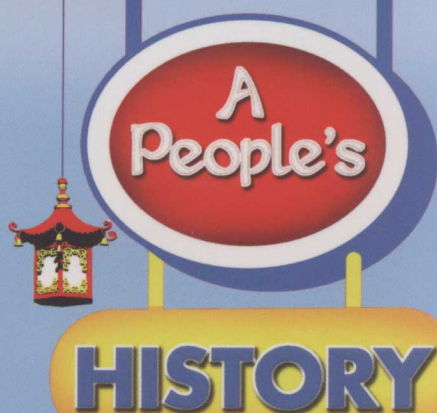


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美國

CHINATOWN

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AMERICAN CHINATOWN

**A People's History of
Five Neighborhoods**

BONNIE TSUI



Free Press

New York • London • Toronto • Sydney



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INTRODUCTION

Personal Geography

Some people unpack when they first arrive in a city. Me, I look for Chinatown.

It started, I suppose, with my grandparents. Traveling halfway around the world from Hong Kong, they settled in Manhattan's Chinatown in 1960. Even after moving to another Chinese enclave in Flushing, Queens, they kept going back, like clockwork, to their old neighborhood. Every morning they took the Q26 bus and the No. 7 subway train to the 6 train to Canal Street, where my grandfather worked in a fortune-cookie factory and my grandmother was a seamstress. Every night they brought home fresh vegetables bought from street vendors they'd come to know.

I picture a set of footprints marking a path from Queens down to Lower Manhattan, traceable on a map of the New York City transit system. When I come here today, I'm keenly aware that it's their route I follow.

NEW YORK, 1977. I am born in Flushing. My family's first apartment is a dingy affair with a leaky ceiling, and my brother is careful to pull me away from the drips. It's around this time, at the end of the 1970s, that economically depressed Flushing starts to change, departing from its roots as an Italian and Greek neighborhood to become, eventually, its own Chinatown. I never get a chance to build

loyalty for my first Chinatown; before we hit school age, our parents move us to Long Island, where good public schools are a selling point. But it's not where we go to be Chinese—Manhattan's Chinatown is.

My personal history with Chinatowns begins here, where we have wedding banquets, christenings, grocery shopping, daily life with my extended family of aunts, cousins, great-uncles, fake-uncles. Everyone's a relative, even when he's not.

I don't love coming here. At my height, the negatives are magnified: the filth of the streets, old takeout containers littering the gutters, sharply jostling knees. But at the child's eye level of experience, there is fascination, too. We children stick together, sidestepping dark, smelly puddles and eyeing strangers warily, but eagerly poking fingers at tanks of lobsters or plastic kiddie pools of tiny turtles imported from Hong Kong. In the narrow aisled shops, open buckets of candied plums and orange peels beckon while the grocery ladies glare. Even so, when we sidle up to the displays, they bark assent and give us a taste.

The Chinatown of my childhood occupies the same cultural epoch as Roman Polanski's eponymous film noir. I am wholly unaware of what the director has done, of his construct of some inexplicable "Forget it, Jake . . . it's Chinatown" idea lurking beneath the surface that will dominate American cinema for decades. Still, because I'm not entirely of that place—I have, after all, one foot in the almost exclusively white Long Island suburbia of the early 1980s—I recognize the peculiarities, both small and large. Chicken feet at dim sum. A brusqueness of manner to outsiders, sizable extended families living under one roof, butting into each other's business. Competitive noise.

The quirks hint at larger ideas, values, even then. Eating is about appreciating flavors and textures, whatever the vessel, and about the symbols behind them—"phoenix claws" being lucky—and is not to be limited by squeamish ideas of what is clean or dirty. A superiority is bred from thousands of years of culture established somewhere else, and not from mere snobbery or unfriendliness; investment in

family protects against outsiders who threaten prejudice and misunderstanding, so that you are never alone, without a community. Finally, if you don't speak up, no one will hear what you have to say. *Dai seng di*—"Make a bigger sound," my mother says, pushing me forward into the world.

When I get my first job after college, I can walk to Chinatown for lunch every day. There is a complicated feeling inside me when I go. I'm here by choice, not dragged along for some family errand or event. What am I here for, now, on my own? I feel unobtrusive, invisible, a little nervous. My tongue is rough; I have to speak Cantonese. The sounds are like an envelope, and I put myself inside it. The street is still dirty, the people still loud, pushy. But I like it. Something here is bigger than me, a history, other people's stories that are somehow my stories, anchoring me in this city. I belong in a way that is deeper than a job or mere geography.

A few years later, I move to the East Village, also a short walk from Chinatown. I make an effort to integrate Chinatown a little more into my regular life. For a year or two, I even visit Mr. Wen, an elderly teacher on Grand Street, a couple of times a week, to learn the workday vocabulary that I never heard in my house growing up. It will help with my travel and my writing, I tell the top editor at the magazine where I work, and he agrees. He pays for my lessons with Mr. Wen.

Family friends sent their kids to Chinese school when I was growing up—weekend classes in Chinatown that emphasized language and crafts and songs. It was the familiar effort to "stay Chinese" in a larger society that doesn't make it easy to be different. Somehow, I had escaped the requirement, and in the lazy way of youth, I was grateful at the time. But it's harder to learn now, even things I want to learn. It's funny to find myself coming here voluntarily, after work, trudging up the subway steps at Grand Street station to Mr. Wen, my adult version of Chinese school.

Mr. Wen is crotchety, funny. He is the chief Cantonese-dialect instructor at a small Chinese-language school called Wossing, but he teaches Mandarin, too. All the kids learn Mandarin now—*potungwa*,

the common dialect of all China—but I'm of that in-between generation, just after the last great wave of Cantonese immigrants, a born-in-America daughter who can still speak her parents' language. Mr. Wen and I sit around chatting in a cramped classroom on the third floor of the school's old tenement building. Or rather, I sit and he stands, even though it's just the two of us. He's smart, trained as a professor, but messy-looking. On a hot summer evening, he will sweat visibly through his button-down shirt, strands of thin gray hair glued to his forehead. He's the age of my grandparents, and he's from the same area, Toisan, located in southern China's Guangdong Province. Guangdong was once called Canton, and most of the Chinese immigrants to American Chinatowns throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were Cantonese from Guangdong's Pearl River Delta region—today a major manufacturing center of China that encompasses Hong Kong and Macau. On the other side of the world, they established communities of the same people, and many more followed them, finding safety in numbers. They were the trendsetters of their time.

Mr. Wen is nothing like my *gung-gung*, my mother's father, but I think of the two of them together anyway. Mr. Wen talks a lot more than my grandfather, who is quiet and stoic. Translucent, my father calls him, referring to his pale skin, threaded delicately with thin blue veins. But he could have been talking about the impression my *gung-gung* leaves, which is often faint, hard to discern, an effort to pin down. I never know what my *gung-gung* is thinking.

Perhaps that's why I feel such affection for Mr. Wen, who is the opposite. Oration is his gift. He steamrolls on, trying to get me to write Chinese. Why don't you want to learn characters? he asks me, drawing on the board. It makes it easier to learn new words. I'm too old for that, I say. I just want to talk more, get my mouth in shape. Learn some travel vocabulary so I can ask questions about the Chinese destinations I profile. His method of teaching is unlike that of any other language teacher I've known. It's circuitous, capricious, winging around the world from hotels and airports to cities and professions. Often, his topics have nothing to do with any of the things

I've asked to learn about. He teaches me whatever occurs to him. He teaches me what he thinks I should know.

Eventually, somewhat reluctant to leave New York but in need of a change of pace, I move across the country. I am surprised to find unfamiliarity in its oldest Chinatown, in San Francisco. Its main street feels empty the first time I visit, in the middle of the day. Shops seem to be closed, and I can't find a steamed bun to save my life. A couple of Chinese grandmothers come toward me. As they pass, I realize that they are speaking English, and their accents born-and-bred American, not Chinese.

And I wonder: *What makes a Chinatown?*

SAN FRANCISCO, 2003. Things happen in this Chinatown that I've never seen before. On my way to dinner one evening, I hear the familiar honking whine of a fire engine. I turn, expecting to see prototypical white male firefighters hanging out of the truck. Instead, I see an all-Chinese fire crew, with a stocky young Chinese woman in command, steering the back of the engine as it careens up Kearny Street and disappears around the corner.

The age of this Chinatown, the country's oldest, has earned it a place of respect in the hierarchy of American Chinatowns. I find that the San Francisco Fire Department even teaches fire safety classes in Cantonese to benefit the Chinatown community. On the other hand, Chinese American families have been here for generations, and many of those families now identify more with American than Chinese. The neighborhood is right up there with the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz as the city's most-visited tourist attractions. And it's true that it's very much a tourist's place. To know San Francisco's Chinatown is to recognize that it exists as a kind of first planet to several satellites—the Richmond and Sunset neighborhoods within the city, the revived Oakland Chinatown across San Francisco Bay. Many new Chinese immigrants now settle outside of the original Chinatown, but it remains a gateway for lower-income immigrants. And still Chinese Americans of all generations gravitate back to it,

on weekends or holidays, for school or camp or special events. The same questions come up for them as they did for me. What brings them back? What do they hope to find? I begin to give voice to these questions outside my own head.

Non-Chinese people tell me all the time that they love Chinatown. "There's so much to look at," they say, pointing at family-owned kite shops, nineteenth-century Taoist temples, traditional herbalists, sidewalk displays showcasing ceramic rice bowls for sale. My friend Jane tells me that as a child, she was never satisfied until she had shot every pop gun in a certain knickknack store on Stockton Street. Other friends say they can't resist the food, which is so cheap, and so fun to eat. They point to restaurant menus, to swinging slabs of roast pork in the windows, and to *dan tat*, delicate yellow egg-custard tarts, at the corner bakery. There is the promise of the unfamiliar—the exotic and the adventurous—paired with the comfort of being in a place that is, in fact, quite well known by now on the Western cultural radar. Still, they find something meaningful, exciting, intriguing there. "It feels authentic," a woman I work with tells me. "Not like anywhere else."

The more I hear about Chinatown, the more I want to hear from Chinatown. Or, rather, from its people, be they new arrivals or old. They make the neighborhood continue on as it does. As early as the 1920s, sociologists predicted that Chinatowns would eventually disappear in the United States, with the assimilation of immigrants into mainstream America. San Francisco Chinatown has not disappeared. But if many of the immigrants no longer live here, why does it persevere? What gives this community its long-standing, cohesive energy? What is San Francisco Chinatown today? And if this Chinatown is so different from the other I know in New York, what about those other American Chinatowns in between? The bigger questions, I realize, don't make sense until I ask the smaller ones, and find out what Chinatown means to ordinary people.

Why are you here?

I BEGIN TO collect these neighborhood stories. And I begin to feel that if the stories were seen alongside one another, they would create a complex and fascinating contemporary portrait of a distinctly Chinese American kind of community. The picture is, of course, a dynamic one: I'm constantly surprised by new waves of Chinese immigration and the unusual locales in which those populations are established, and by the way the old ones shift and assimilate into mainstream America while still holding themselves slightly apart. The scattering has occurred all over the world, establishing Chinatowns in places as far-flung as Vancouver, London, Yokohama, and Caracas, enriching the cultures of all of those cities. I don't mean to suggest that American Chinatowns eclipse these in significance. And for many Chinese, of course, traditional Chinatowns have never figured significantly in their lives. But the immigrant experience has always been vital to the mythology of America, and so the iconic status of Chinatowns in this country commands particular attention. It captures my own attention precisely because it is close to home; in more practical terms, it offers a strict organization for this examination, to rein in what could certainly have been a sprawling book and topic. But the rest of the world, of course, is always there and always felt—it's because of the current global focus on China and its diaspora that I am ever more intrigued by the roots and lively, little-known details of prominent American Chinatowns. In these places, Chinatowns have grown, changed, and thrived, exerting influence beyond their borders.

I BEGIN MY work on this book in San Francisco's Chinatown. It seems right to start here—it's the oldest of the prominent American Chinatowns still in existence, and it's where I live now. In investigating what made San Francisco's Chinatown so distinctive, I get to know my adopted city more intimately. I come to appreciate the Bay Area as the ancestral home of Chinese America. The Chinese called San Francisco *dai faw*: "big port," or "first port." It was through this gateway that tens of thousands of Chinese came during the Gold

Rush—looking for *gum saan*, or “gold mountain”—and railroad boom times, when China suffered from famine, war, and natural disaster and its people were welcomed to the Western frontier as cheap labor. That welcome didn’t last long—racism quickly built up to the exclusion acts that rescinded that invitation—but the deep roots of a community were already established. In a republic that was constantly renewing itself with new immigrant pools, xenophobia moved rapid-fire from one group to the next. In this way, American xenophobia was the first force to shape the first port’s Chinatown. The 1906 earthquake, which remade Chinatown and the city itself, marked the point at which the community began to take charge of its own image through the shaping of its skyline. It was perhaps the first time an American Chinatown did this so explicitly, but certainly not the last—the building of self-image is a compelling and enduring theme resonating through the Chinatowns included here. It continues in the modern day, with youth leaders who seize the opportunity to “show-and-tell” their own Chinatown stories to San Francisco’s tourists, and with today’s new immigrants, who struggle to find their voice in the gilded ghetto. They come face-to-face with the paradox that is Chinatown: a vibrant, jam-packed community that speaks their language, but also an insular home that makes it harder to communicate with the larger world outside.

Back in New York’s Chinatown, I find I can’t escape my family history there. As in San Francisco, I explore the neighborhood with an eye to different generations and their stories, observing the circumstances and geographies that have made the community unique. On streets I had walked a thousand times—the historic main street of Mott, quiet, crooked Doyers, busy East Broadway—I try to slow down and see them anew. This being New York, I track the biggest economies in Chinatown, talking to predominantly female labor organizers for the ubiquitous garment trade, and trace the thread of my grandmother’s story as a longtime seamstress in several Chinatown garment factories. To find out about the history of ruling family associations, I seek out the unofficial mayor of Chinatown—the current president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Asso-

ciation, what was for a century the supreme organization of the Chinese in New York—and am startled to learn that, in the early 1970s, he shared Cookie Machine No. 2 with my grandfather in a tiny mom-and-pop fortune-cookie operation in Chatham Square. And when I visit Chinese schools new and old, including a venerable institution on Mott Street, based out of New York's oldest Catholic church, I end up standing at the spot where I was baptized, three decades before. And so I incorporate that personal history in my travels through Chinatown. It becomes inevitable that I embrace the idea of a city within a city—that as big as New York is, and as large as its Chinese population has grown to be, spreading out across the boroughs, the still-small world of Chinatown is where everybody knows somebody, and, chances are, that somebody knows you. Over time, it has found itself inextricably tied to the ups and downs of the city outside. Chinatown became something the city *needed*, in good ways and bad.

In Los Angeles, I find a close-knit Chinatown community that was also uniquely necessary to the larger city—indeed, it was wed to Hollywood at an early age. The movies shaped Chinatown in surprising ways, and not just through their representations of the Chinese on celluloid. Those who saw it happen tell me that Hollywood had more of a hand in the actual creation of the Chinatown of the 1930s than most people know. In this Chinatown, reality and fiction came together to shape not only how America pictured Chinese and “Orientals” in the world, but also to shape the construction of the physical place in which L.A.'s Chinese resided. In the last several decades, the scattering of the Chinese American community to other pockets of L.A.—Monterey Park, Alhambra, and the San Gabriel Valley are just a few—has lessened the day-to-day importance of Chinatown here, but these new enclaves are still connected to the original. As other Chinatowns do, L.A.'s Chinatown persists as a cultural touchstone, indisputably compelling to generation after generation of Chinese Americans. In a way that these other communities do not, Chinatown sends a signal to explore your cultural identity.

What happens when Chinatown ceases to be all Chinese? Can Chinatown be itself and something else, too? A longtime melting pot of cultures, the Kingdom of Hawaii pulled in the Chinese as contract laborers beginning in 1852. For a time, in the 1880s, the Chinese even outnumbered Caucasians in the islands. In 1900, Hawaii officially became a U.S. colony. Throughout the twentieth century, Honolulu's Chinatown became home to successive waves of Asian immigrants, and finally to an arts community. Here, Chinatown feels open. Many aspects of Chinese culture have made their way into Hawaii's everyday. In a social environment that was friendlier than that which was found on the mainland, the Chinese community achieved widespread success and acceptance. It paved the way for Honolulu Chinatown's distinctive renaissance. Listening in on the conversation here, I find insight into what it means to be Chinese and something new at the same time—an acceptance of self-invention that is a lesson for the rest of America.

Finally, Las Vegas. Perhaps most of all, a man-made Chinatown in a man-made place reveals fascinating things to me about America and what sway Chinatown holds over it. On the surface, a Vegas-brand Chinatown seems the ultimate American commodification of ethnic identity. What do I expect? A cheap imitation of the original, a cartoon world empty of substance. But the community that has sprung up around this Chinatown has startling parallels to the traditional one, fulfilling many of the functions of the old neighborhood. The depth of experience to be found here shows that as much as Chinatown is a tried-and-true attraction in this country, darker elements persist, even in shiny, happy Vegas. "In American culture, 'Chinatown' also means negative things," James Chen, the founder of Las Vegas's Chinatown, says. "It means filthy, gritty, dirty, produce on the street, people only speak Chinese, isolated, doesn't care about anybody else, or even worse—gangsters, prostitution, that kind of thing. And to be in a new city, Las Vegas, I knew we had to be better." The story of this founding, and how Chen confronted his image problem, is a telling commentary on the direction that other Chinatowns are headed.

I could say that my nostalgia for the past is what spurs me to seek out Chinatown wherever I go, but I think that's only part of it. I don't go there for the same reasons my grandparents did; I grew up around the fringes of the neighborhood, and the insularity and security of their community never existed for me. They sought out Chinatown for the comfort of a place where people still spoke the same language they did, where they could simply feel at ease. In a still-strange country, it was a sort of homecoming. Hong Kong and China were places I would travel to, not from.

Though it's nice every once in a while to hear Cantonese and eat food that I know well—rice porridge and egg custard when I want to be reminded of my mom, soy-sauce chicken when I think of my grandfather—my fascination with Chinatowns has more to do with being able to see how other Chinese communities integrate into their larger surrounding communities. By looking at the distinctive American Chinatowns of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Honolulu—fingers of land on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, key entry points for multiple generations of Chinese immigrants to the United States—alongside that of Las Vegas, I find unlikely intersections of the new and the familiar.

Chinatowns as we have known them are captivating places to explore. By digging deeper into a group of iconic Chinatowns in important cities across the United States, we get a sharper, more profound sense of immigrant experiences that are specific to place. As we take a look at several different generations in each, we also find out what it is that prevails in culture and tradition across the diaspora. And in examining diverse stories that include those of a newer, unusual Chinese enclave in Las Vegas, we create a moving picture of a population that has always flourished in community form. Of course, these are not the only stories, nor are they meant to be wholly representative of every Chinatown. Rather, they are simply points of view—compelling ones that show us new ways of seeing the Chinese in America today.