatown, and also in numerous contributions to the development of trade, industry, education, politics, and culture in New England.

Chinese merchants and students first arrived in small towns and communities in New England in the mid-19th century. They owned the earliest Chinese tea shops and restaurants in Boston and Portland, Maine, and some were among the first Chinese to study in missionary schools in western Massachusetts and to graduate from a U.S. college in Connecticut. Many were sojourners who returned to China to contribute to its modernization, while a smaller number stayed as pioneers to acculturate into American life through marriage, education, and missionary activities. With the advent of industrialization and the transcontinental railroad, another stream of immigrant pioneers ventured into New England from across the American West and Canada or through New York. An early group was recruited as strike breakers to work at a shoe factory in North Adams. Almost all of these male workers came from Toisan County of Guangdong Province in China from which there was a constant flow of migrant labor to the United States through the contract system.

When Chinese laborers found their way from North Adams to Boston after the 1870s, they settled in the South Cove landfill area where immigrant Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Syrian workers had previously established successive ethnic enclaves following the opening of the nearby South Station railroad hub in the 1840s. By the dawn of the 20th century, several hundred Chinese resided along narrow alleys such as Oxford Place and Oliver Place, adjacent to the two main roads of Harrison Avenue and Beach Street. Although some were ignored or ridiculed by other immigrants, most Chinese were spared the violence and forced removal that occurred on the West Coast when Congress passed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. An immigration raid in Boston Chinatown in 1903, however, reduced the population of Chinese residents in the neighborhood by nearly half. The population did not rebound until after the second decade of the 20th century. Throughout this period, working and living conditions were deplorable. The widening of Harrison Avenue in 1893 almost destroyed the city's Chinese business core. The elevated transit railway also created unbearable noise and pollution when it passed through the neighborhood from 1899 to 1941. Through perseverance, some Chinese found their niche by establishing successful laundries and restaurants between 1900 and 1930. This enabled the boundaries of Chinatown to expand across Tyler Street, Hudson Street, Harrison Avenue, and Beach Street.

As Chinese merchants and workers clustered around the city and scattered across the region, they developed organizations and services based in Chinatown for recreation, information, and support. The first groups were tongs—clan associations with the dubious image of engaging in illicit activities such as gambling, opium smoking, and extortion. By the second decade of the 20th century, some community leaders established the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New England and the Chinese Merchants Association to represent Chinatown. Many families, including those with surnames such as Moy, Yee, Chin, Wong, and Lee, formed their own family associations in the 1920s. Since many earlier settlers were single men or had left their wives behind in China, the family associations provided an extended kinship structure for the “bachelor society” similar to that of a fraternity or sworn brotherhood. Those who were later able to bring their wives and establish families in Chinatown created a new second-generation culture beginning in the 1920s. These children who were born in the United States or who immigrated at young ages typically attended the local Quincy School and spoke both English and Toisanese. Although they interacted with Syrian immigrants and other non-Chinese children in public school, many found social support in the 1930s in organizations that focused on Chinatown youth such as the Quong Kow Chinese School and its marching band, the YMCA, and the local Boy Scout troop.

One notable development was the emergence of a strong organizational culture for Chinese American girls and women in the 1930s. The Chinese Mission and the Denison House were both active in recruiting immigrant women and girls to help spread the gospel while instilling a collective sense of self-worth. They organized a girls’ basketball team and other leisure activities for Chinese women. The Catholic Maryknoll Sisters Center also became quite active after being established in 1946. Many Chinese American women in the 1930s joined Chinatown organizations that strove to support a strong and independent China. The most prominent example was the New England Chinese Women’s Association founded in 1940, whose members were highly visible in raising funds to support China against Japanese imperialism during World War II. Some women such as Rose Lok, the first Chinese American female pilot in Boston, were pioneers who joined the Chinese Patriotic Flying Corps. In 1952, a Chinese American mother in Maine, Toy Len Goon, was honored as Mother of the Year.

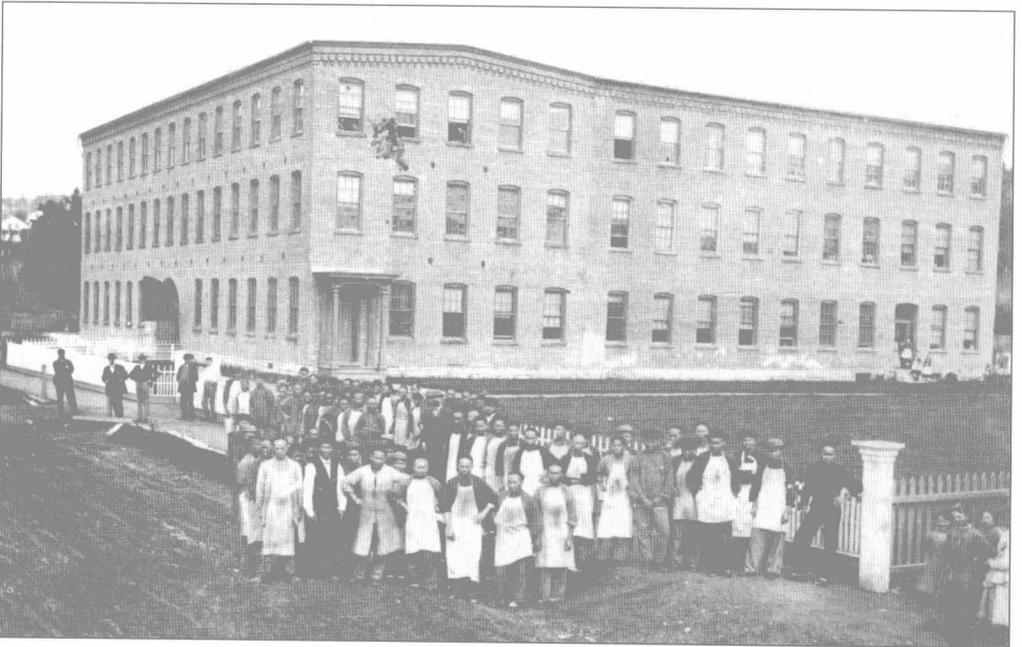
Chinese in Boston were politically active in the late 1930s and early 1940s primarily in response to the turmoil in China. They often expressed their nationalism toward China through street parades and demonstrations. The war also imparted a sense of U.S. patriotism and civic participation in Chinese American students. From their war experience, Chinese Americans gained new respect through their heroism in U.S. military units such as the 14th Air Service Group.

Chinese American community life in Boston during the postwar period from 1945 through the 1970s was characterized by the threatening impact of urban redevelopment and expanding opportunities for interaction outside of Chinatown. Specific challenges came from the construction of the Central Artery and the extension of the Massachusetts Turnpike highways in the 1950s and 1960s—which displaced hundreds of Chinese American families on Hudson Street and Albany Street—followed by aggressive institutional expansion by Tufts University and the New England Medical Center in the 1970s. Given Chinatown’s proximity to downtown Boston, intense pressures of land redevelopment have persisted to the present, forcing community members to establish new civic organizations and strategies to defend as well as develop Chinatown in ways that enable its rich legacy not only to survive, but thrive.

In the 1980s, a Chinatown gate and community murals represented new public symbols to demonstrate Chinatown’s dynamic cultural identity and historical importance. More recently, a memorial was completed in 2007 to honor hundreds of Chinese immigrant pioneers buried in Boston’s Mount Hope Cemetery. Although the future of Boston Chinatown may be difficult to determine, its historical record is visible and deserves to be recognized. This book, then, is our collective effort to make such recognition possible—to preserve the legacy of Chinese Americans in Boston and New England, especially prior to 1965, and to honor the vitality of their continuing history.

One

ARRIVALS IN NEW ENGLAND



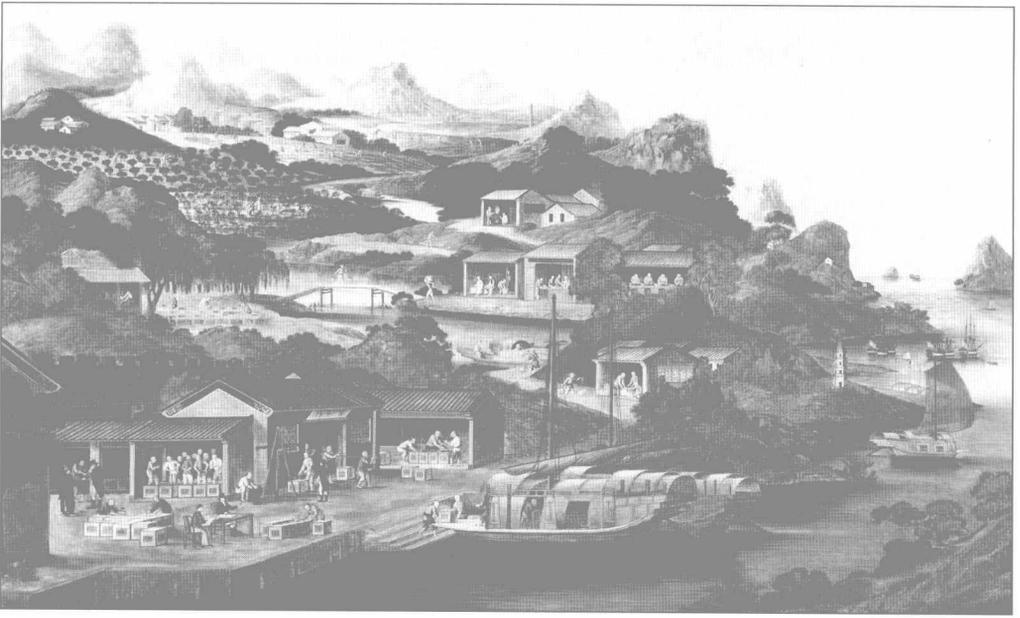
CHINESE WORKERS IN SAMPSON SHOE FACTORY, NORTH ADAMS, 1870. The earliest presence of Chinese workers in Massachusetts is widely recognized as the group of 75 who were hired by Calvin T. Sampson to break a labor strike and work in his shoe factory in North Adams. This group portrait outside the factory belies the arduous journey they undertook from the West Coast and the hostile reception they received from striking workers. Some of these Chinese workers possibly constituted the early Chinese settlement in the Boston area. (Courtesy of Boston Athenaeum.)



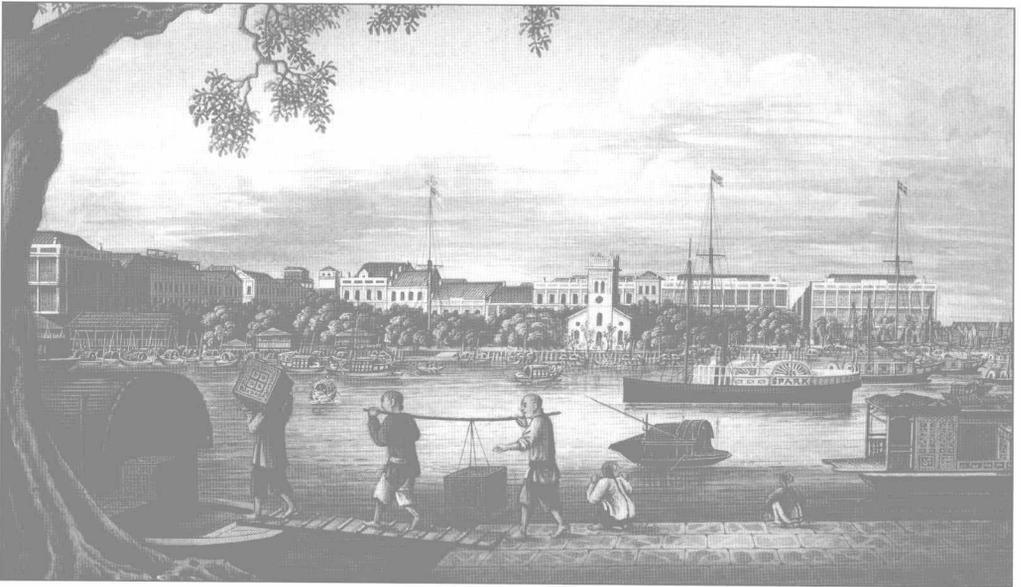
LAI BEN VILLAGE, TOISAN COUNTY, 1970s. Toisan (Taishan) County of Guangdong Province is the location of most of the ancestral villages for Chinese who immigrated to Boston from the 1870s to the 1960s. This photograph, taken in the 1970s, depicts a view of pond, communal well, and threshing ground in a Lee family village, from which descendants of Lee Yue arrived in Boston in 1893. (Courtesy of Tunney Lee.)



ANCESTRAL HOME, 2006. Visiting the ancestral villages in Toisan County has helped Chinese Bostonians connect with the memory of their distant ancestors who made the long journey to America. May and Thomas Chin (left) visited May's ancestral village with the help of a local overseas Chinese representative. (Courtesy of May and Thomas Chin.)



THE CHINA TEA TRADE, c. 1790–1800. This spectacular illustration of the Whampoa Island in Guangzhou shows the production of tea as well as preparations for its export from the anchorage. After 1787, the first American ship set sail from Massachusetts to the port cities of Whampoa and ushered in the era of America's China trade in New England. (Courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum.)



TRADE BY NEW ENGLAND MERCHANTS IN CANTON (GUANGZHOU), c. 1852. The early steamer *Spark*, seen alongside a small sampan loading chests of tea, was brought to Canton by Capt. Robert Bennett Forbes in 1849. Forbes founded the firm of Russell and Company and left an estate in Milton, known today as Captain Forbes House. Many other notable Bostonians also made their wealth on the China trade. (Courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum and Forbes House Museum.)

CHINAMAN'S TEA STORE.

TWENTY TO FORTY CENTS PER POUND SAVED.

CHOICE PURE TEAS
OF ALL KINDS.



PURE COFFEE,
FRESH EVERY DAY.

CHINESE TEA STORE ADVERTISEMENT IN BOSTON, 1865. This advertisement of a tea store owned by successful merchant Oong Ar-showe at 25 Union Street is the earliest evidence of a Chinese shop in Boston. His advertisement stresses the authenticity of his tea products through text and the image of the loading of tea cargo from the ports. It is interesting to note that he also sold coffee! Oong Ar-showe became a naturalized citizen in 1860, perhaps the first Chinese in Massachusetts to do so, and became well known in Malden, a suburb of Boston. His son William, born in 1854, is most likely the first United States-born Chinese in Massachusetts. (Courtesy of Boston City Directory, 1865.)

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NEW

CHINAMAN'S

TEA STORE.

NEW

TEA AND COFFEE

From China & Japan to San Francisco, and thence by rail to this city. All goods warranted. Money refunded if goods do not prove as represented.

AR FOO,
CHINA
Tea Merchant,
333
Congress St.

PORTLAND

STONE WARE CO.

Manufacturers of every description of

STONE WARE GOODS,

DOUBLE GLAZED, VITRIFIED,

STONE DRAIN

—AND—

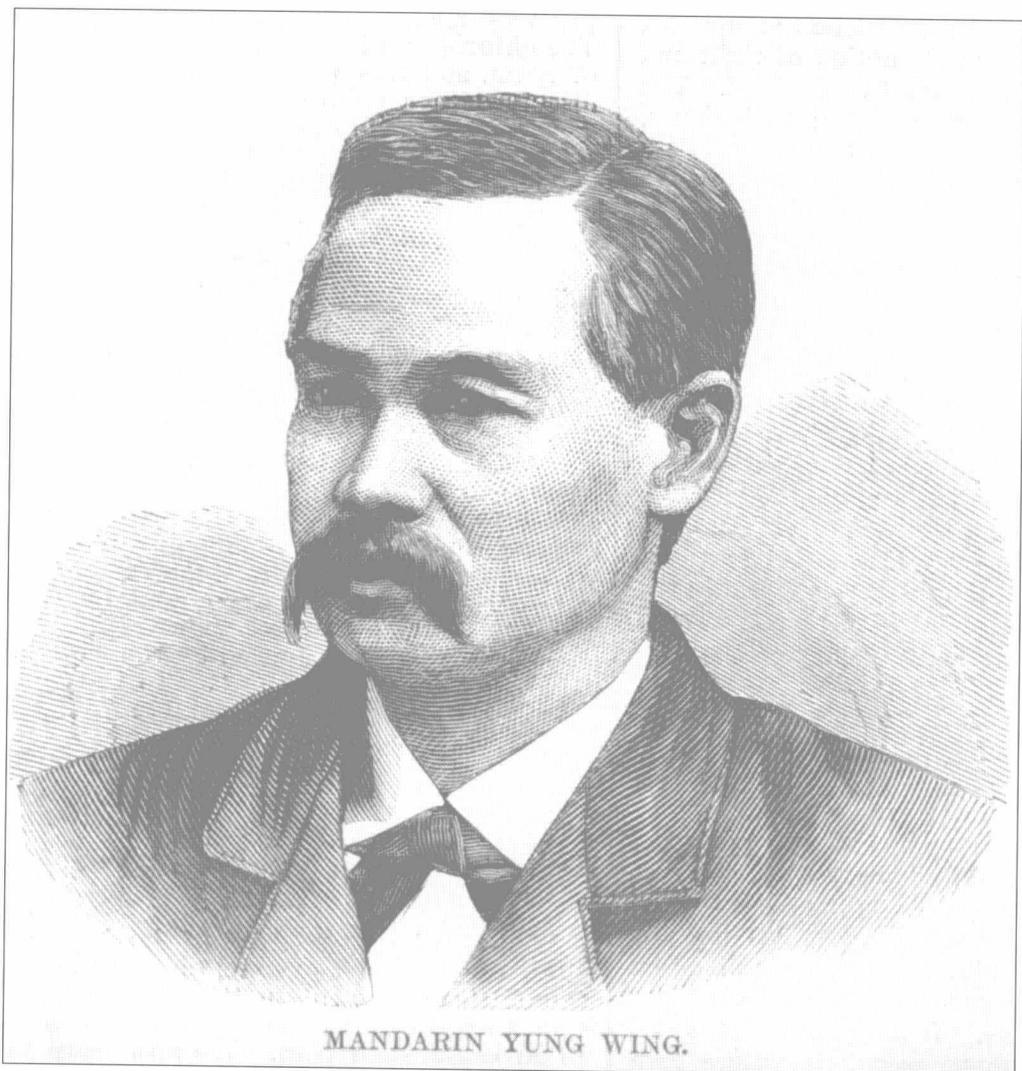
WATER PIPE,

Factory, North End of Deering's Bridge.

J. N. WINSLOW, Treasurer.

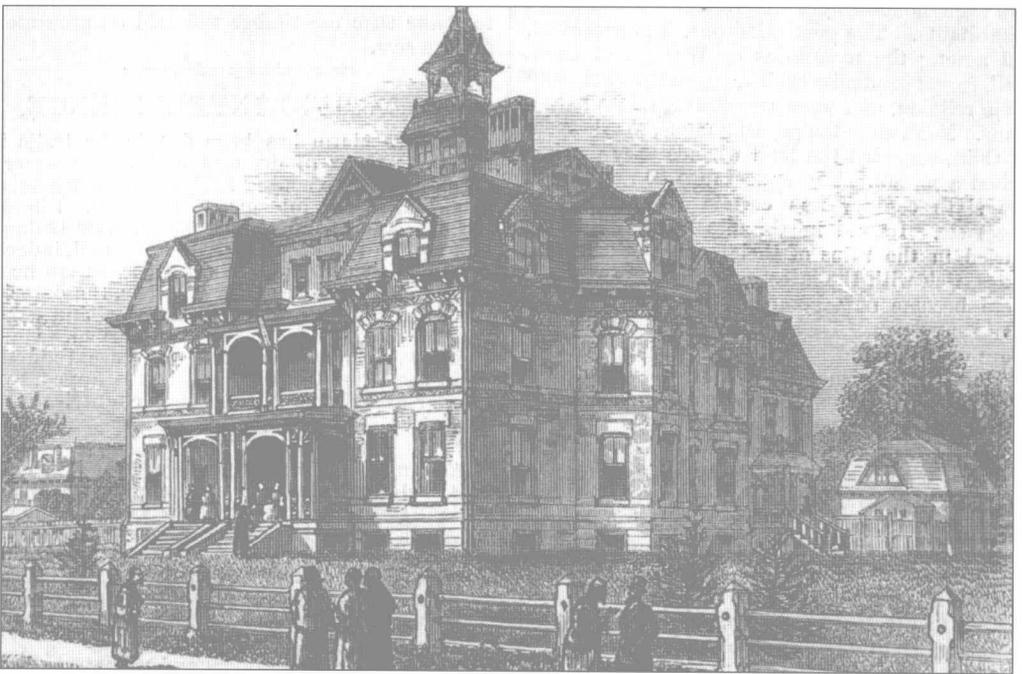
J. T. WINSLOW, Superintendent.

PORTLAND'S TEA STORE, 1871. Ar Foo Fong went to Portland, Maine, in 1860 to work for George C. Shaw in his store on Middle Street helping customers select teas. By 1871, he had his own store on Congress Street, as evidenced here by his advertisement in the Portland city directory of 1871. (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society.)

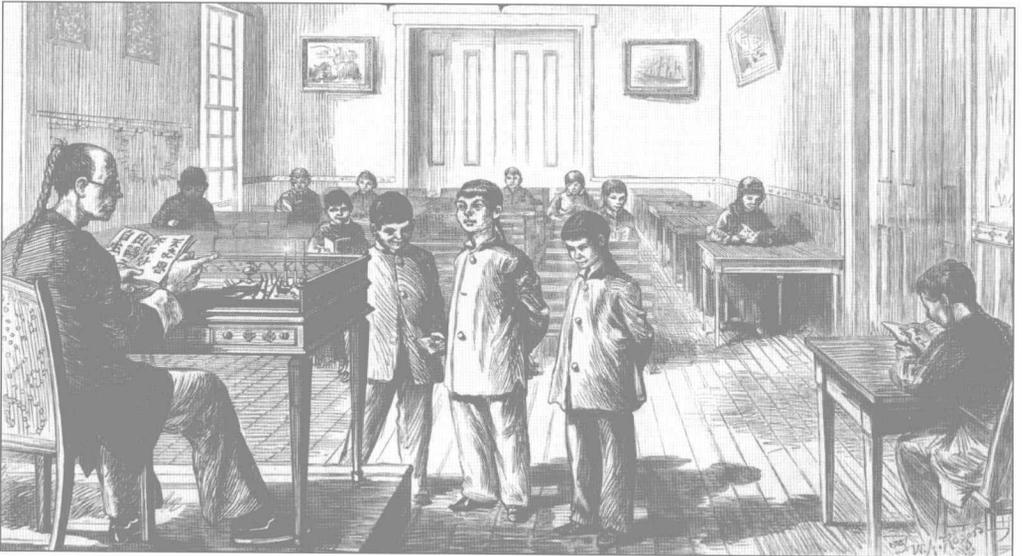


MANDARIN YUNG WING.

YUNG WING'S PORTRAIT, 1878. As American missionaries extended their influence in China, they began to recruit and enroll Chinese students in missionary schools in New England. The most prominent example was Yung Wing, who after studying in Morrison School in Hong Kong, was enrolled in Monson Academy in Massachusetts in 1847. Yung Wing went on to become the first Chinese student to receive a U.S. college degree, from Yale University in 1854. Yung Wing sought to promote modernization of China and helped the Chinese government to send groups of students to study in New England in the 1870s. His efforts were however hindered by both opponents of reforms in China and the anti-Chinese movement in the United States. Yung Wing's contribution is now widely recognized both in China and the United States. This wood-engraved illustration comes from *Harper's Weekly*, May 18, 1878. (Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society.)



CHINESE EDUCATIONAL MISSION BUILDING, 1878. The Chinese Educational Mission, sponsored by the Chinese government at the urging of Yung Wing, brought 120 students to Hartford, Connecticut, in the 1870s to study Western culture, science, and technology. The program was terminated in 1881 for various political reasons. The building pictured here in *Harper's Weekly* was located at 252 Collins Street and torn down in the 1960s to make way for St. Francis Hospital. (Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society.)



CHINESE CLASSROOM IN HARTFORD, 1878. *Harper's Weekly* featured the young students, all boys, in their traditional mode of learning, either seated at their desks or standing to talk with their teacher. The Chinese teacher's responsibility was to assure that students would retain their Chinese language and culture in the United States. (Courtesy of Connecticut Historical Society.)



FIRST GROUP OF CHINESE BOYS DEPARTING FOR HARTFORD, 1872. Thirty students are shown in front of the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company in Shanghai before their departure for the Chinese Educational Mission in 1872. The average age of the students was about 12. (Courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries.)



REUNION OF THE STUDENTS IN CHINA, 1890. Many of the students had stellar careers upon their return to China. From left to right are (first row) Liang Pao Chew, mining engineer; Li Lai Tong; Kwong King Yang, railroad engineer; Tong Sze Chung, naval officer; and Yen Fu Lee, newspaper editor; (second row) Wong Wai Chung; Jeme Tien Yau, railroad engineer; Chung Mun Yew, railroad director; Tong Kai Son; Kin Ta Ting, doctor; Liang Pao Shi, railway official; Kwong Young Kong, mining engineer; Luk Hin Shen; Willy Tseng; and Liu Yu Lin, consular service. (Courtesy of Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries.)