



WENDY ROUSE JORAE

the children of chinatown

GROWING UP
CHINESE AMERICAN

IN SAN FRANCISCO

1850-1920



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GROWING UP

CHINESE AMERICAN

IN SAN FRANCISCO,

1850-1920



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第2

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WENDY ROUSE JORAE

the children of chinatown



to the

CHILDREN OF

CHINATOWN,

PAST, PRESENT,

AND FUTURE





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INTRODUCTION the children of chinatown

CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD IN EARLY CHINATOWN

IMAGINE KITCHEN REALITY

When one imagines San Francisco's nineteenth-century Chinatown, Chinese children do not usually figure prominently in the picture. Scholars of Chinese American history have focused primarily on the story of adult Chinese immigrants; only within the last two decades have significant studies examining the stories of Chinese American families emerged. Chinese children appear only sporadically in the histories. For an examination of the historical record reveals important evidence of the experience of Chinese children in America and offers scattered glimpses into their daily lives. The narrow designation of San Francisco's early Chinese population (1850-1900) as a "bachelor society" or more recently as a "spin household" community ignores the variety of family structures and the small but significant presence of Chinese children. It is important to recognize the presence of children in early Chinatown, not only because it changes the way we conceptualize Chinese American history, but also because the presence of these children and the formation of families impacted the larger community surrounding the Chinese in America. This book challenges prevailing interpretations of early Chinatown by positioning Chinese children and their families at the center of efforts to combat American anti-Chinese racism. My research reveals the heretofore untold story of child life in early Chinatown while also unearthing the various myths surrounding Chinese American childhood.

I have defined two major objectives for this work. First, I will examine how various groups constructed contrasting images of childhood and family life in Chinatown that significantly influenced the debate over Chinese immigration and the future of the Chinese American community. Second, and



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INTRODUCTION

CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD IN EARLY CHINATOWN

IMAGE VERSUS REALITY

When one imagines San Francisco's nineteenth-century Chinatown, Chinese children do not usually figure prominently in the picture. Scholars of Chinese American history have focused primarily on the story of male Chinese immigrants; only within the last two decades have significant studies examining the stories of Chinese American females emerged. Chinese children appear only sporadically in the histories. Yet an examination of the historical record reveals important evidence of the existence of Chinese children in America and offers scattered glimpses into their daily lives. The narrow designation of San Francisco's early Chinatown (1850–1920) as a “bachelor society,” or more recently as a “split-household” community, ignores the variety of family structures and the small but significant presence of Chinese children. It is important to recognize the presence of children in early Chinatown, not only because it changes the way we conceptualize Chinese American history, but also because the presence of these children and the formation of families impacted the larger controversy surrounding the Chinese in America. This book challenges prevailing scholarly notions of early Chinatown by positioning Chinese children and their families at the center of efforts to combat American anti-Chinese policies. My research reveals the heretofore untold story of child life in early Chinatown while also unraveling the various myths surrounding Chinese American childhood.

I have defined two major objectives for this work. First, I will examine how various groups constructed contrasting images of childhood and family life in Chinatown that significantly influenced the debate over Chinese immigration and the future of the Chinese American community. Second, and

most importantly, I will recover the voices and experiences of Chinese American children in early Chinatown and reveal their efforts to circumvent policies of exclusion and segregation in American society.¹ I am most concerned here with reconstructing the lived experience of Chinese children in America by examining their immigration experiences and exploring their daily lives at home, at work, at school, and in the missions and court system.

The persistence and dominance of the bachelor-society paradigm has contributed to the difficulty of recovering the voices and experiences of children in early Chinatown. The success of anti-Chinese propaganda in painting the Chinese in America as a bachelor society in the mid- to late nineteenth century reinforced a social hierarchy that placed Chinese American children at a severe disadvantage. Facing obstacles of immigration exclusion, cultural dislocation, child labor, segregated schooling, and crime and violence in Chinatown, Chinese American children struggled for recognition in a society that increasingly resented their presence. Nineteenth-century anti-Chinese propaganda denied the existence of normative family life as a way of illustrating the deviant culture of San Francisco's Chinatown and contrasting the lifestyle of Chinese immigrants with a middle-class domestic ideal.² The perception of a "familyless" Chinese community has pervaded the historical scholarship even into the modern era and has rendered the presence of children in early Chinatown largely invisible. In recent years, the designation of early Chinatown as a split-household community has attempted to move scholars beyond the narrow definition of a bachelor society to examine the unique nature of family life in early Chinatown. The split-household model considers the structural dynamics of Chinese families separated by the Pacific Ocean. In split-household families, men migrated to America while their wives remained in China to raise the children and contribute to the husband's family economy.³

The designation of San Francisco's early Chinatown as a split-household community, however, remains problematic in its failure to acknowledge the family life that did exist in Chinatown during this period of Chinese American history. Children in general remained relatively rare in San Francisco compared to similar-sized American cities. As late as 1910, only 19 percent of San Francisco's population was age fourteen and under. This was significantly lower than the 32 percent of children age fourteen and under in the total U.S. population.⁴ Decades of anti-Chinese hostility and harsh immigration laws hindered, but did not completely prohibit, the immigration of Chinese children and the growth of Chinese American families in California.