

**An illustrated history of the  
Chinese in America**



AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY  
OF THE  
CHINESE IN AMERICA



RUTHANNE LUM MCCUNN

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**DESIGN ENTERPRISES OF SAN FRANCISCO**

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*for two very special people  
my mother & my husband*

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 79-50114

International Standard Book Number

Hardback: 0-932538-01-0

Paperback: 0-932538-02-9

Printed in U.S. A.

Front Cover: Three Chinese men in Silver City, Idaho.

Back Cover: A Chinese family in San Francisco in the late 1800's.

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## Acknowledgments

This book has gone through many phases. During each phase, I have been fortunate in receiving help from both friends and strangers who have been generous with their time and talents.

The initial idea for writing the history of the Chinese in America for young people was prompted by Antoinette Metcalf.

I was encouraged to continue probing for information by my students' perceptive, relentless questions and their eagerness to read everything I wrote for them.

During the initial drafts of the book, I received important, insightful criticism from Dic Fritz, Robin Grossman, Hoi Lee, Gale Ow, and Ellen Yeung.

The completed manuscript was carefully checked for accuracy by H. Mark Lai, historian. I am deeply indebted to him for sharing his knowledge and giving so much of his valuable time to a stranger.

I am also grateful for the careful proofreading of the manuscript by Lynda Preston and Stan Sargent.

Many people provided me with invaluable help in searching out the appropriate photographs in this book. These people include: the librarians at Bancroft Library; Gordon Lew, editor, East West Journal; Laverne Dicker, photo archivist, the California Historical Society; Puanani Kini and Irma Tam Soong at the Hawaii Chinese History Center; Agnes C. Conrad, State Archivist, State of Hawaii; Jim Davis, photo archivist, Idaho State Historical Society; Mrs. Perham, owner, New Almaden Museum; Ben Hazard and Dorothy Delahusay at the Oakland Museum; Cathy Flynn and Mark Sexton at the Peabody Museum; Gladys Hansen, San Francisco City Archivist, San Francisco Public Library; Peter Louis at the United Front Press; Phil Choy, Sister M. Alfreda Elsensohn, Ed Gray, Ed Sue, Alex Ross, Robin Grossman, and John Roussel.

Finally, but most especially, I wish to thank my husband. Without his considerable talents and hours of labor, this book would not exist.





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# Preface

America is a nation of immigrants. Even the first people, the Native Americans, are believed to have migrated from another continent, Asia. The history of America is therefore a history of the different ethnic groups - where they came from and why; their contributions, hardships and achievements; their assimilation as well as their preservation of what is unique to their cultural group; and their lives today.

Though the history of America is incomplete unless it includes all its ethnic groups, the history of the Chinese in America has remained largely an untold story. Perhaps this oversight is due to the fact that Chinese-Americans still number less than a million in a nation of 220 million. Nevertheless, their influence and contributions over the last 130 years have had a profound effect on the course of American history.

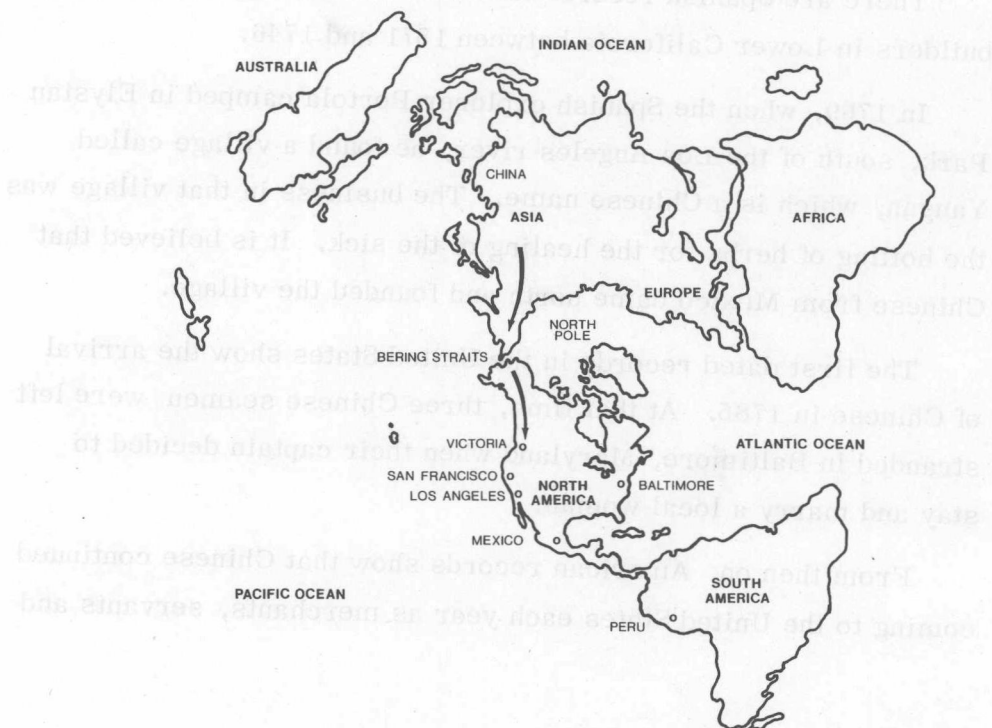
It is therefore my privilege and pleasure to share the lives of these hardy American pioneers with you. May you be as enriched from the reading of this history of our Chinese forbears as I have been from the research and writing of it.

Ruthanne Lum McCunn  
San Francisco, Calif.

# First Asian Americans

The Asian and American continents are on opposite sides of the world. They are separated by the Pacific Ocean but many thousands of years ago, they were joined together by a narrow strip of land near the North Pole. This bridge between the continents was called the Bering Straits.

Historians believe that people from Asia walked across this strip of land. They settled in different parts of the two American continents and became the first Asian Americans. People had not learned to record history when this migration took place but there are many signs to show that it really happened.



1.1 Asians walked across the Bering Straits.

## AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN AMERICA

One clue may be found in the early art of Peru in South America. Some of the ancient paintings have drawings of a tiger that only lives on the Asian continent.

Another piece of evidence is that both the early Chinese and the early Indians of Mexico believed jade to be magic. They carved the stone in much the same way and used it as offerings to their gods.

They also had the same unusual burial ceremony for their nobles and the rich. They painted a piece of jade red. Then they placed the painted stone in the dead person's mouth before burial.

Archaeologists have also found very old Chinese objects in Victoria, British Columbia. These objects prove that Chinese either visited or lived in Canada centuries ago.

The first written proof of Chinese in America can be found in the Great Chinese Encyclopedia. The historian Ma Tuan-Lin wrote that a Buddhist priest named Hui Shen arrived in British Columbia, Canada in 458 A.D. He then traveled down the coast until he reached Mexico.

There are Spanish records that show Chinese worked as ship builders in Lower California between 1571 and 1746.

In 1769, when the Spanish explorer Portola camped in Elysian Park, south of the Los Angeles river, he found a village called Yangna, which is a Chinese name. The business in that village was the boiling of herbs for the healing of the sick. It is believed that Chinese from Mexico came north and founded the village.

The first dated records in the United States show the arrival of Chinese in 1785. At that time, three Chinese seamen were left stranded in Baltimore, Maryland when their captain decided to stay and marry a local woman.

From then on, American records show that Chinese continued coming to the United States each year as merchants, servants and



## THE FIRST ASIAN AMERICANS

students. However, they did not start to come in great numbers until after gold was discovered in California in 1848.

The Chinese who came to the "Golden Mountains" (as they called California) soon discovered that making a fortune was not as easy as they had hoped. They had to endure many hardships. Despite these hardships, they continued to come.

In order to understand why the Chinese came to America, it is necessary to see what kinds of lives they were leaving behind in China.

# Foreigners in China

China had a highly developed civilization as early as the ancient Greeks and Romans. It had a very structured society headed by an Emperor who was like a King. Under the Emperor were aristocrats and magistrates who governed the country. Most of the people, however, were peasants who had to work very hard just to survive.

China believed itself to be self-sufficient. It grew or made almost everything the people needed including many luxurious products.

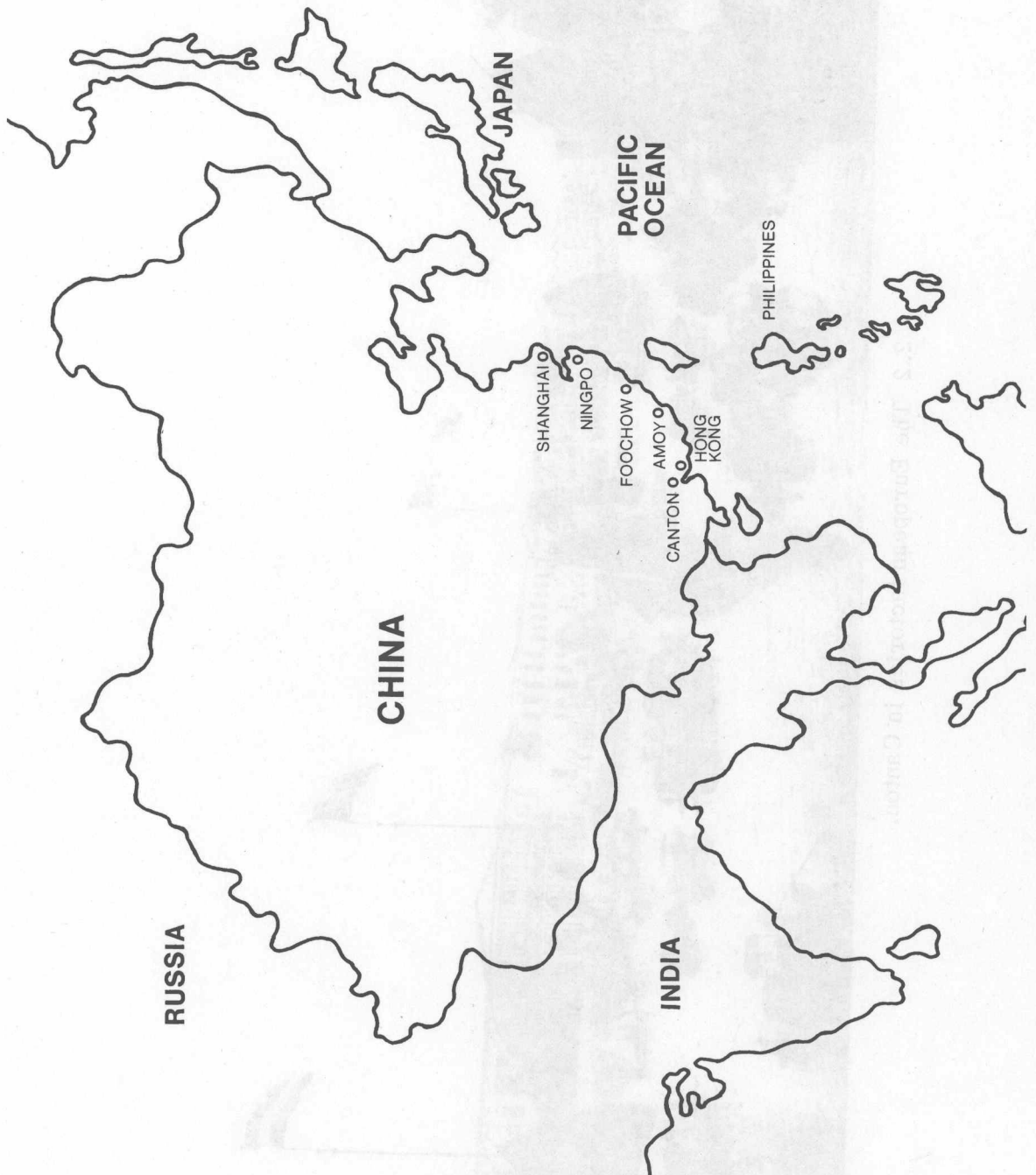
Occasional travelers and merchants from Europe visited China before the 1500's. They took Chinese products back home with them. When the European people saw the beautiful silks, porcelains and lacquerware and tasted the delicious teas, they wanted more.

The European merchants wanted to satisfy their customers. The Chinese merchants were anxious to trade too, but during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Chinese government would not allow the European ships to dock in China. The government was afraid of foreign influence. It didn't want to risk change.

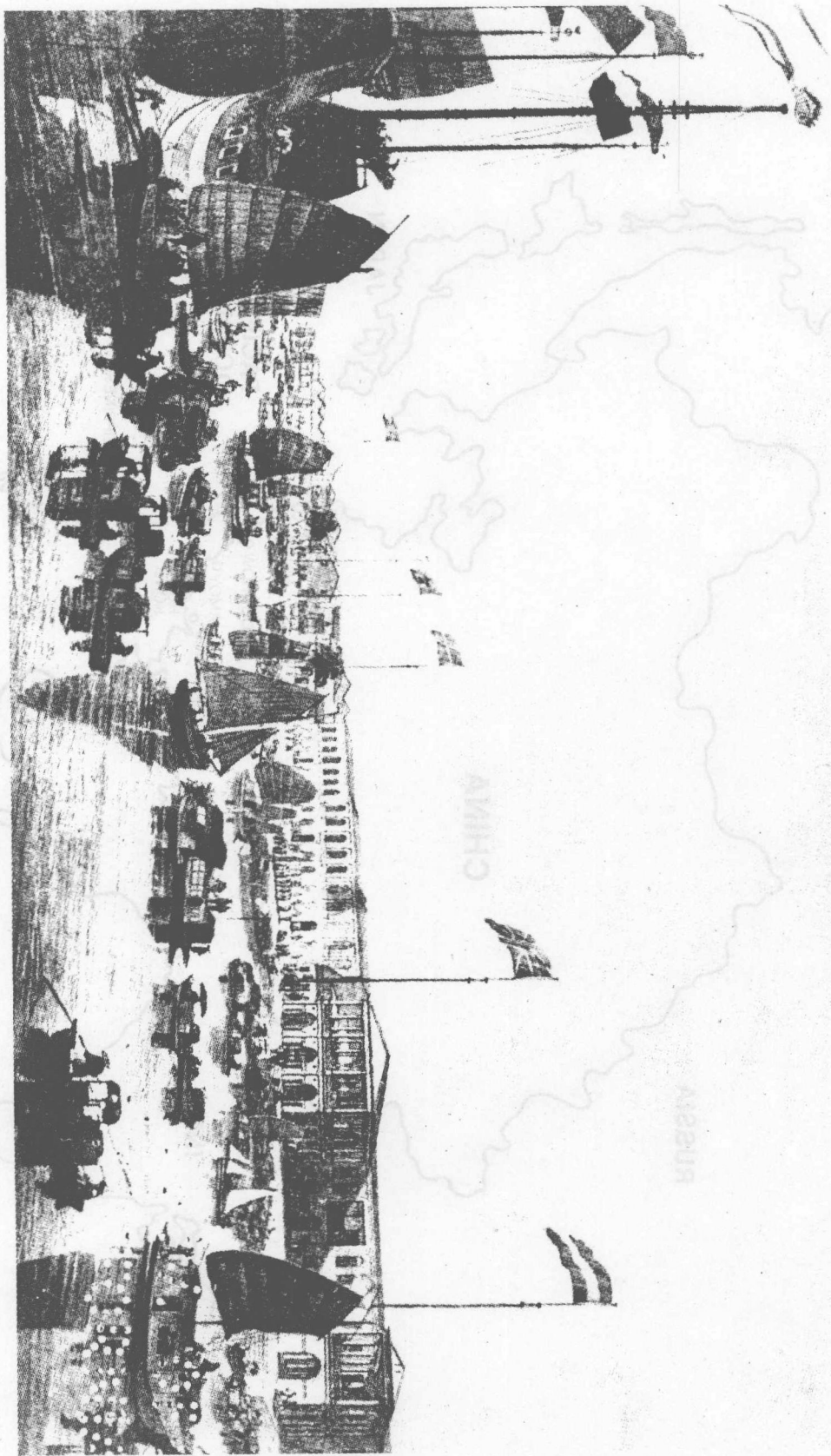
In order to trade with the Europeans, some Chinese merchants filled their boats (called junks) with merchandise and sailed to the Philippine Islands to trade with the Spanish who sailed there from Mexico.

Finally, in 1757, the Chinese government agreed to open one port to the foreigners for trade, the port of Kwangchow (Canton). However, the government forced very high taxes and strict rules on the European traders.

FOREIGNERS IN CHINA



2.1 The Chinese opened five ports to foreign trade.



2. 2 The European factories in Canton.



## FOREIGNERS IN CHINA

The foreign merchants had to trade through large Chinese companies called Hongs. While the ships could dock in the port, the merchants were not allowed into the walled city of Kwangchow; and they were not allowed to gather in groups of more than ten.

The biggest problem for the merchants was that the Chinese people were not interested in most of the products from Europe and America. It wasn't good business for the foreign merchants to buy from the Chinese without selling them something in return. They kept wondering what they could bring to China to sell.

Finally, the Portuguese found something new to try. They brought in opium, a powerful drug made from poppies. When opium is smoked, it makes the person dream that everything is happy and wonderful. Life for many of the Chinese people was often unbearably hard. Opium made them forget their troubles. It therefore became more and more popular.

The opium trade grew. All the other Western countries, especially Britain, started bringing opium to China.

The Chinese government did not like the opium trade. Too much opium made the users so sick and weak that they were unable to work or do anything except take more of the drug. Also, the Chinese merchants paid for the opium with silver. There was too much silver leaving the country.

The Chinese government passed a law in 1796 to stop the sale of opium. The law was not very effective because corrupt Chinese officials and Chinese smugglers helped the European merchants smuggle opium into China. The opium problem became worse.

Alarmed, the Chinese government passed a law in 1838 that made the growing, selling or smoking of opium punishable by death. Chinese government ships started seizing and destroying all opium shipments to China. In fact, there is still a place in Kwangchow, preserved as a national monument because Commissioner Lui burned tens of thousands of pounds of seized opium there.