



SAN FRANCISCO Chinatown

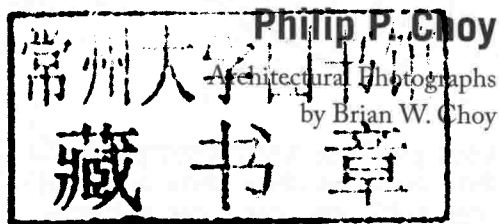
A Guide to Its History
& Architecture

Philip P. Choy

Architectural Photographs
by Brian W. Choy

SAN FRANCISCO Chinatown

A Guide to Its History
and Architecture



City Lights • San Francisco

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Philip P. Choy

Architectural Photographs
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*This book is dedicated to the late Him Mark Lai,
Dean of Chinese American History.*

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PREFACE

From the time of the Gold Rush of 1849 to the present, Chinatown has been a “must-see” in every guidebook on San Francisco. Chinatown in the 19th century was singled out as a blight on the urban landscape of the city, its infamous reputation spreading to the far corners of the nation. Visitors were warned not to wander alone but were advised instead to hire licensed guides for safety. Only the guides could take you through the maze of secret underground tunnels into the bowels of the earth, where you could witness a “peculiar” race dwelling in darkness.

Descriptions of a mysterious Chinese quarter were so compelling that John W. Wilson, a young man from a small village east of Indianapolis who joined the army during the Boxer Rebellion, returned home via San Francisco, determined to see Chinatown. In an oral history taken in 1969 by Thomas Krasean of the Indiana Historical Society, Wilson recalled his experience.

JW: And I come over to Frisco and we all wanted to see Chinatown, there was ten of us. So Chinatown was underground at that time, you know . . . City underneath. Did you never read about that? Boy, beat anything you ever saw in your life.

TK: Actually underground, you mean?

JW: Actually underground, business houses . . . opium dens and everything else down in under there. Well, we were standing in front of this agency waiting for a guide . . . there

was a Chinaman walked up . . . and said, "I am a guide. . . ." Well we hired him. We got underground and we went in a saloon . . . down a stairway and then . . . he says, "Now, you are underground. . . ."

The remainder of the interview tells how the guide, who held the only torchlight, vanished and left them wandering in the dark. While desperately searching for a way out, Wilson's friend nearly stepped through a trap door and if he had fallen through, he might never have been heard from again. According to Wilson, this was the way people were robbed. After their horrifying experience, he and his friend finally found their way out in the morning. The rest didn't get out until later that evening.

John Wilson continued:

But everybody had a different experience from the other fellow . . . wandering around, told they get into . . . opium dens and everything else, you know. Underground . . . that was underground before the earthquake. When the earthquake . . . thousands of people died under there that nobody ever known about.

These images of an infamous Chinatown began to change after the 1906 Earthquake. Guides applying for licenses issued by the police commission were warned not to refabricate and promote the evil spectacle of an underground Chinatown, lest their licenses be revoked. Public opinion began to improve, aided by a series of positive articles run by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The Chinese also

promoted this improvement by planning a new Oriental City.

Today, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s and '70s, the social pendulum has swung toward the appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity. Chinatown is now singled out as an asset to the urban landscape of the city. Thousands come to visit the same 19th century "exotic heathen temples" with neither disdain nor contempt but with intellectual curiosity, to dine with the locals where once no white man dared to eat the strange odoriferous food. Case in point: when the *San Francisco Chronicle* on April 20th reported the closing of Sam Wo's Restaurant, a dirty, rickety, narrow, three-story, one-hundred-year-old hole in the wall condemned by Public Health for conditions unsuitable for the preparation and storage of food, a block-long line of old-time Chinese and non-Chinese customers waited to enjoy a final meal there. Each spring when the parade dragon rears its magnificent golden head, thousands of visitors pack into Chinatown, fascinated with the appearance of a nonassimilated foreign community complete with exotic cultural traditions.

The treatment of Chinatown both in the past and in the present obscures the reality of history. Few realize that the existence of the community is intimately interwoven with the history of the city. The intent of this guidebook is to place the evolution of the Chinese community in the context of the U.S./China relationship and reclaim our rightful place in the annals of America.