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SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN



Judy Yung and the
Chinese Historical Society of America

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CHINATOWN



THE CHINESE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA (CHSA). Founded in 1963, CHSA is dedicated to fostering an understanding of the Chinese American experience through exhibitions, education, research, and publications. Its Museum and Learning Center, located in the landmark Julia Morgan YWCA building at 965 Clay Street in San Francisco, features the main exhibition, "The Chinese of America: Toward a More Perfect Union," as well as rotating exhibits of visual artists and distinct aspects of Chinese Americana. CHSA publishes a monthly newsletter and an annual journal, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*. For more information, visit <http://www.chsa.org>.

ON THE COVER: This publicity photograph of three boys building a sand pyramid at the corner of Grant Avenue and Pine Street was released by the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce sometime in the 1930s. (Courtesy of California Historical Society.)

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*This book is dedicated to my parents Tom Yip Jing and Jew Law Ying, who
chose to make our home in San Francisco's Chinatown.*



PORTSMOUTH SQUARE, 1946. Author Judy Yung was born in San Francisco's Chinatown, the youngest of five girls, from left to right, Sandra, Patricia, Judy, Sharon, and Virginia. A sixth child, Warren, was born two years later.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	6
About the Author	6
Introduction	7
1. Tong Yun Fow: 1848–1906	9
2. Oriental City: 1906–1945	43
3. Gilded Ghetto: 1945–2000	81
4. Chinatown Today	119
Bibliography	125
Key to Historic Sites in Chinatown	126
Street Map of Chinatown	127

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Judy Yung is professor emerita of American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Dr. Yung is currently working on her husband's memoirs, *The Adventures of Eddie Fung: Chinatown Kid, Texas Cowboy, and POW Survivor*.

She has worked as a librarian at the Chinatown Branch Library in San Francisco and the Asian Branch Library in Oakland, as associate editor of *East/West* newspaper, and director of the Chinese Women of America Research Project in San Francisco. Her books include *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940* (1980); *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1995); *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1999); and *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (2006).

INTRODUCTION

San Francisco's Chinatown has the reputation for being the oldest, largest, and most famous Chinese enclave outside of Asia. Bordering Nob Hill on the west, the financial district on the east, and North Beach on the north, Chinatown dates back to the 1850s, when 30,000 Chinese from Guangdong Province came for the California gold rush. Some settled in the vicinity of Portsmouth Square, establishing businesses to serve the growing population in San Francisco. After the gold rush was over, many more Chinese men, recruited to build the railroads and work in agriculture and manufacturing, came. By 1882, when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting the further immigration of Chinese laborers to this country, Chinatown had grown to 15,000 people, occupying the 12-block area that remains its core today.

Early Chinese settlers called Chinatown Tong Yun Fow or "town of the Tang people," so named because of their reverence for the Tang Dynasty. On the one hand, they chose to live in this neighborhood because it provided them with everything they needed—work, food and supplies, mutual aid organizations, religious houses, medical care, entertainment, and newspapers. On the other hand, racial discrimination and hostilities in the 1870s prevented them from finding better jobs and housing outside Chinatown and from sending for their wives in China. It wasn't long before Chinatown turned into an overcrowded slum, notorious for its tong wars, opium dens, and prostitution. Tourists came to Chinatown as much to see this underworld as to shop for exotic curios from the "Orient."

When all of Chinatown was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire and the city made plans to move Chinatown to a less desirable location, Chinese merchants acted quickly to rebuild on the original location. The new "Oriental City," designed in a "faux-Chinese" style to attract tourists, was cleaner, safer, and more modern. Moreover, the earthquake, in destroying all the birth certificates in city hall, provided a way for Chinese immigrants to circumvent the unjust exclusion laws by claiming U.S. citizenship and sending for their families in China. Slowly Chinatown's population grew from a low of 8,000 in 1920 to 18,000 by the eve of World War II. The streets of Chinatown bustled with shoppers, tourists, and family life. Prevented from integrating into the larger society, however, Chinese remained stuck in Chinatown, living in crowded quarters and working menial jobs.

It was not until World War II, when China and the United States became allies that conditions improved for Chinese Americans. Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, granting Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens and allowing a small number of Chinese immigrants to come to this country. In the following decades, many anti-Chinese laws were revoked, enabling Chinese to marry whites, own land, find better jobs, and live outside Chinatown. People began moving to other parts of the city and to the suburbs, leaving behind the elderly, single men, and low-income families. If not for the booming tourist trade and increased immigration in response to the War Brides Act and, more importantly, the Immigration Act of 1965, Chinatown would have become a ghost town.

As a result of renewed immigration, the Chinese population in San Francisco grew from 25,000 in 1950 to 82,000 in 1980. The influx of Chinese immigrants and families revitalized Chinatown, providing it with a large labor force while creating new demands for Chinese food, goods, and services. The streets of Chinatown teemed with life again. Tourism remained Chinatown's top moneymaker, but behind the glitz, ghetto conditions of substandard housing, low-wage jobs, inadequate health care, and street crime began taking their toll. In response, a new generation of Chinese American activists, inspired by the civil rights movement, organized demonstrations, lobbied all levels of government for funding, and established over 30 new organizations to deal with the community's many socioeconomic problems. Then in 1989, San Francisco was hit by the Loma Prieta earthquake, which seriously damaged the Embarcadero Freeway, Chinatown's primary vehicular artery. When the city decided to demolish the freeway despite the pleas of the community, Chinatown suffered such severe economic hardship that its future vitality became uncertain.

Recovery has been slow. Chinatown now ranks as the third rather than second most visited attraction in San Francisco, after Fisherman's Wharf and Union Square. But throughout its history, Chinatown has never been just a tourist attraction. To this day, it exists simultaneously as a residential neighborhood, business community, and cultural center for Chinese Americans of diverse backgrounds. The images collected in this book document the realities of daily life and major transformations in the past 150 years. They also attest to the tenacity and skills of a community to overcome adversity and maintain Chinatown as a vibrant place for residents, businesses, and tourists.

One

TONG YUN FOW

1848–1906



PORTSMOUTH PLAZA, c. 1865. Chinatown was born in the vicinity of Portsmouth Plaza, which was barren land just 20 years before this photograph was taken. Known as the “Cradle of San Francisco,” it was here that navy captain John B. Montgomery planted the American flag on July 9, 1846, claiming the Mexican port of Yerba Buena for the United States; here that newspaper editor Samuel Brannan sparked the gold rush by running through the plaza yelling, “Gold on the American River;” and here that Mayor Geary and a committee of San Franciscans officially welcomed 300 “China Boys,” presenting them with Christian literature in Chinese on August 28, 1850. (Courtesy of Society of California Pioneers.)



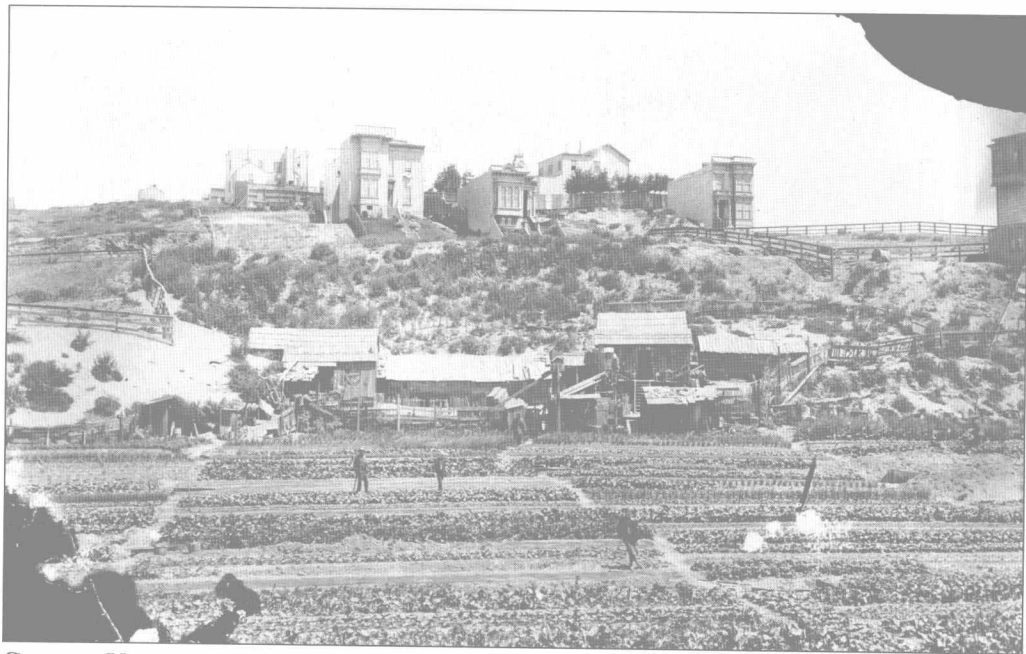
PARROTT BUILDING, c. 1876. Chinese labor was instrumental in the building of San Francisco. The John Parrott Building at the corner of California and Montgomery Streets was built in 1852 by Chinese masons using granite stone cut to specification from China. The construction was so sturdy that the building withstood the 1906 earthquake. (Courtesy of CHSA collection.)



CHINESE CIGAR FACTORY ON MERCHANT STREET, 1869. As mining declined in the late 1850s, manufacturing became San Francisco's chief economic base. Chinese workers, generally paid less than white workers, were hired to make cigars, shoes, clothing, and woolens. Many Chinese opened their own factories in Chinatown after they learned the trade. (Courtesy of Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.)



CHINESE FISHERMEN, c. 1897. As early as 1854, about 150 Chinese fishermen settled on the south side of Rincon Point, operating 25 boats and catching 3,000 pounds of fish a day. These two fishermen are drying shrimp and squid to be sold locally or shipped to China, Japan, and the Hawaiian Islands. (Courtesy of CHSA collection.)



CHINESE VEGETABLE GARDEN, c. 1885. Initially Chinese could live and work anywhere. Some grew vegetables for the local market. The Chinese in this photograph are tending a vegetable garden at Union and Pierce Streets—then the outskirts of the city. (Courtesy of California Historical Society.)



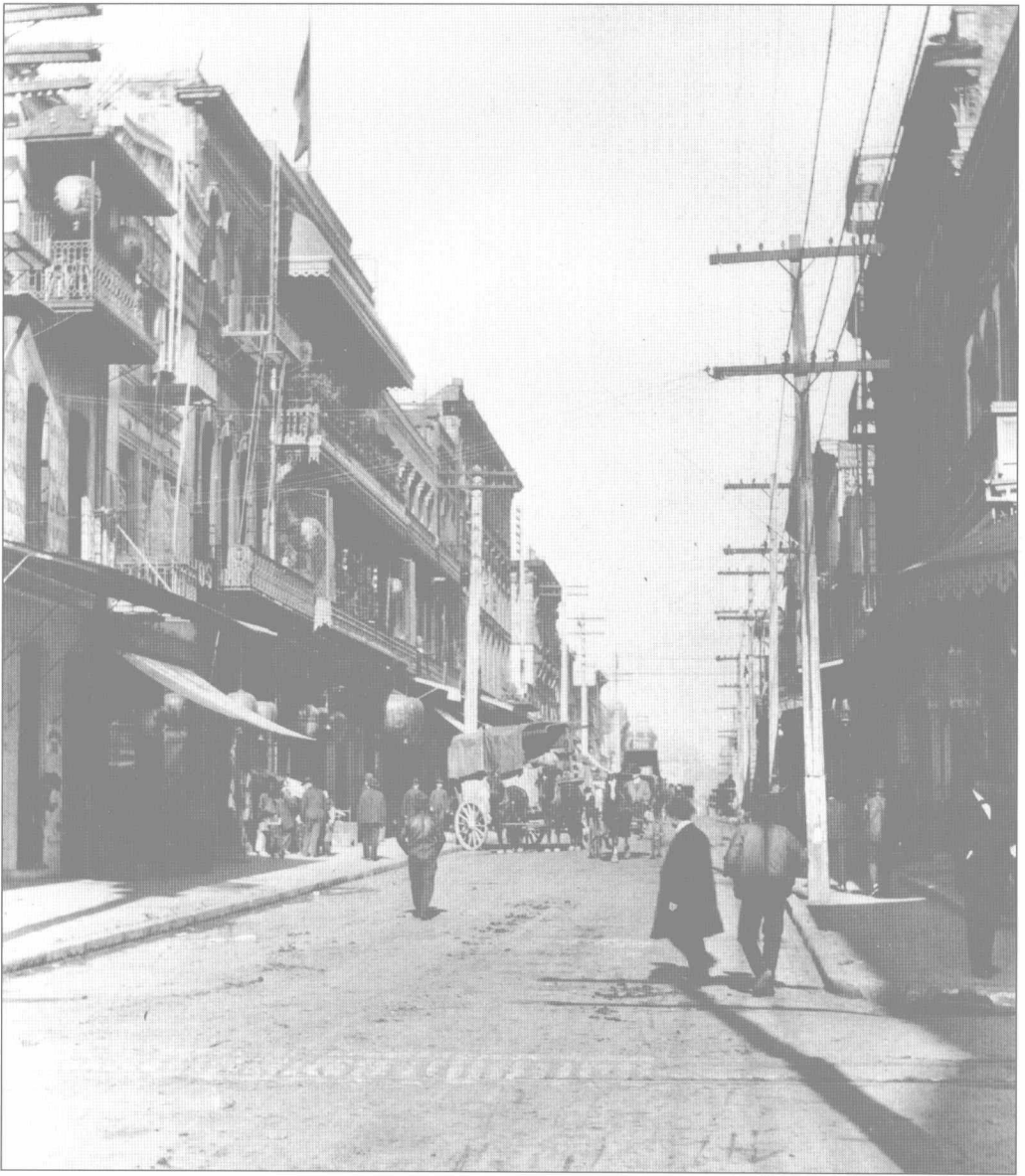
WING CHUN LAUNDRY AT 2460 SACRAMENTO STREET, 1906. With the shortage of female labor and a willingness on the part of the Chinese to take on any gainful job, many Chinese operated laundries or worked as cooks and domestics outside Chinatown. (Courtesy of Philip P. Choy.)



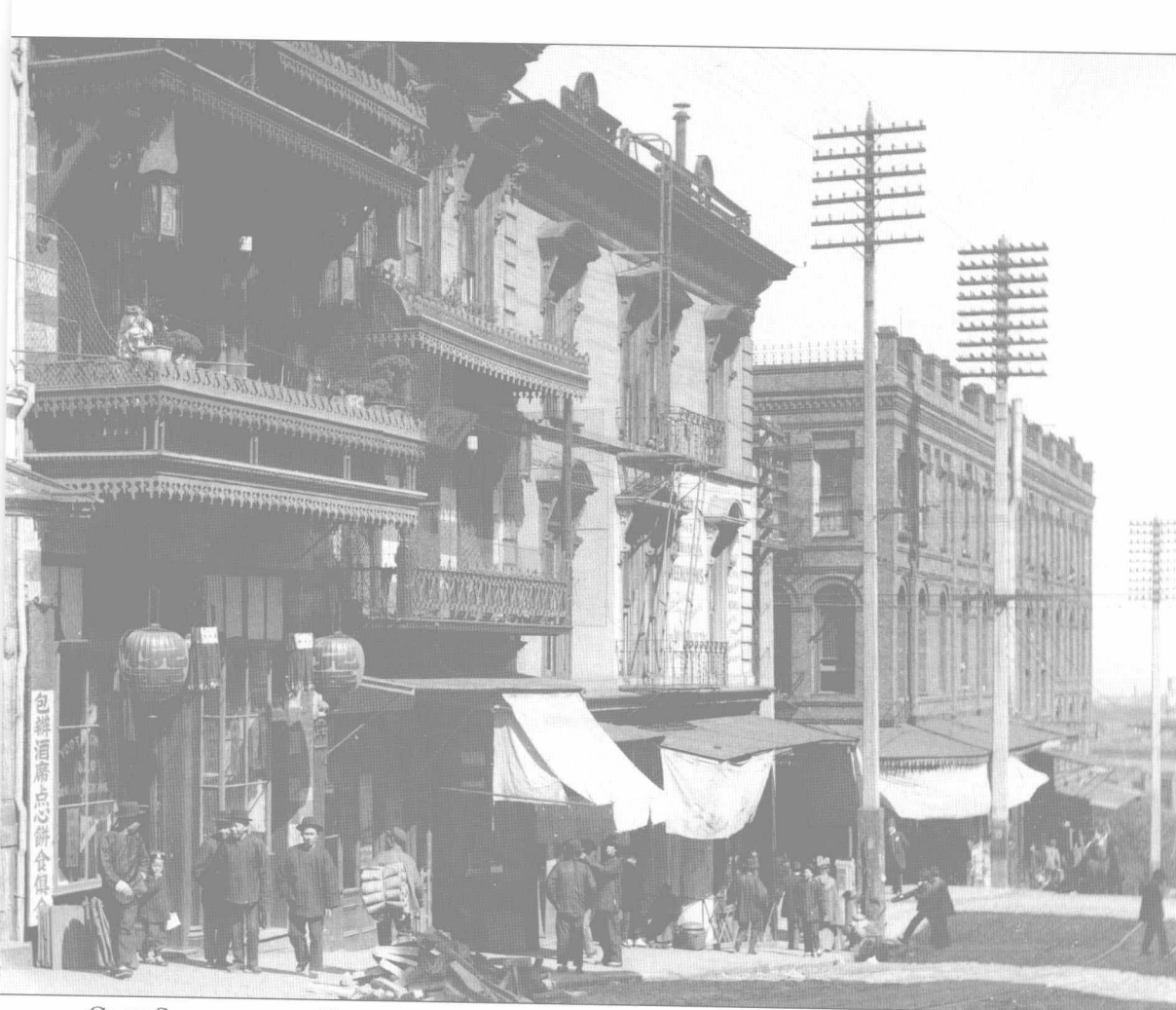
TONG YUN GAI, 1865. Sacramento Street, between Stockton and Kearny Streets, became known as Tong Yun Gai (street of the people of the Tang Dynasty) because it was here that the first Chinese stores and organizations were established in the early 1850s. (Courtesy of Society of California Pioneers.)



DUPONT STREET, C. 1880. As the original inhabitants vacated buildings along Dupont Street (later renamed Grant Avenue) and moved to other parts of the city, Chinese became the new tenants. They operated storefronts at the street level and shared boarding rooms behind and above the stores. To further maximize space use, they sometimes added balconies and awnings to the front of the buildings. (Photograph by Isaiah West Taber; courtesy of Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.)



DUPONT AND CLAY STREETS, 1900. By the 1870s, Dupont Street had replaced Sacramento Street as the economic center of Chinatown. A directory published by the Wells Fargo Bank in 1878 listed 423 Chinese firms, with 121 located on Dupont Street, 60 on Sacramento Street, and 60 on Jackson Street. (Courtesy of Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.)



CLAY STREET ABOVE DUPONT, C. 1900. Chinese had a distinctive way of decorating the old Italianate Victorian buildings. They placed flowerpots on the balconies, hung big red lanterns from the canopies, and affixed Chinese signboards to the walls. The Chinese sign on the left is an advertisement for a restaurant: "Will arrange banquets—full line of light refreshments available." (Courtesy of CHSA collection.)