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1870–1945
Editors Chuimei Ho and Soo Lon Moy for
the Chinatown Museum Foundation

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ARCADIA
PUBLISHING

ISBN 978-0-7385-3444-2

Published by Arcadia Publishing
Charleston SC, Chicago IL, Portsmouth NH, San Francisco CA

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2005924981

For all general information contact Arcadia Publishing at:
Telephone 843-853-2070
Fax 843-853-0044
E-mail sales@arcadiapublishing.com
For customer service and orders:
Toll-Free 1-888-313-2665

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Chinatown Museum Foundation

This is the accompanying volume for the exhibition "Paper Sons—Chinese in the Midwest 1870–1945," which opened in May 2005, at the new Chinese-American Museum of Chicago - Raymond B. and Jean T. Lee Center.

The production of the book has benefited tremendously from information and assistance given by Phyllis Cavallone, Fr. Michael Davitti, Scott M. Forsythe, Ruth Kung, Dominic Lai, Lucy Moy Lee, Raymond Lee, Raymond Lum, Len Louie, Jeffrey Moy, Ruth Moy, Susan Lee Moy, Elinor Pearlstein, John Rohsenhow, Jean Vondriska, and Wai-chee Yuen. We thank Mrs. Ruth Moy and Dr. Raymond Lum in particular for their generosity in giving us not only advice but also large numbers of images and objects as well.

The Foundation could not have completed the volume without the hard work of its curatorial team, especially the authors themselves, and the strong interest of its Board of Directors. It owes a particular debt to the enthusiasm and constant support of the exhibition production team led by Gwendolyn Moy, who scanned in many of the images and who took an important part in the development of several key ideas. The preparation of all print-ready images was done by Bennet Bronson. The Foundation thanks him for the many hours he spent converting old snapshots into publishable pictures.

The photographs and data used here were generously provided by many individuals, organizations, archives, and libraries. The following have generously allowed us access to images and artifacts and, where necessary, permission to publish them:

Individuals: Bennet Bronson, LaVerne Chan, Philip Choy, Grace Chun, Philip Fong, Chuimei Ho, Eugene Kung, Margaret Larson, David K. Lee, Raymond Lee, Chuck Lee, Raymond Lum, Billy Moy, Jeffrey Moy, Patricia Moy, Ruth Moy, Soo Lon Moy, and Susan Lee Moy.

Institutions: Beloit College, California State Library, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago Metropolitan Lee Association, Chicago Public Library (Harold Washington and Chinatown Branches), Field Museum Library, Gee Kow Oak Tin Association, Hung Mon (Chinese Freemason) Society, Moy Shee D.K. (Moy's Family) Association, National Archives and Records Administration, St Therese School, and Wong's Family Association.

INTRODUCTION

This book was born out of the exhibition, "Paper Sons—Chinese in the Midwest 1870–1945," the inaugural show of the new Chinese-American Museum of Chicago. Both museum and exhibition opened in May 2005. While the book follows the exhibition in terms of content and overall theme, it has a tighter focus. Its main themes are Chinese immigration and Chinese-American identity in the Midwest.

The subject is vast. The resources are rich. Community members and public agencies have been generous with information. Our research team has assembled a mass of archival and oral data plus more than 1000 photographs and 150 objects, and more are coming in every week. Thus, we have had to make many hard choices. This volume only has room for a selection of the photographs. In the end, we had to choose on the basis of who will be most interested in the book: Chinese-Americans, members of other ethnic groups with similar immigrant experiences, and those interested in Midwestern history.

Thanks to the efforts of previous historians, the outlines of the subject are familiar. One learns from these writers that immigrants from South China first came to the Midwest in the 1870s, that they suffered severely from racial prejudice, that due to the Exclusion Act of 1882 the Chinese community had very few women in it, that anti-Chinese laws and feelings began to break down during World War II, that the Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, and that in recent decades Chinese-Americans have overcome many of the obstacles of the past.

While the present authors know that this outline is accurate, we feel that it warrants a closer look. Interviews with Chinese-Americans of the generation that remembers the Exclusion Act period showed that they had complex feelings about the past. They were proud of the achievements of their families and other Chinese immigrants, but mainly when those achievements were outside Chinatown. We felt that they seemed uneasy about several aspects of the Chinatown past—about the false family names of so-called "paper sons," who entered the country with other people's identity papers; about the ghetto-like reputation of their neighborhood; and—significantly—about being the children of restaurant workers and laundrymen. Some are not just uneasy about this background. They may even be ashamed of it. But we do not fully understand why. Should Chinese-Americans be embarrassed about having

worked in laundries? Irish-Americans and German-Americans, who ran as many laundries as the Chinese, show no signs of shame about it. And washing clothes was certainly less disgusting and better paid than working in slaughterhouses, the economic mainstay of many white Chicago families. In fact, laundrymen made more money than Chinese teachers, as the case of Charles K.S. Lee testifies (see pages 21, 35). Laundry jobs allowed extended vacations, needed few language skills, and required only a six-day week. George Ade, a well-known Chicago writer of the 1890s, observed that on Sundays Chinese laundry workers dressed well and enjoyed life in middle-class style (see page 37). So where did the shame come from?

Paul Siu, a sociologist of the 1930s in Chicago, noted that life for Chinese laundrymen was made harder by the fact that they had left their wives and children back in southern China. He coined the term "sojourners" for such men, who would go abroad to work for most of their lives, returning to their home villages every few years to visit their families. Some writers claim that this sojourner pattern was a response to unjust exclusion laws in America. However, it was much older than that. Sojourners from Guangdong (Canton) and Fujian (Fukien) provinces had already been working in Southeast Asia for several centuries, also without Chinese wives or children, before the first Cantonese left to try his luck in the California goldfields in 1849.

For America, as elsewhere, certain villages and towns in South China specialized in providing sojourners. Many of those communities were quite prosperous due to the money remitted by husbands, fathers, and sons in other countries. Young men went abroad not because of extreme poverty but to seek well-paid jobs. They often played important economic and sometimes political roles in their host countries. When they returned to China, they were respected as successful men. True, before retirement they had to cope with racial prejudice, sometimes extreme, and to face other threats that required courage and ingenuity to survive. But to be able to overcome such hardships abroad was a source of pride, not shame.

Anti-Chinese laws instigated by European-American racists did create a problem that was unique for sojourners in the U.S. Due to those laws, many Chinese immigrants of the working class had to behave illegally in order to enter and stay in the country. An especially common ploy was to buy other peoples' identity papers showing that one was U.S.-born or the son of a citizen, and that as such, one was entitled to enter as a citizen oneself. Such immigrants were known as "paper sons" and had to use their false identities for the whole time they stayed in America.

Is bearing someone else's family name the primary source of shame or guilt, as Confucian tradition seems to suggest? The paper sons (and daughters) we have so far interviewed indeed had a strong urge to talk about it but seldom showed signs of shame or guilt. We further consulted a psychologist who pointed out that being resourceful and successful helps. Apparently many had accepted their false identities. Some just shrugged. "Everybody was a paper son in those days." Perhaps being in the majority also makes it easy to accept.

Yet another possibility is that feelings of shame have been imposed by outsiders. In the past, other Americans often denigrated the Chinese in laundries and restaurants, calling them dirty and secretive, as well as coolies, opium addicts, and rat eaters who spoke a comical form of English. Even the Chinese themselves have sometimes shown negative feelings. Early Chinese at universities and seminaries in Chicago often held themselves aloof from the urban Chinese community of shopkeepers, laundrymen, and restaurant owners. The successful professionals who moved out of Chinatown often felt that they had moved one rung up the social ladder.

Is it possible that this educated, professional group has internalized the stereotypes projected by American racism, and that these in turn have been accepted by the descendents of early Chinese immigrants? If this is true, we think it is too bad. All Chinese-Americans, suburban or urban, intellectuals or business people, should join in celebrating the achievements of the first generations of immigrants.

There is no doubt that the early residents of Chicago's Chinatowns had to make a lot of adjustments and that they suffered in many ways. Yet we have found them to be admirable people—adventurous, resilient, talented, and entrepreneurial. We hope this volume will help readers to see them in the same light.

One

SEEKING A NEW WORLD

CHUIMEI HO

Here rice and grain are easy to get. Friends are easy to have. Housing is easy to set up. Utensils and other material needs are easy to acquire. Business is easy to do.

These are the reasons that a 13th-century sojourning Chinese merchant in Cambodia gave when asked by a visitor why he had left China. Today, immigrants to the U.S., Chinese and non-Chinese alike, still leave their ancestral homes for similar reasons. The Chinese diaspora reached the Americas in the mid-19th century. This volume focuses on their lifestyles in Chicago between 1870 and 1945.

Today there are about 30 to 40 million Chinese in 136 countries outside China. More than half of them live in Southeast Asia, but the United States has the largest Chinese population outside Asia, over 1.6 million.

No Chinese are known to have been in Chicago until the first trans-continental railway was completed in 1869. By 1874 there were already 18 laundries and one tea shop in the central part of the city, all managed by Chinese. They came from the Pacific coast for a more tolerant society after anti-Chinese violence broke out in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and elsewhere in the western part of the country. In the words of Mr. Dong Chow Moy (see page 61) who landed in Chicago shortly after 1876, "The Chicagoans found us a peculiar people to be sure. But they liked to mix with us."

Unfortunately, this ethnic hostility found its way to policy. In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which not only restricted the number of Chinese workers coming to America, but also limited freedom of travel for those who already resided in the States. Hence many Chicago laundrymen were stranded. The stress was intense, but as usual the resourceful immigrants found ways of working around the law in order to stay in this land of promise. The Chinese population in Chicago continued to rise sharply. By 1900 the Census Bureau found 1,462, and there must have been others who avoided government notice. Not everyone came legally. The Chinese Inspector of the Department of Labor in Chicago deported the caught ones.

The 1906 earthquake in San Francisco turned out to be a hidden blessing for Chinese immigrants. Sbsequent fires burned down the buildings where birth certificates were kept. Taking advantage of the absence of proof, many Chinese managed to become citizens, claiming to have been native born or children of native born persons.

Even observers with no knowledge of overseas Chinese are likely to notice three obvious architectural features that assert Chinese cultural identity: religious structures, cemeteries, and Chinatowns. In America Chinese religious structures are not limited to Buddhist or Daoist temples; many Chinese came to the West because they had become Protestants and Catholics. The more traditional Chinese deities were often enshrined in community organizations. The Mount Auburn Cemetery in Stickney has been a resting place for many Chinese-Americans since the 1940s.

Like other immigrants who lack local languages and knowledge, the Chinese have felt the need to stay together. They themselves call their enclaves "Tang people street" [tangren jie], in honor of the early Tang dynasty. They run restaurants, groceries, and souvenir shops in

those enclaves, which westerners call "Chinatowns." The enclaves are often portrayed as seedy and riddled with gangsters and exotic crimes, but also as exciting and romantic. Chicago's Chinatown has its share of fame and blame.

The early Chinese immigrants started as sojourners. They traveled back and forth to be in touch with their roots. By their sojourning, they created the first bridges that have brought Asia to Chicago. Over time, some decided to sink their roots here. The path of assimilation could sometimes be painful, but successful immigrants had to be resilient. After all, it takes new attitudes to live in a New World.

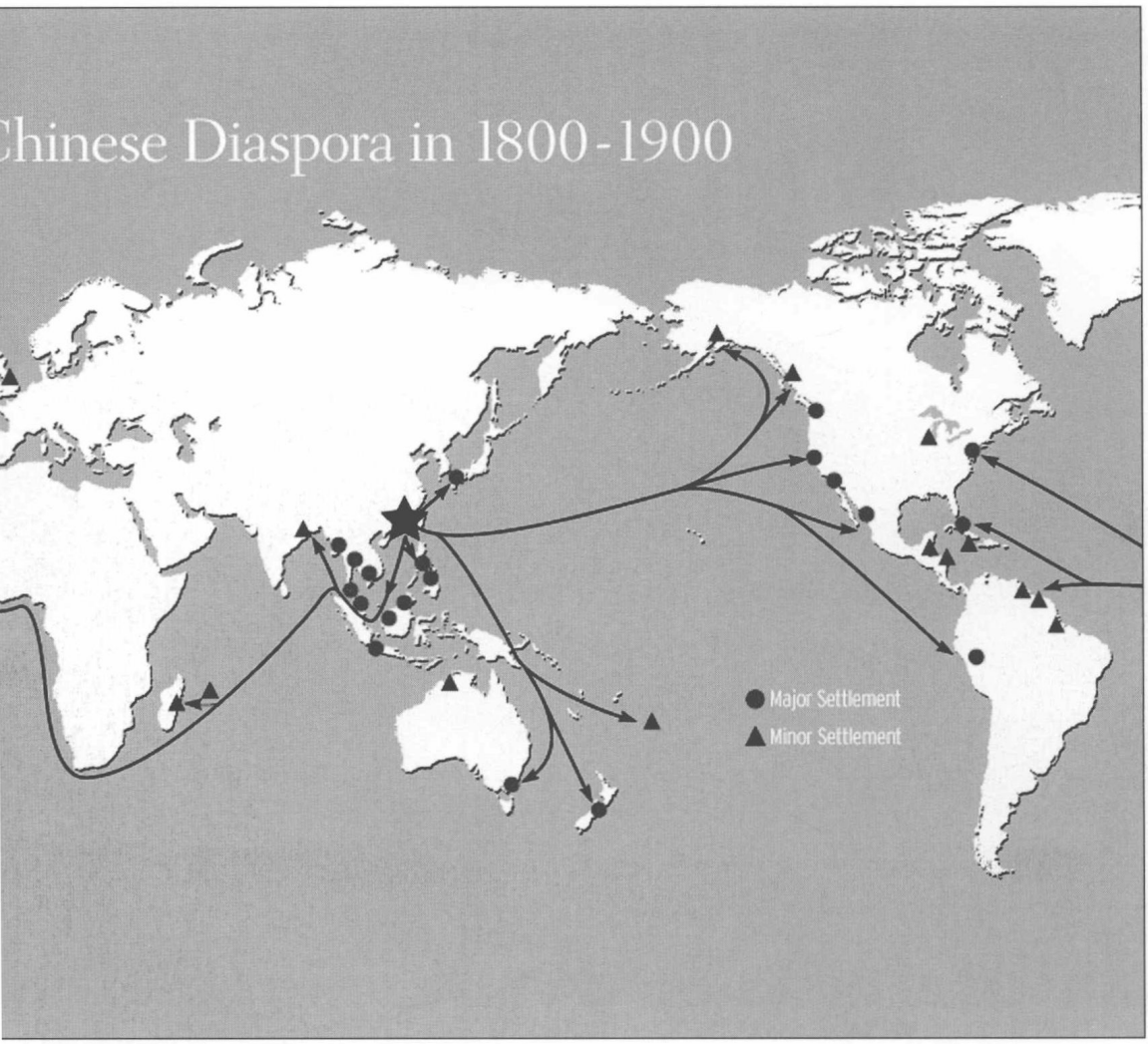
CHICAGO'S CHINATOWN ON CERMAK, 2005. The busy Wentworth and Cermak corner, highlighted by the gateway, is one of the few Chinatowns in America that is still thriving. Over the past 20 years Chicago's Chinatown has considerably expanded its business and residential areas.

WENTWORTH AVENUE, CHICAGO, 2005. Wentworth Avenue, or the "Ever Lasting" as it is known among Chicago's Chinese, is the major north-south axis of Chinatown and retains today many original buildings. The large twin-tower building, built in 1928, was formerly the headquarters of the On Leong Merchants' Association (see pages 58–60). The Moy Shee D.K. (Moy's Family) Association building on the left was built a few years later (see page 68).

CHINATOWN SQUARE—AN EXTENSION ALONG CHICAGO RIVER, 2005. Built on reclaimed land from the former Santa Fe Railway Depot a block north of the Cermak/Wentworth junction, the growth of Chinatown Square moves in pace with recent immigration of the last 20 years.

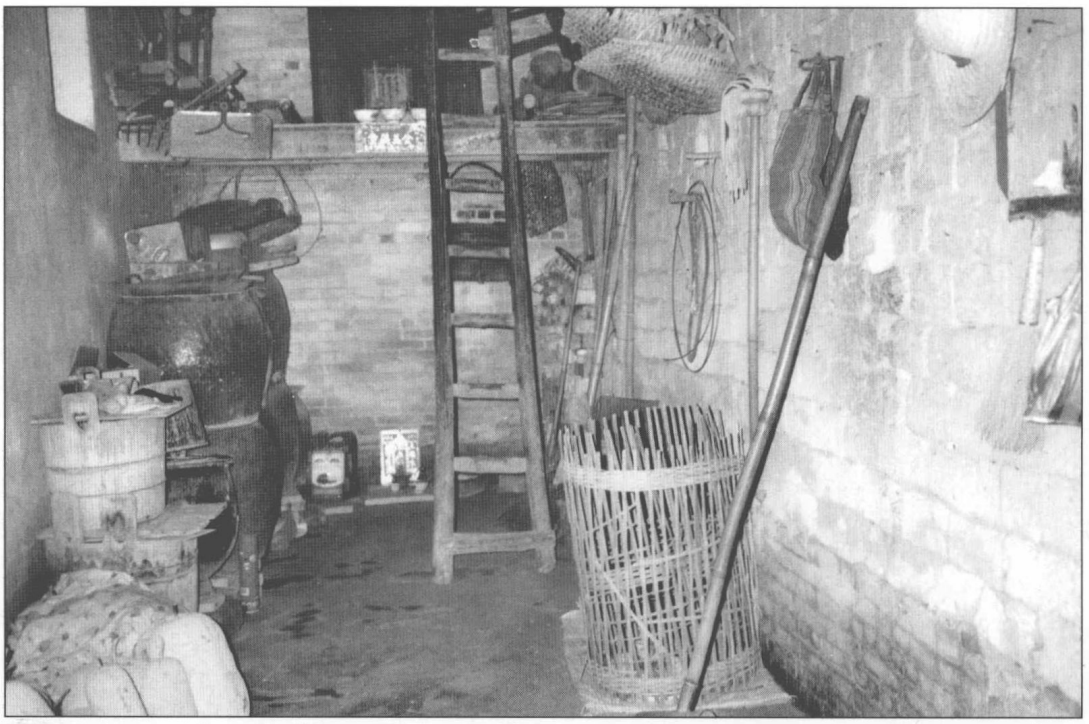
THE NORTH CHINATOWN—OR IS IT VIETNAM TOWN? CHICAGO, 2005. The Argyle/Broadway commercial area displays cultural traits similar to those of the Cermak/Wentworth Chinatown. The difference lies in the people. Developed since the 1970s, the Argyle Chinatown has attracted many Southeast Asian immigrants. The large building adjacent to the CTA railroad is the office of Hip Sing Association.

THE PING TOM MEMORIAL PARK, CHICAGO, 2004. Chicago's Chinatown had little recreational space until Ping Tom Memorial Park was open in 2002. Named after a prominent community leader and the son of Tom Chan (see pages 63, 68, 71), the park features traditional Chinese architecture. The community has come a long way in being able to turn a seedy district into a respectable commercial-residential neighborhood.

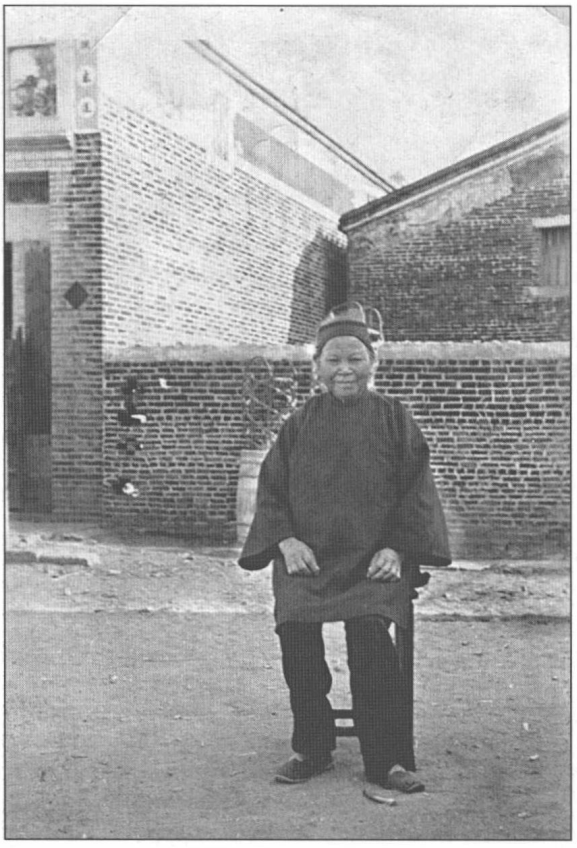


Chinese Diaspora. Chinatown might have been seen by many as a small, closed ethnic enclave. Yet for its residents their world was vast and deeply embedded in a global Chinese networking system. They journeyed back to China often, traveled to other cities for business meetings, and visited friends and relatives in other Chinatowns.

THE LUM VILLAGE IN XINHUI, GUANGDONG, 1940S. Not every immigrant was driven out of his or her hometown by poverty. In South China, men were expected to go abroad to make a living and a name. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen was an outstanding example. The tradition was so strong that men who stayed behind were frowned upon as lacking ambition.



KITCHEN OF A VILLAGE HOME, TAISHAN (TOISAN), GUANGDONG, 1990. For some, life in the home village might have seemed primitive and backward. But the same home beckoned successfully to many returning overseas sons, even though those sons were already accustomed to the convenience of American gas stoves, electricity, and fast transportation.



A VILLAGE WOMAN, TAISHAN, GUANGDONG, 1940S. Life in Taishan was no different from life in small towns in other parts of the world, except that Taishan had proportionally more women than men. Tradition claimed that Taishan women were used to having absentee husbands whose occasional visit often brought back a slice of Americanism. Wise parents married their sons off and acquired a grandchild before sending them abroad. Some were willing to take the chance that a grown-up son would return home for an arranged marriage. Mrs. Moy in the picture never saw her son again. She died shortly after her 15-year old son's departure.