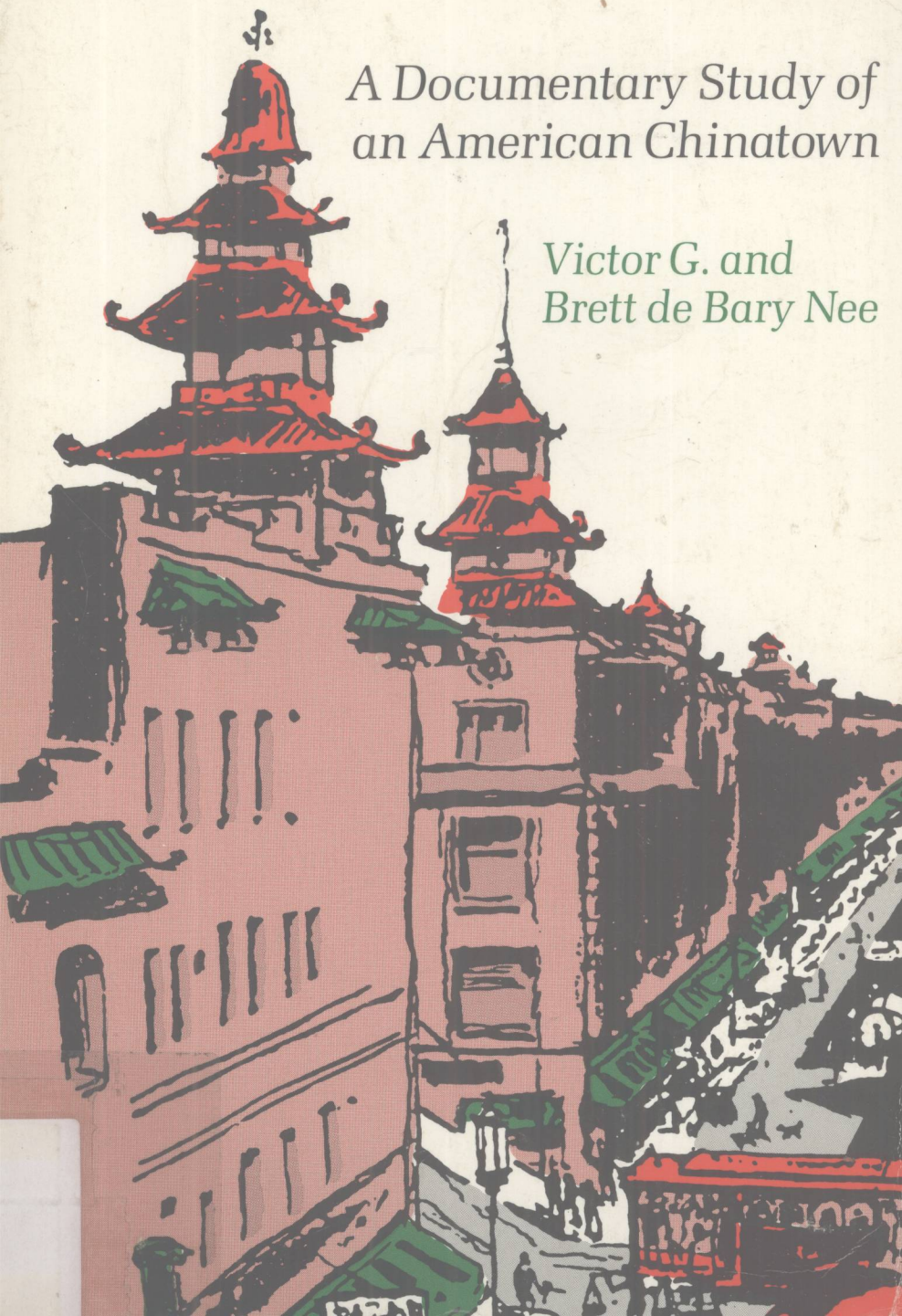


LONGTIME CALIFORN'

*A Documentary Study of
an American Chinatown*

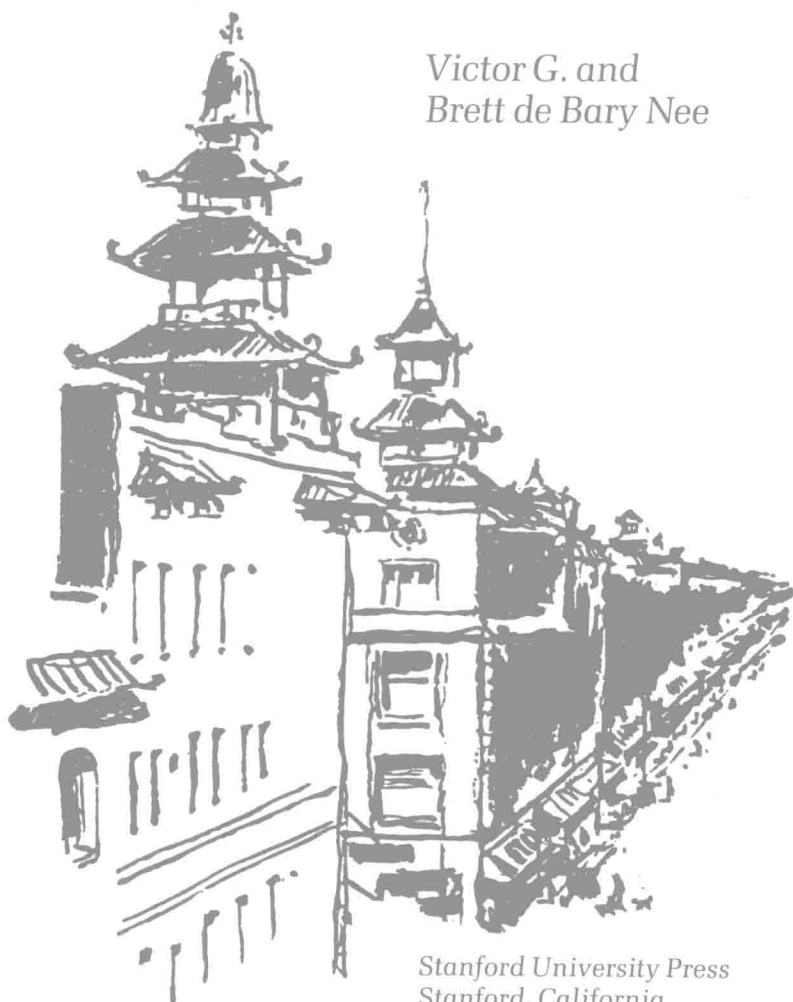
*Victor G. and
Brett de Bary Nee*



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Stanford University Press
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A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown

*This book is dedicated to:
Gilbert and Margaret Nee
and Him Mark Lai*

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Introduction

I AIMS, METHOD, AND SCOPE

This book is about a community and a people whose roots extend deep into the American past. Most Americans know of San Francisco's Chinatown, yet few can claim an understanding of this community, the role which its people played in the making of the American West, and the rich tradition and culture which it spawned in its one hundred and twenty year history. In a very real sense Chinatown has been a blind spot of American interest and concern, its people too small in number to pose a serious threat, and the reality of their history in America too painful an experience to remember. This book attempts to bring to the surface the past of Chinatown which has for so long been ignored as well as the present-day life of the people who make up the community. What forces created Chinatown and continue to perpetuate its existence? What has been the source of its exceptional cohesiveness and resilience as an American ethnic community? What is the consciousness of its people? Against the background of the historic process of Chinese immigration as that of the first, free, nonwhite people to America, these are the broadest questions with which this book attempts to deal.

Longtime Californ' is a book which grew in stages. It was initially conceived of simply as a collection of interviews with people who lived in Chinatown. Since we ourselves had read little about Chinatown, American Chinese history, or California history before we began the book, we entered the community in June 1970, with no careful plan for research or hypothesis to prove, just a general interest in talking with people. All the concepts and theories in the book developed gradually after this point—often taking off

from the moment of reflection or the flash of insight of a local resident—and grew directly from our conversations and observations of life in Chinatown. The limitation of written materials on Chinatown published so far in America made it all the more essential for us to rely on oral tradition and physical culture in attempting to understand the community.

Our first two weeks in Chinatown were spent familiarizing ourselves with the community. We had only one contact when we began. While this friend made arrangements for us to meet people, we also walked around starting conversations at random, simply by introducing ourselves to people and explaining that we were writing a book. The striking scene of the darkly-clothed, elderly men in Chinatown, who seemed to spend almost all their daylight hours in elaborate conversations on Portsmouth Square, immediately caught our attention. Our knowledge of Chinatown's history, however, was at that point too limited to guide us into meaningful conversations with these old men, so, while we struck up a few acquaintances, the first attempts to interview them proved frustrating. Otherwise, the most accessible people in the community at this point were the social workers who staffed Chinatown's newly established anti-poverty agencies, church workers, and a few gregarious shopkeepers. Within two weeks, we were able to get some idea of the situation in Chinatown through our talks with these people.

We had two strong impressions of Chinatown during this early period of exposure. The first was a general sense of surprise at the extent of the problems resulting from the low income level of the community. Off the main streets we found that housing was overcrowded and poor, we learned that medical services were limited, and we quickly noticed the presence of conspicuous numbers of unemployed men. The second impression was that Chinatown had been highly politicized. There was an almost visible current of tension running between different groups in the community identified as "the establishment" (the leadership of traditional social institutions, particularly the Chinese Six Companies), the "liberals" (social workers), and the "radicals" (college

students involved in community projects), as well as between smaller, personal cliques which were loosely affiliated with these central groups. We learned that there were three major causes for this tension: a bitter struggle which had taken place since 1965 between establishment leaders and liberal social workers for control of the Chinatown anti-poverty program, which had been introduced to cope with the community's intensified social and economic problems in the wake of the post 1965 immigration; the development of youth rebellion and an exploding juvenile crime rate among Chinatown teenagers; and the recent arrival to the community of radical students from nearby university campuses who had held public rallies and demonstrations against the Six Companies. In June 1970, liberal leaders in Chinatown were attempting to spearhead a campaign directed toward the city government for greater political and economic justice toward American Chinese. Emerging from several years of confrontation with Chinatown's traditional leadership, the liberals were convinced that it lacked both the financial resources and political know-how to deal with the community's needs. Buoyed by the rising tide of minority rights movements among other racial groups, ethnic consciousness was at a high peak in Chinatown and references to exploitation and racial discrimination against American Chinese came up in conversations with a high degree of frequency.

On the basis of these early weeks of exposure and some limited background reading we were able to put together a crude picture of the community's social structure and history and to develop for the first time a systematic plan of interviewing. Although we later came to perceive differentiations in Chinatown society more clearly, we began mapping out a schema of important groups in the community whom we felt it would be necessary to interview: elderly people, the "establishment," immigrants, shopkeepers, male workers, women, and youth. By talking to people from all the generations present in the community, we also hoped to be able to trace the process of its historical development from at least the late nineteenth century on. The garment industry, which we discovered was the subject of particular

controversy that summer, became a separate and distinct topic to examine through interviews.

We generally relied on personal contacts or references when we set up interviews. In order to constantly expand the circle of subjects, we made it a rule after each interview (particularly if it had been successful) to ask the interviewee for suggestions or introductions to other friends who might be interesting to talk to. Because of the extreme factionalism in Chinatown that summer, maintaining contacts with all the different groups in the community was a persistent problem. We were able to cope with this only through a constant (and often nerve-wracking) effort to minimize the interjection of our own opinions and reactions into conversations, thus maintaining the appearance of "on-lookers," since at that time identification with any particular group in Chinatown usually meant automatic rejection by opposing groups. We also, of course, sought to avoid involvement with any single group or nexus of relations in a way that would affect the objectivity of the study.

The method of interviewing we relied on least was formal questionnaires. These we used only when they were asked for in advance and when the interviewee seemed to feel more at ease being able to anticipate questions as they came up. Generally, however, we found the use of questionnaires resulted in a stiff and unilluminating conversation. People tended to respond as if to an exam, in short, functional sentences which involved almost no introspection. For the most part, therefore, we preferred to do interviews informally, rather like open-ended conversations in which the greatest value was placed on letting the individual find and talk freely on the subjects which interested him or her. This second method of interviewing repeatedly seemed to bring richer participation and to involve a full range of responses.

Still, however, we usually found it necessary to guide an interview along certain broad areas of subject matter to ensure that the conversation did not become completely extraneous. Since we were always keenly interested in the defining characteristics and interrelationships of various generations and social groups in Chinatown, we made it a

rule before an interview to familiarize ourselves with significant historic events or social processes which may have been part of the experience of the person we were talking to. Whenever possible we met with the person before the interview to help us with this. On the next meeting, we would then begin the interview with very simple questions about the person's life, keeping alert to areas where his own biography tended to intersect with broad historical movements. Usually we would move chronologically, covering experiences common to every life, starting with memories of parents and childhood, education, choice of occupation, and so forth. In most cases we found that after a certain amount of this type of reminiscence, the conversation naturally began to focus on certain events which were seen by the person as pivotal experiences in his own life. Often, a high degree of concentration and clarity developed in the process of this step-by-step reflection on events and resulted in insights of exceptional depth and candor. A second value of covering common life events in the course of an interview was that, once we had collected such information from a fairly broad cross-section of the community, we were able to perceive much more clearly than we had at first the way in which economic position and social background affected and changed people's lives. By including autobiographical questions along with certain questions on distinctive features of Chinatown (participation in its complex institutional life, perception of the non-Chinese society outside, etc.) we tried to build an objective picture of Chinatown society as a whole, based on the way in which different statements reinforced or conflicted with each other. By the end of our research we had conducted four hundred interviews, including informal untaped conversations.

We deeply regretted that our inability to speak Cantonese limited most of our interviewing in Chinatown to conversations we could carry on in English. We discovered quite early that almost all of our meaningful relationships in the community were with people who spoke English. This inability primarily affected our interviews with recent immigrants, and we felt disappointed, in finishing the book, that the depth and intimacy with which we were able to portray

this group had been curtailed by our lack. On the other hand, as our interviewing progressed, we found the linguistic problem rather less of an obstacle to understanding life in Chinatown than we had originally anticipated. Contrary to our first impression, with the exception of the recent immigrants a large percentage of people in the different segments of the Chinatown community either spoke or had some facility with English. We therefore developed the practice of doing long and numerous interviews with English-speaking members of each social group, while simultaneously conducting a smaller number of interviews through interpreters, in Cantonese. Although interviewing through interpreters was bulky and somewhat less rich than direct interviews, we were able to use these interviews in Cantonese to check information and attitudes we had discovered in the English interviews. In cases where important experiences emerged which were not duplicated in English interviews, we put a translated Cantonese interview into the text.

We returned to Cambridge at the end of summer 1970, with a large box of taped interviews and notes. That winter, we listened to the tapes again, taking notes on them and checking for correlations and contrasts in what people said. Since, after four months of daily exposure and contact with people in Chinatown, we had gained a fairly comprehensive picture of the structure of the community, its points of crisis and friction, as well as persistent elements of consciousness which seemed to come up in the conversation of almost everyone who lived there, we were now able to define what we thought were critical questions in the study and to check each interview for the ways in which it expressed a response to them. As we sifted through explanations offered by the interviews as to the "whys" of various aspects of Chinatown's existence, a theoretical structure of the book began to emerge. Why had Chinese come to America? How had they sustained themselves economically there? Why did they live in San Francisco's Chinatown? To which society was their bond stronger, American or Chinese? With which people in Chinatown did they carry on their social life? What values defined these relationships? Which institutions and organizations in Chinatown did they feel were

important? Why? Who were the leaders of Chinatown? Who were the "rich" and "poor" in Chinatown? Why were wages and prices in Chinatown lower than outside? How was Chinatown regarded by the white society outside? What was their own experience of the society outside? Did they feel there is, or has been, racial discrimination against American Chinese? We put together a first draft of the book composed of selections from interviews which answered these questions, and which we conceived of as a community study presented completely in terms of the words and perceptions of the people who lived there. In structuring the book, we attempted to emphasize a binding theme which struck us as running through all the interviews: that Chinatown (like any other community) does not exist in isolation from the larger society around it; that, in fact, every aspect of its life bears the influence of this relationship with the outside. Thus, while the tie to Chinese society and its cultural forms had been constant throughout Chinatown's history, it had been the demands of the American context which played the dominant role in shaping the community, its distinct subculture emerging, in a sense, as the vector between the two converging forces. Chinatown, then, was not a microcosm of Chinese society on American soil, but a unique American community with a history and language, and institutions of its own, the reality of which reflects life in the growing inner-city ghettos of large American cities.

In May 1971, we returned to Chinatown for a second and longer period of exposure and lived there for eleven more months completing work on this book. Initially, we had come to fill in gaps in the interviews because we felt the evidence they presented raised questions which we were still unable to answer. We wanted to test some of the ideas we had and also compare our first impression of the community with what we found a year later. There was, as it turned out, a striking contrast between the atmosphere of summer 1971 and that of the preceding summer. The continuation of national recession and the failure of federal anti-poverty programs in alleviating long-term problems of the community seemed to have dampened the intensity with which people called for and anticipated changes in the

social and economic status of the community. At the same time, the acute sense of racial tension seemed to be subsiding in the wake of the start of improved relations between the United States and China. The mood of Chinatown seemed less agitated than it had been the summer before. But the community as a whole seemed to have changed relatively little. Its pace of life and everyday cycle of activity seemed familiar. The pressing problems which had affected the lives of the people remained unchanged: employment difficulties continued, the housing crisis deepened, the juvenile delinquency rate climbed, depressed wages continued to limit people's options and range of activities. With the change in the political mood of the community, our own focus of observation came to settle more on permanent and long-standing patterns of daily life. When we finished the few interviews which needed completion, we moved into a new stage of work. We terminated taped interviews and began a period of simply watching different facets of life, taking detailed notes on scenes, social situations, and even physical structures, and carrying on long conversations with people during which we attempted to clarify our understanding of various aspects of the community. At this point our idea of the structure of the book also changed, as we began to realize the need for analytical and descriptive writing, in addition to the interviews, to convey the complexity of the background and overall context of the Chinatown community.

The major result of this change in structure was an expansion of the book's treatment of the Chinatown past, going beyond even the memories of its oldest residents. The longer we lived in Chinatown, the more we came to sense that its present configuration grew out of a past which we had not yet clearly grasped. The weight of this past seemed to be an integral part of the consciousness of people in the community and to continue to affect their behavior, so much so that we decided to begin a session of reading in primary sources from nineteenth and early twentieth century history which might illuminate the origins of Chinatown. During this period we read and studied nineteenth century California newspapers, primarily the *Alta Califor-*

nia, congressional records, pamphlets, diaries, and looked at old photographs all collected in the Rare Books Room of the San Francisco Public Library. We found these materials invaluable as documentation of the white response to Chinese in America and led to a real breakthrough in our work. For the first time we had a vivid sense of the history which had so often been referred to by older people in Chinatown and which we had had difficulty coming to terms with before. We could now understand the basis for the harsh or bitter stories of a violent past which we had tended to discount as exaggerated when we first heard them, despite the frequency with which the same stories were told by different people. We realized, in fact, that most of the experiences we had heard about from men who arrived in California at the turn of the century did not even extend back to more intense periods of anti-Chinese violence between 1870 and 1890. We incorporated much of what we learned from this research into the second chapter of this book, "American California."

The investigation of Chinatown's origins also produced an additional theme for the internal organization of the book. While maintaining the book's original aim of examining the present-day community in its totality, we now attempted to highlight the coexistence in contemporary Chinatown of three distinct societies, one spawned during the earliest period of her history and remaining on the fringes of the two which define the community today. We identified these three societies as the "bachelor society" (composed of immigrant male laborers who dominated Chinatown during the nineteenth century), the small-business centered "family society" (which grew up with the increasing presence of women in Chinatown later in the twentieth century), and an emerging society of working-class families, composed of new immigrants who have entered the community in large numbers since 1965. To clarify the differentiation between the three societies, we rearranged the interviews in the book to follow a more "chronological" order, beginning with the oldest generation of bachelor laborers and their memories. In this way we hoped to convey what we ourselves had discovered in

Chinatown: that the past is an organic part of the present, that its vestiges are visible in attitudes, physical edifices, and institutions, and that ultimately the causes for much of what is observed in the present lie in the past.

Another development of our second stay in Chinatown was the opportunity to develop friendships with people we had met or spoken to during the first summer. During this second year, almost our entire social life and recreational life centered around Chinatown. We visited friends at their homes, invited them to our apartment, and in many cases, asked for their help in evaluating their interviews (whether they had been superficial or not). We took breaks from writing by going down to movies in the Kearny Street basements, going on long walks through Chinatown taking notes, or sitting in the coffee shops, restaurants, or Portsmouth Square. We began to know a large number of people by name who would give us the latest news when we ran into them on the street, and tease us about walking around with our notebooks and pads. People were always inquiring about the progress of the book and wondering when it would come out. Thus, in contrast to the first summer, when we felt tense and uncertain about our relationship to Chinatown, we now felt relaxed and at home. There were several reasons for this. We became increasingly aware that Chinatown was not at all the "closed" community which it is always portrayed to be by the outside media, but one which had become accustomed to a constant arrival of immigrants and a diverse population. Particularly after the introduction of the anti-poverty programs to the community, many suburban-bred Chinese began to return and involve themselves in Chinatown—Victor was quickly identified as part of this group. We also found that people were generally encouraging and positive about the prospect of a community study done by a fellow American Chinese. They agreed it had been necessary to return to Chinatown for a longer period of work in order to deal responsibly with its complicated society and past. Many expressed a sense that they had been victimized by a long history of misunderstanding, oversimplification, and distortion of the American Chinese community by those who lived outside. They felt there was