

CHINATOWN

MOST TIME, HARD TIME

CHALSA M. LOO

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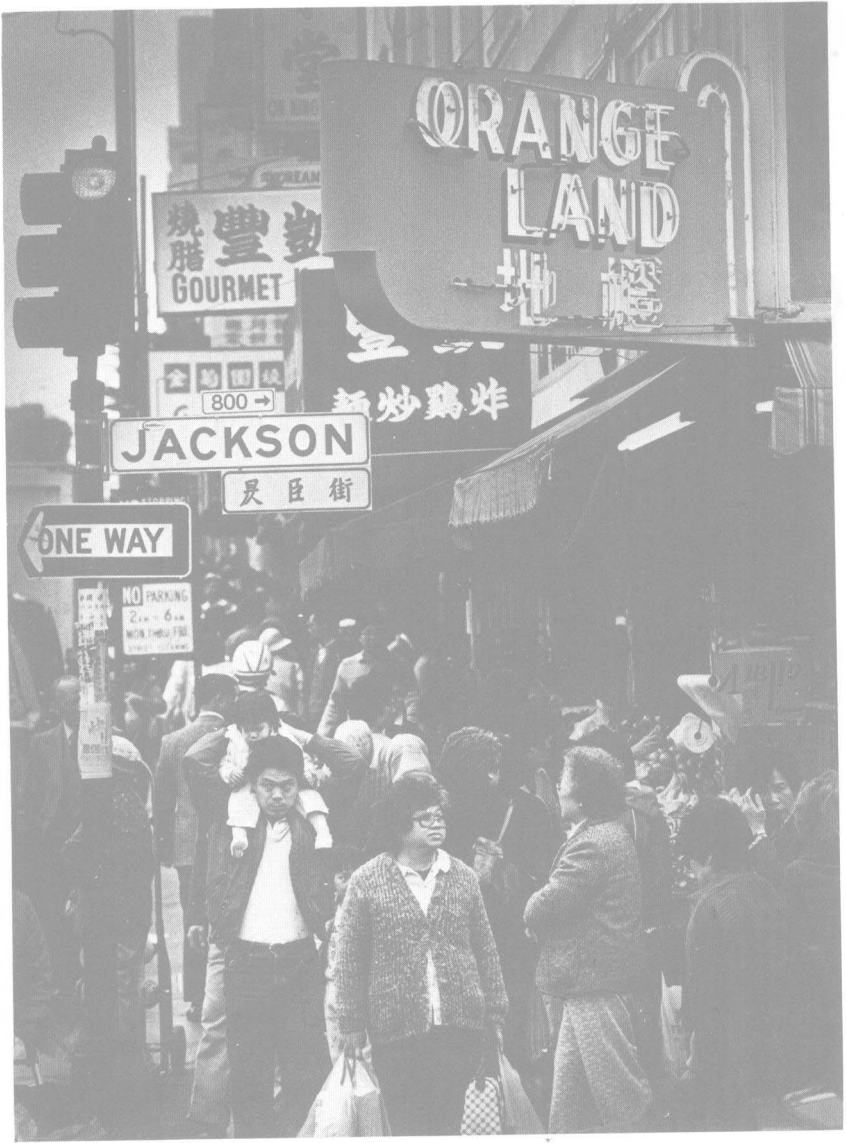
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The heart of Chinatown, this scene depicts the contrasts of the neighborhood: shopping conveniences poised against crowding that runs three-persons deep. On weekends, pedestrians maneuver to a slow and jagged crawl. In 1985, Orangeland, the buildings on this corner that housed 195 Chinese immigrant families and elderly, was slated for demolition. Market-rate condominiums were to take its place. In order to preserve the existing housing, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted against the zoning change required for the condominium development. 1985. (Photograph by Craig Lee, courtesy of the *San Francisco Examiner*, copyright © *San Francisco Examiner*/Craig Lee.) Reprinted by permission.

To all who helped to make this book possible



Depicting the starkness of some of Chinatown's interiors, this girl's play area consists of a broom, broken chair, garbage pail, crate, and paint cans. Conspicuously absent are toys, curtains, or pictures to grace the windows and walls. 1976. (Photograph courtesy of Pok-Chi Lau.) Reprinted by permission.

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Approaching a neat, orderly room in one of the low-income residential hotels, this is the home of a dignified man in his 90s who lives alone. Even with no place to go, this well-groomed man dresses in a three-piece suit, a behavior that is characteristic of many men in his generation. From his sole window he has a full view of a brick wall, quite common for many rooms in Chinatown. With the natural light from his window, he reads the daily Chinese newspaper. This man is proudly self-sufficient and is content to live in Chinatown. 1984. (Photograph courtesy of Crystal K. D. Huie.) Reprinted by permission.

Death of a Candy Store

I walked in sight of my assigned address, then realized this was no stranger's home but a familiar place from my past. Not less than seven years ago, this address represented every child's dream—an unthinkable variety of gum, candy, and affordable toys. Better yet, it was all within a kid's arm's reach. The candy store was a very small cubicle, crowded and overstocked with every conceivable type of cavity-creating edible. It had the latest in candy, baseball card packages, and an unrelenting count of water pistols.

I approached the doorway only to see that much had changed. Its faded, peeling green exterior, and the rusted and outdated "Things Go Better With Coke" sign were not reminiscent of the flourishing candy shop I once knew. I knocked because I could find no doorbell. Quickly, a middle-aged man came to the door dressed in his mein knop (cotton jacket), tall hi (Chinese slippers), and extremely worn-out pants.

I identified myself and asked if he had received our letter. He said "yes," then immediately asked if the Chinatown Housing and Health Research Project (CHHRP) had anything to do with preventing private businesses or corporations from buying out the "little people." He was fearful that his residency might be in jeopardy. I said that this interview could indirectly help him but that CHHRP was not directly involved in preventing corporate buy-outs. Curious about our study, he welcomed me in anyway.

While entering, I noticed two walls still lined with shelves. But no candy now occupied the space. Instead, canned goods, old clothing, boxed games, and other storage materials appeared. A bunch of fabric lay in a pile by a sewing machine. The floor was concrete, showing little attempt to make the converted home cozy. I wondered if this was a candy shop converted into a home or a home awkwardly pieced together by remnants from the candy shop.

This respondent was an educated man who felt he was constantly waging an uphill battle. He didn't know what to do. Calling his job a "treadmill existence," he felt in a rut. Life had become too much of a routine; it lacked purpose or meaning.

He and his wife couldn't communicate. He only understood Chinese but couldn't speak it. She only spoke Chinese. He was extremely Americanized, while she was traditionally Chinese. He felt his wife expressed only disappointment in him and in the grim life they faced. He was forced to close down his store because of a triple increase in rent over a 10-year period. With the income he and his wife brought in, they could barely pay the bills and had nothing to save. Inflation and rent hikes were his unbeatable foes.

Upon concluding the interview, I thanked him for being so candid and open. He looked down at the floor, shook his head, and said, "I didn't think it would be such a grueling experience."

Researching Ethnic Minority Populations

Chinatown, San Francisco stands as the birthplace of Asian America and is one of the longest standing ethnic communities in the United States. This crowded, low-income community exists in the midst of abundant wealth and is visited by roughly 5,000 tourists per day. Within this community live 31,000 Chinese Americans, only part of some 60 million persons of color in this nation. This book provides social science research data about this historic community and its people. The portrayal, which combines scholarly and personal contexts, provides an understanding of the life problems, concerns, perceptions, and needs of a major segment of the Chinese American population. The research tests existing hypotheses about Asian Americans, corrects erroneous stereotypes, enlarges our empirical base of knowledge in order to train human service professionals to work with persons of color, and provides relevant data for policy planning and service delivery. By addressing key research issues relevant to Chinatown residents, the book also raises issues that are relevant to other low-income and ethnic minority populations.

This work documents a distinctive American community from an interdisciplinary perspective that incorporates psychology, sociology, urban studies, ethnic studies, community studies, history, women's studies, and linguistics. Within the field of psychology, this work bridges clinical, environmental, community, and social psychology. Methodologically, the work represents a model of quantitative, multidomain interview sample survey research, a form of scientific inquiry that is well suited to assessing the beliefs and perceptions of a population.