

Gum Saan Journal

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**Shaken as by an Earthquake:
Chinese Americans, Segregation and Displacement
in Los Angeles, 1870-1938**

By Isabela Seong-Leong Quintana

**A History of the Los Angeles City Market:
1930-1950**

By Tara Fickle

**Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles:
Christine Sterling and the Residents of China City,
1938-1948**

By William Gow

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An Introduction of the Chinatown Remembered Community History Project

By Gordon Hom, President of CHSSC, 2009-2010

The Chinatown Remembered Community History Project tells the story of a generation of Chinese Americans who came of age in Los Angeles during the 1930s and 1940s. Like others in their generation, these Chinese American men and women lived through the Depression and then served their country valiantly in World War II. Yet unlike other Angelenos their age, these Chinese American youth had to deal not only with conflict abroad but also with the constant threat of displacement here at home. The construction of the new Union train station brought with it profound changes to the landscape of the local Chinese American community, beginning in the early 1930s with the destruction of much of Old Chinatown and continuing on with the development of two new Chinese American communities: China City and New Chinatown. For all Chinese Americans in Los Angeles, but especially for the youth, the 1930s and 1940s represent a pivotal moment of change and development.

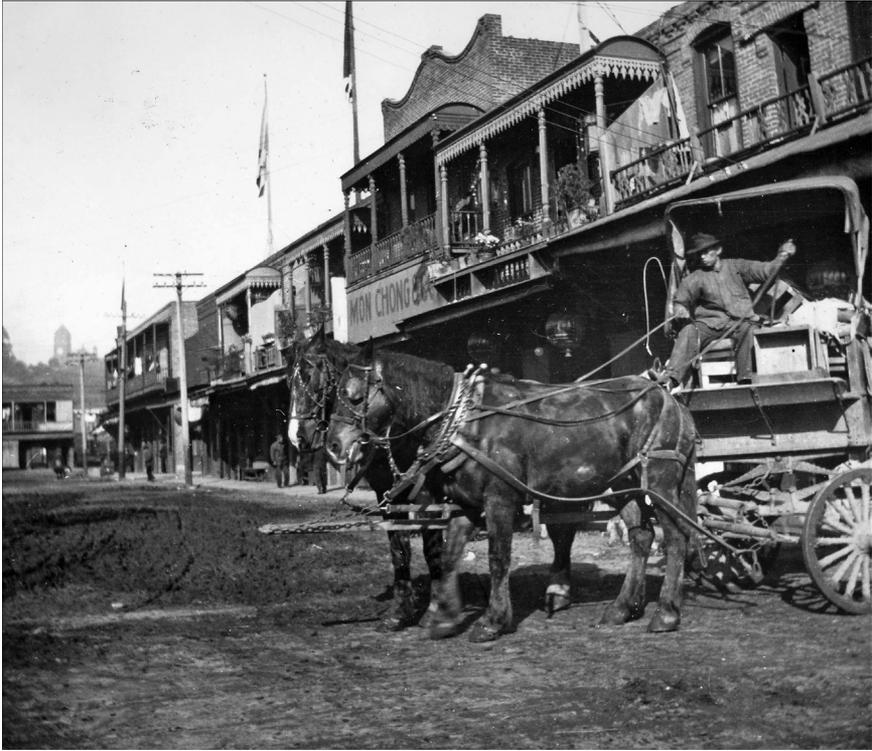
Chinatown Remembered Project reflects the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California's on-going effort to document the history of Los Angeles Chinatown and the surrounding Chinese American communities. Local youth from Los Angeles Chinatown Youth Council (LACYC) interviewed an older generation of Chinese Americans who remembered the 1930-40s period. We hope to continue to expose a younger generation to the importance of preserving local history

An important accompaniment to this issue of *Gum Saan Journal* is the Web site: www.chinatownremembered.com. This site includes many other articles researched by members of LACYC, a youth group sponsored by the Chinatown Service Center. Edited by Annie Luong, our Project Youth

Coordinator, the Web site includes a wonderful collection of personal profiles that tell so much more of the story.

- Richard Chee
- Ben Fong
- Dorothy Hom
- Esther Lee Johnson
- Irvin Lai
- David Lee
- Marian Leng
- Albert Lew
- Marie Louie
- Ruby Ling Louie
- Stanley Mu
- Charlie Quon
- Peter SooHoo Jr.
- Jennie Lee Taylor
- Tyrus Wong
- Eleanor SooHoo Yee
- Johnny Young

The Project Director for Chinatown Remembered is William Gow, a multi-talented teacher who works with high school and college students. He is the lynchpin for this collaborative effort. It is our hope that the accomplishments of the Chinatown Remembered Community History Project can be expanded in the coming years.



Old Chinatown.
Courtesy of Peter Soo Hoo Sr. Collection

Shaken as by an Earthquake: Chinese Americans, Segregation and Displacement in Los Angeles, 1870-1938

By Isabela Seong-Leong Quintana

“The old men were shaken as by an earthquake when they learned that a modern Union Depot with expansive grounds was going to dislodge them from their long established habitations,” wrote Garding Lui in 1948.¹ Published some ten years following the final displacement of the majority of Los Angeles’ Chinatown, Lui’s words provide a glimpse of how Chinatown residents experienced the loss of their homes, businesses and community. From 1933 until 1938, Chinese, along with Mexican residents whose homes

bordered Chinatown to the north, were forced to relocate and all buildings east of Alameda Street were razed to the ground. In their places, the city of Los Angeles built a number of city and civic buildings including Union Station railroad terminal. The removal of Old Chinatown in the 1930s is significant not only for the geographical dispersal, but also for the destruction of the original center of Chinese community life in Los Angeles.²

Following a long-established history of anti-Chinese policies, practices and events, city officials' decision to build Union Station in Chinatown's place built upon an entrenched national and local culture of exclusion that shaped the daily lives of Chinese people. Chinese communities faced state and local policies as well as everyday discrimination that segregated their living spaces and controlled their geographic mobility. By the 1870s, when Chinatown's population had grown significantly, Chinese homes and businesses lined Calle de los Negros (renamed Los Angeles Street in 1877) adjacent to the Plaza and shared space with Mexican homes and businesses.³ Because of limitations placed on Chinese property ownership, Chinese rented property that was previously occupied by Spanish-Mexican elites. City boosters chose to build Union Station in Chinatown's location in order to take advantage of the aesthetic qualities of the Plaza and the tourism possibilities it offered for a romanticized Spanish-Mexican "past,"⁴ erasing Chinese roots in the city center.

From the 1870s until 1938, Chinatown grew in both population and geographical area. By the 1900s, there were many more families who came to live alongside the large numbers of male laborers. Born in Chinatown in 1917, Eleanor SooHoo remembered the places of her neighborhood. "Well, the streets were unpaved," she recalled. "There were dirt streets. There was a playground at the end of Apablasa Street and across from that there was a horse stable."⁵ Having grown up in Old Chinatown during the 1920s and 30s, SooHoo is part of the last generation of children to witness its landscapes. Although the physical geography of Old Chinatown was destroyed, oral histories allow us to imagine how Chinatown residents played, worked and lived. They offer us an opportunity to understand Old Chinatown as a place made through the vibrancy of human interactions in everyday life. While segregation and limited resources constrained the everyday activities of Chinese women, men and children, these recollections

illuminate the ways in which Chinatown residents were able to build communities and make home.

Housing and Segregation

In 1870, close to two hundred Chinese residents lived in Los Angeles according to the U.S. census. This was a dramatic increase from the 14 Chinese residents recorded by the census ten years before. In 1870 approximately half of L.A.'s Chinese residents lived on Calle de los Negros next to the Plaza. The larger area surrounding the Plaza attracted many immigrant communities. Over the next few decades, the neighborhood's residents would live in a segregated geographical area that became known as Chinatown, despite the Mexican households located within Chinatown's perceived borders and especially on its perimeter.⁶

From the 1870s through the first few decades of the 20th century, the population living in the Chinese quarters around the Plaza grew radically despite government policies designed to curtail Chinese immigration, anti-Chinese labor agitation and racial violence. One study suggests the majority of Chinese migrants to Los Angeles came from other parts of California. Many migrated to Los Angeles after their work with track construction for the Southern Pacific Railroad ended, others came in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and still others came from rural areas where anti-Chinese sentiment was high and Chinese population was smaller.⁷ Government policies had particular salience for women. As historians have argued, the 1875 Page Law, which specifically restricted the migration of Chinese women into U.S. geopolitical borders, played a crucial role in limiting the population of Chinese women in the United States.⁸ The law was rewritten seven years later in 1882—the Chinese Exclusion Act—to limit the migration of all Chinese laborers.

By 1880, the Chinese population in Los Angeles had increased five fold since the previous decade—from 234 to 1,169. Over the next 30 years, in 1910, the population more than doubled to 2,602. While the population increased tremendously between 1880 and 1910, the percentage of women only grew from 4.5 percent to 5.7percent.⁹ As Chinatown's population grew, the area became increasingly identified as Chinese, despite the racial and ethnic diversity of those living in the area. As the name "Chinatown"

implied, mainstream perceptions of the area were that it was racially homogenous. According to the 1930 census, Mexican and Japanese homes were located side-by-side with Chinese ones in the area near the L.A. Plaza. Still, Chinese households made up the majority of the residences on major thoroughfares in the area that was known as Chinatown.¹⁰

As Los Angeles' Anglo population boomed, Mexican and Chinese residents of the Plaza area became more and more geographically isolated from the rest of the city. Housing segregation barred Chinese people from living in most parts of the city, along with Mexicans, Blacks and Japanese.¹¹ Nonetheless, Chinatown's initial settlements located along Calle de los Negros in the early 1870s eventually expanded east. By the 1880s, Chinatown reached eastward toward the Los Angeles River and homes were increasingly located in the river's flatlands, an area that often flooded and served as a prime site for further railroad track construction and other industries. When the Southern Pacific railroad arrived in Los Angeles in 1876, its tracks passed through the middle of Chinatown along Alameda Street. For decades thereafter, the regular passing of trains through the area were part of the fabric of the Chinatown experience. "All night long you could hear the trains coming in and out. It was very noisy there," remembered Arthur Chung, who lived in Chinatown as a child during the 1920s. "You know, in the Old Chinatown, the trains used to pass right through, right in the middle of Chinatown."¹² Additionally, the area did not receive regular city services—such as paving, plumbing and housing regulations. In essence, the city targeted Chinatown and the immediately surrounding area for infrastructure that benefited the city at large, especially white Angelenos, but was unwilling to provide regular municipal services for the communities that lived there.

Residential housing in the flatlands on the eastern side of Chinatown during the 1870s through the 1930s was not only located alongside railroad lines, but also the horse stables of the Chinese-run grocery industry. Chinese grocers utilized a large area of the flatlands near the river to keep their horses and wagons, which they used to take produce from farms to various Los Angeles markets. Many Chinese men worked in the produce industry, growing vegetables on rented land to sell at city market. In an 1878 ordinance, the City of Los Angeles began requiring vegetable peddlers to register for a permit that would allow them to legally sell their produce in

the city. In response, they went on strike, which forced the city to rescind the ordinance. In 1880, 50 of the 60 registered vegetable peddlers in Los Angeles were Chinese. Fourteen years later, the city registered 103.¹³ So dependent was the city on Chinese vegetable industry that in 1886, vegetable peddlers were able to quell an anti-Chinese boycott by refusing to sell to people who upheld pledges against hiring Chinese labor and patronizing Chinese businesses.¹⁴ Such scrutiny of Chinese grocers continued into the 1910s, when city health officials, buttressing the popular notion that Chinese grocers were unsanitary and a threat to the city's public health, instituted regulations on fruit and vegetable vending aimed specifically at Chinese vendors.¹⁵ In his oral history interview, David Lee, who was born "right next to the stables" in 1920 emphasized the proximity of Chinatown homes with the stables and the role of the produce industry in the Chinatown community. "They used to have stables, all the grocery, they used for horse-buggy and wagon and then put their grocery and then go to district to sell."¹⁶ In the first decades of the 20th century, congestion associated with vegetable wagons in Chinatown and the shared spaces of housing and horse stables drew the attention of city officials who had long been concerned about sanitation in the general Plaza area. A 1922 study suggested that "hundreds" of Chinese men slept in the corrals with the horses and vegetables at nighttime.¹⁷ Whether or not this was true, the stable area was a fixture in the daily experiences of Chinatown residents and work in vegetable production and sale was common amongst Chinatown men.

The area surrounding the Plaza was segregated not only by race but by industry as well. In addition to the produce stables, railroad tracks and other industries, the area was also home to the city's red light district. Prostitution and gambling were bustling commercial industries in both Chinese and Mexican areas around the Plaza at the turn of the 20th century. At this time, a number of other brothels flourished in the area, despite city regulations aimed at expelling them.¹⁸ As one historian notes, "through zoning laws and corrupt practices, city officials had allowed nearly all of the gambling houses and brothels and one-third of the city's saloons to be located in the space between the Plaza and the heart of Chinatown."¹⁹ As Chinatown was largely a bachelor society, brothels flourished, in part, due to the large numbers of Chinese men seeking their services. These businesses also attracted Whites and Mexicans to Chinatown, both as workers and as

clientele.²⁰ In the 1890s-1900s, Sánchez Street, which paralleled Los Angeles Street one block to the west, was known for a bustling brothel where Chinese women worked.²¹ The city segregated these industries in the Plaza area, where few Whites lived. Although the City banned prostitution in 1909, many brothels continued their businesses. The presence of industries like stables for vegetable peddlers, railroad tracks and depots, and vice contributed further to the segregation of Los Angeles' Chinese population, even while these industries were central to Los Angeles' economy. This was the case even into the 1930s as the city made plans to build Union Station. "Chinatown was located in the worst parts of town," recalled Chung who visited Chinatown regularly as a young person in the 1920s and 30s. "They never allowed the Chinese to live in the best parts of town. It was near Mexicantown, Olvera Street and First Street where the Japanese were....But it was not a good part of town."²² As Chung's recollection demonstrates, Los Angeles' Chinese residents were well aware of how segregation affected their daily lives and they recognized that segregation was an experience shared with other people of color—in Chung's case, Mexicans and Japanese. In this way, Chinatown was a site of strategic containment; whites found Chinatown and the Plaza area generally, undesirable as a place of residence, despite their desire to seek pleasure there.

These working-class communities took up residence in dwellings that were affordable, where they were permitted to rent and which offered them comfort, and, perhaps, safety in ethnic community. While some sought housing in Chinese enclaves elsewhere in the city by the 1920s, and in a few exceptional cases more wealthy Chinese families lived among non-Chinese people further from Chinatown, the Plaza area continued to be a commercial and social center for Chinese in the region. Arthur Chung's family, for example, lived several blocks south of the Plaza area near Pico and Hill, where his family ran an herbal medicine practice that catered to a non-Chinese clientele; they made regular trips to Chinatown to visit family and shop.²³ Likewise, Eleanor SooHoo's family visited Chinatown "about once a week," after they moved to another part of the city.²⁴

Initially, Chinese living quarters were old adobes and wooden structures; in later decades, there would also be brick buildings. In the late 19th century, the majority of these living quarters in Chinatown were two-

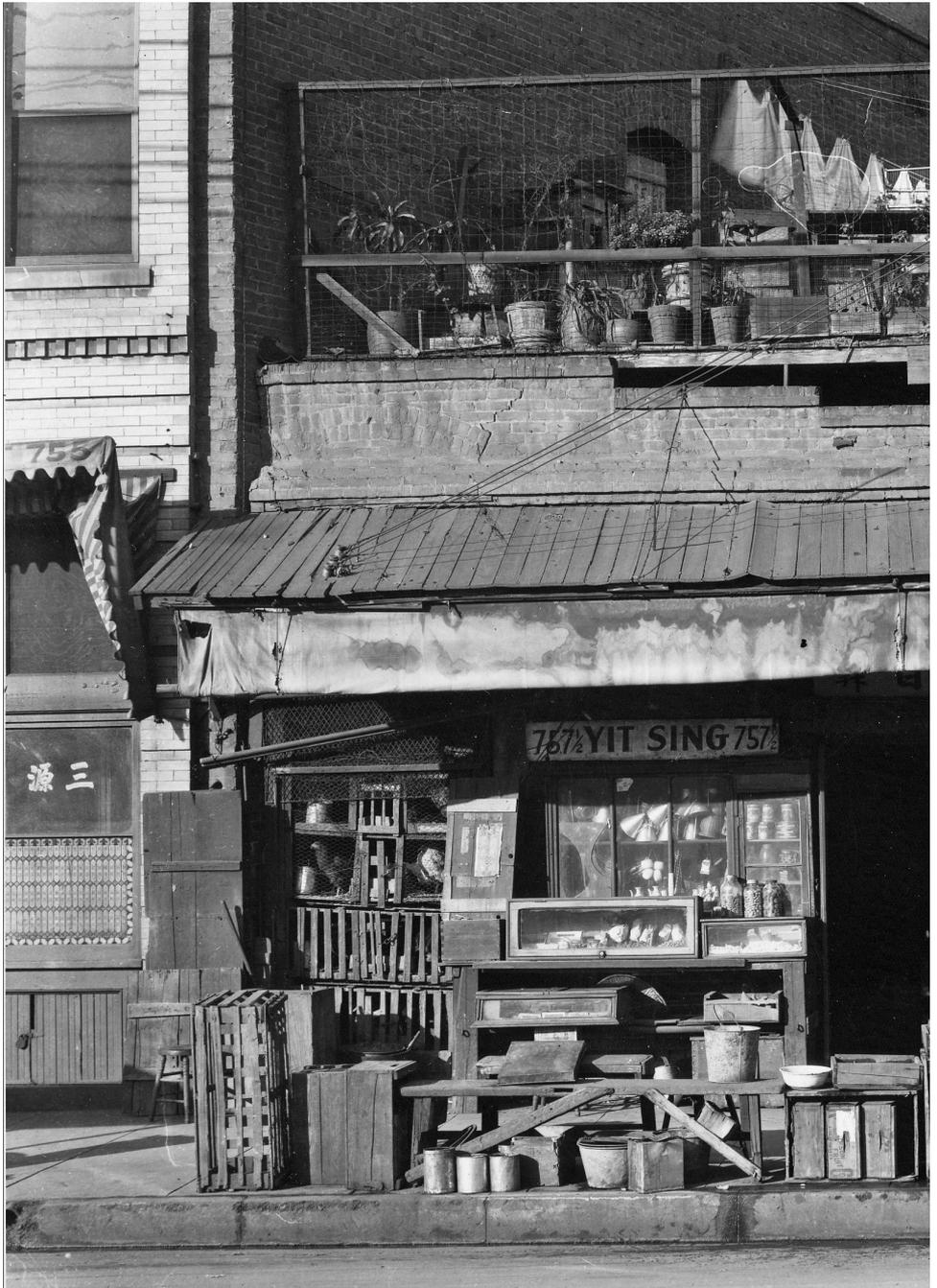
story wooden structures built very closely together. Arthur Chung described his aunt's house in Chinatown as "a wooden frame house, two stories, very creaky and weird to walk on the floors and the floors would creak."²⁵ Other families lived above storefronts. Lee's family eventually moved above a storefront. "At that time, there was only a few place[s] you could live. We had a Bow Wong Low. That's an apartment house, actually a rooming house... we had the corner of the apartment. So our whole family lived up there. And downstairs the store, was a shoemaker or something like that."²⁶ In this way, Chinese living spaces often overlapped with work and business spaces.

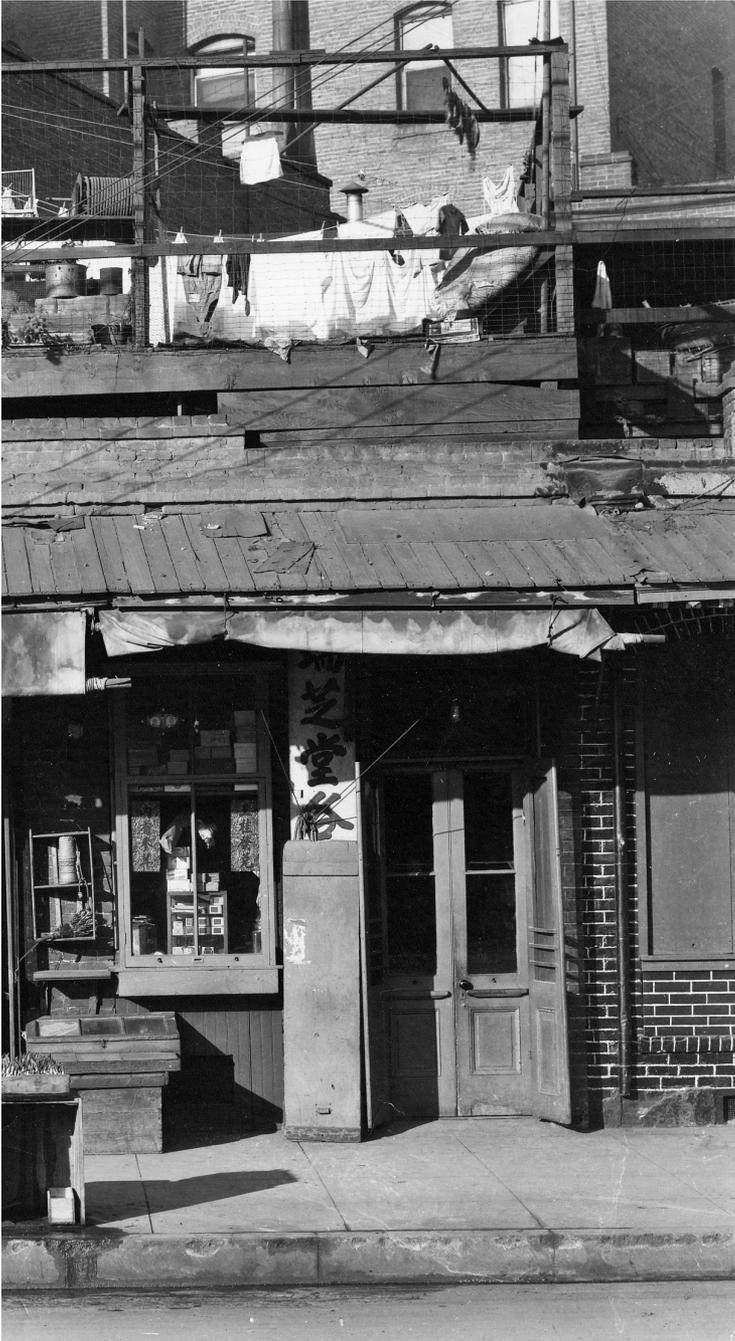
By the early 20th century, Chinatown increasingly drew a great deal of attention from Whites who were concerned with overcrowding. In 1924, Lieutenant R. E. Steckel, an L.A. policeman who worked in Chinatown recalled a man who had a small space behind his store that he rented out to a number of men, "Old Jim down here has a little store with a sort of balcony at the back where he has beds which he rents to other Chinamen and makes his living that way."²⁷ Living situations, in which several Chinese men lived in shared and cramped quarters, were common. One resident remembered that his family shared their apartment with a number of single men who worked at their restaurant. He commented, "Apartment also consists of all the workers also from the restaurant. We always had a lot of people at the... apartment... I would say five or six, plus the family. Most of them [were] singles... They would get married. They left their wives in China."²⁸ Ying Wong Kwan recalled that when she was a young girl, her father opened a laundry business, which was located in the same building as their home, "Divided, you know, with walls, partitions and doors." "We had proper living quarters there. And it was a very large room. Ample living quarters for the help, too, which my father brought over. Ten people at a time and fed them."²⁹ Tyrus Wong lived with his father in all-male living quarters in Ferguson Alley, one of the major thoroughfares of Chinatown during the 1920s – 30s. Although he and his father had a small room to themselves, he remembered that his building also housed a number of men who worked in farming. According to his description, there were often five or six men living in one large room and other men often slept in the hallway.³⁰ Male lodging houses, like the one where Tyrus Wong lived, were common for both Chinese and Mexican workingmen who lived in the Plaza area. They provided affordable and shared housing.





Chop Suey Restaurant in Old Chinatown.
Courtesy of Peter Soo Hoo, Sr. Collection.





**Yit Sing storefront
in Old Chinatown.
Courtesy of
Icy Smith
Collection.**





Los Angeles Street in Old Chinatown.
Courtesy of Peter Soo Hoo Sr. Collection

Everyday Life and the Making of Community

In addition to homes in which families took in boarders, lodging houses were common for men. According to one sociologist of the time, “One typical lodging house has 32 rooms on one side and 34 on the other, alternate store and living rooms; upstairs all the rooms are occupied by lodgers.” These lodging houses had “community kitchens” that were shared by lodgers of multiple buildings and were often located “in crowded sleeping rooms, the ovens being wedged between built-in bunks.”³¹ While the writer found this living situation deplorable, it seems likely that shared eating and living spaces also offered opportunities for community living in the midst of racial hostility. Chinese women, especially those who migrated from China, did not leave the neighborhood area often. Much of their time was spent caring for children and the home, and in some cases, for family businesses as well. Their work included cooking, cleaning and washing for the boarders who stayed in their homes. Chinese women of merchant families also worked to keep the family businesses running. However, because their numbers were so few and because their homes were often tied to businesses and served as rooming houses, Chinese women who had families were often the only women in the household, at least until a girl child was born.

During the early decades of the 20th century, census records reveal that Chinese households were often composed of many laboring men; if there were women in the household at all, there were only one or two. Thus, Chinese women were somewhat isolated, spending time on household work for male family members and boarders alike. As one study states, “Visiting neighbors, relatives, or friends was the only leisure time activity for many Chinese women.”³² Jennie Lee Taylor recalled this as well, as she recounted her mother’s participation in a small group of Chinese women in Chinatown during the 1920s. “They didn’t have any fun. They don’t go any place. They just stay home and most of the time they just gossip at each other and that’s about it.” Spending time talking with each other — or “gossiping at each other,” as Lee Taylor says — is one way that Chinese women of her mother’s age in the 1920s made connections with other women in the Chinatown community.³³

Children also did a lot of work in the home. Jennie Lee Taylor recalled

that her family's laundry business mostly catered to single Chinese men. "[Our laundry business] was right in Chinatown. Yah, mostly the... bachelors, because during that time there weren't that many women. So mostly the men. They bring their shirts and laundry and we send the laundry out to be washed and it comes back every Wednesday and Friday and I have to iron... We [she and her brother] use[d] to use those old fashioned irons, that uses the oil on the gas stove and they [weighed] about five or six pounds."³⁴ Although this kind of work was taxing on children's bodies, children's work became a critical part of the fabric of Chinatown and the Los Angeles economy. Together, women and children labored in the home to provide food and laundry for Los Angeles' working Chinese men.

Most of the children who lived in Chinatown attended Chinese schools after their public school day and in the summertime. Nora Sterry, principal of the Macy Street School, a school attended by many Chinatown children, counted five Chinese schools in Chinatown in 1922.³⁵ Although Sterry suggested that Chinese children's "great handicap" was a general lack of playtime and trouble socializing at school,³⁶ evidence shows that children played quite a bit, despite the work they did caring for siblings and helping with family businesses. The street and other common areas were chosen spaces for play.³⁷ Residents remember as children playing on the tracks of the Southern Pacific, which ran by their homes. In fact, the playground in Chinatown was located on a Southern Pacific lot in the horse stables and only Chinese children played there.³⁸ Tyrus Wong remembered, "Down there [the horse yard] they had a corral but no horses in there and that's where they had the playground." He went on: "I go down to the playground and play there with the same age, play baseball and things like that."³⁹

Displacement

By the 1930s, the combination of segregation and exclusion in the Plaza area was an entrenched part of the city's urban planning processes, making Plaza area communities particularly vulnerable to city boosters. Because Chinese did not own the land under their homes and gardens, they had little recourse when the city decided to force residents to move. Additionally, they did not have resources to protect their homes and businesses from incidents like fire. Such vulnerability was evident long

before plans for Union Station were put into play.

In fact, Chinatown had been displaced before. When arsonists set Chinatown buildings along Calle de los Negros on fire in 1886, the flames spread quickly down the line of adobes where Chinese living quarters, stores, theater, restaurants and other businesses were located.⁴⁰ Another arson-related fire was set to Chinatown the following year in 1887. Despite the great loss that Chinatown residents experienced with this series of anti-Chinese activities, the arsonists were never penalized. Colonel Bee, “Acting Chinese Consul and chief solicitor for the Chinese Six Companies at San Francisco,” came to Los Angeles to investigate on behalf of Chinese residents who had suffered a great loss. *The Los Angeles Times* quoted Colonel Bee: “If the city is to blame, the losses must be paid. . . . If an American’s house is burned in China, all he has to do is to send in his bill, and it is paid by the government at once.”⁴¹ Chinese settlements across the West had been experiencing arson-related fires. Bee’s statement demonstrates the sentiment that Chinese residents in Los Angeles were not receiving just treatment and response from municipal authorities. However, Bee’s negotiation with the City of Los Angeles resulted in plans to relocate Chinatown, or rather, to “remove” Chinatown “to a poorer part of the city” so that it would “no longer be a central eyesore.”⁴² Another *Times* article stated that Chinatown’s displacement was expedited by both fire and lack of insurance coverage for Chinese residents: “Undoubtedly the late incendiary fires and the withdrawal of insurance from the Chinese quarters by the insurance companies have been the most potent influences on securing this quick result.”⁴³ In some ways, the 1886-87 arsons served as precedent for the “removal” of Chinatown 40 years later with the building of Union Station.

Conversations about building a new train terminal in Los Angeles began long before plans were put into place. At the turn of the 20th century, the city sought to address congestion and traffic problems, caused largely by the web of railroad tracks that crossed each other through Plaza area neighborhoods, which they believed posed a concern for public safety. They settled on the site of Chinatown because of its proximity to the Plaza and the possibility of removing Chinatown from the area. The demolition of Chinatown and the construction of Union Station, were physical manifestations of the city’s controlled image of itself as a “white spot” in the

U.S. landscape. As historian Mark Wild has argued, the construction of Union Station was a part of Los Angeles' racialized corporate urban development efforts in the early 20th century; this development was characterized by the simultaneous rebuilding of the city's physical, political and moral image in ways that "envisioned immigrant and nonwhite populations as distinct, bounded ethnic communities that could either be isolated from white populations or incorporated... into the broader urban community."⁴⁴ City planners and businessmen saw the building Union Station as serving multiple functions that upheld this image of the city; it would ease traffic problems and reroute railroad tracks, make room for government buildings and rid the city of Chinatown and other Plaza area residents whose presence threatened the "new" image.⁴⁵

However, before construction could be commenced, the City of Los Angeles went through several land disputes, particularly with several of the descendants of Spanish-Mexican elites like the Apablasas and Sepulvedas, who claimed rights to their ancestral plots; land atop which Chinatown communities had been built and settled.⁴⁶ Chinese residents, unable to own land, were caught in the middle of a long-standing process of conquest in which the City of Los Angeles sought to claim land from those who had owned it before the U.S.-Mexico War.⁴⁷ As David Lee recollected, "We as Chinese at that time, we [were] only living here. We don't own here.... If they want you to move, you move.... No Chinese owned property around Chinatown. None of us owned anything."⁴⁸ With the impending court decisions regarding land ownership, Chinatown residents began to move elsewhere. "They felt bad," recalled Jenny Lee Taylor. "They all had to move regardless of what they felt they still had to move... during that time who are they going to protest to?"⁴⁹ By 1933, the removal of Old Chinatown began with the construction of Union Station. New Chinatown, in its current location northwest of the Plaza would not officially open until 1938. Many relocated to the growing Chinese communities near city market and near Adams and San Pedro, as well as to New Chinatown.⁵⁰

Conclusion

New Chinatown formed as a result of the construction of Union Station and became a new home to many former residents of Old Chinatown.

Peter Soo Hoo, along with other L.A. Chinese businessmen, worked together to acquire property that would become the site of New Chinatown. As Icy Smith points out, “New Chinatown was the first Chinese enclave in the United States which was owned by Chinese Americans.”⁵¹ Many businesses that flourished in Old Chinatown were able to relocate to New Chinatown. Just as Old Chinatown was built on top of land that was formerly occupied by Spanish-Mexicans, New Chinatown was built on land where working-class Mexicans had lived before them, known as Sonoratown. Along with Mexicans who were also displaced with the building of Los Angeles municipal buildings, Chinese were easily “removed” to make room for the City’s plans for re-imagining itself without a Chinese presence. Segregation and exclusion went hand-in-hand for the residents of Old Chinatown.

Notes

1. Garding Lui, *Inside Los Angeles Chinatown* (Los Angeles, 1948), 38.
2. Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, *Linking Our Lives: Chinese American Women of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, 1984), 16-18.
3. Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); César López, *El Descanso: A Comparative History of the Los Angeles Plaza Area and the Shared Racialized Space of the Mexican and Chinese Communities, 1853-1933* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2002).
4. William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza*, 178.
5. Eleanor Soo Hoo, interview by William Gow, October 7, 2007, CHSSC Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
6. Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza*, 111.; Wild, *Street Meeting*.
7. Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, *Linking Our Lives*, 13.
8. Sucheng Chan, “The Exclusion of Chinese Women, 1870-1943,” in *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 94-146; George Anthony Peffer, *If They Don't Bring their Women Here: Chinese Female*

Immigration Before Exclusion (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

9. Census figures for the general population in Los Angeles were actually highest in 1890 (at 4,424) and began to decrease over the next few decades. Lucie Cheng and Suellen Cheng, "Chinese Women of Los Angeles, A Social Historical Survey," in *Linking Our Lives: Chinese American Women of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, 1984), 2.

10. U.S. Census, Los Angeles County, 1930.

11. Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 84.

12. Arthur W. Chung, interview by Beverly Chan, October 1979, Southern California Chinese American Oral History Project, UCLA Special Collections.

13. G. Yee and E. Yee, "The Chinese and the Los Angeles Produce Market," *Gum Saan Journal* 9, No. 2 (1986): 5-7.

14. Everette G. Hager, George E. Kinney, and Anthony F. Kroll, *An 1886 Chinese Labor Boycott in Los Angeles, Especially prepared as a keepsake for the Roxburghe and Zamorano Clubs* (The Castle Press, 1982). 18-19, 25.

15. Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 31-35.

16. David Lee, interview by Suellen Cheng, December 5, 1979, Southern California Chinese American Oral History Project, UCLA Special Collections.

17. Nora Sterry, "Housing Conditions in Chinatown Los Angeles," *Journal of Applied Sociology* (December 1922): 74.

18. W. W. Robinson, *Tarnished Angeles: Paradisiacal Turpitude in Los Angeles Revealed*, printed for members of the Roxburghe Club and the Zamorano Club (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1964), 2.

19. Romo, *East Los Angeles*, 76.

20. Wild, *Street Meeting*, 125.

21. Robinson, *Tarnished Angeles*, 16-19.

22. Chung, interview.

23. Ibid.

24. Soo Hoo, interview.

25. Chung, interview.

26. Lee, interview.

27. Catherine Holt, "Information Obtained from Lieut. R. E. Stackel of

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San Pedro City Market.
Courtesy of Icy Smith Collection.

A History of the Los Angeles City Market: 1930-1950

By Tara Fickle

Chinese involvement in vegetable farming and peddling far predated the opening of the 9th Street City Market in 1909. Even before large-scale immigration of Chinese men began to flow into California due to the Gold Rush and railroad construction in the mid-19th century, Chinese had long devoted parts of their home plots to sustenance farming, particularly in the Sze Yup provinces, where the majority of early Chinese immigration originated. Due to the similarity in climate and soil fertility, the transition to growing vegetables in California soil was a relatively easy one. As Chinese railroad workers began to arrive en masse, they were accompanied by farmers and cooks, also men, whose primary role was to grow Chinese vegetables and cook familiar meals for their compatriots.

From Railroad to Vineyard

Once the primary sections of the transcontinental railroad had been completed in 1869, vast amounts of track having been laid all across the Sierras and into the interior plains, thousands of Chinese men migrated to Western urban centers, particularly San Francisco and Los Angeles. Their movement and settlement patterns were greatly restricted due to both discriminatory housing and employment laws, as well as general anti-Chinese sentiment, culminating in anti-Chinese riots in 1894. Chinese migration between the two urban centers was common; interviewee Keong Lee's father moved the family from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 1925, tiring of working as a cook in a Chinese restaurant and hoping for better luck in the burgeoning Los Angeles produce market.¹

Los Angeles proved to be an ideal location for Chinese vegetable growers, both because of its climate and its vast tracts of undeveloped land. Initially, the acres east of Alameda Street, between Macy and Aliso streets, were owned by one of the earliest Angeleno families, the Apabladas; "Apple Blossom Street" is the Anglicized name for the thoroughfare that cut through their land. This area, bounded by Macy and Aliso streets to the north and south, and Main and Juan streets on the west and east, became most of what came to be known as Chinatown (later "Old Chinatown"). Juan Apablada was an early employer of Chinese laborers, mostly displaced railroad laborers who worked the thousands of vines on his property. In addition to working the vineyards, many Chinese also raised beans and other vegetables, peddling them door-to-door in two sacks balanced on a bamboo pole. This process was vastly simplified by the existence of *zanjas*, irrigation ditches which ran along the city streets: Zanja Madre, the largest of the two, ran along the west side of Alameda Street, while Zanja 2, which later would provide water for the city's first ice factory, ran between Chinatown and the Los Angeles River. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Chinese were discovered siphoning water from the *zanjas* in the dead of night to obtain water for their gardens.

Building the Produce Market

Outside of Chinatown, other Chinese entrepreneurs established large vegetable gardens in South LA, in the area now known as Watts, Lynwood and Compton, and as far down as Wilmington and San Pedro; smaller farms, many of them growing asparagus, dotted the fields of El Monte, Artesia, Fountain Valley, and La Puente.² By 1880, 50 out of the 60 registered vegetable peddlers in Los Angeles County identified as Chinese, and by 1894, there were 104 licensed vegetable wagons owned by Chinese.

By the turn of the century, the agricultural business is estimated to have employed a full one-quarter of the Chinese male laboring population in California. Produce was taking its place alongside restaurants, laundry, and gambling as one of the *Sei Dai Kuen* (“Four Big Businesses”) of Chinese America, both because of untapped markets and discriminatory hiring practices, which confined Chinese to certain sectors of the service industry.³

A market established by the Chinese themselves, however, was quite long in coming to fruition. Initially, the majority of vegetable selling was done around the circular Olvera Street Plaza, just South of Macy Street, where Caucasian, Japanese and Chinese farmers congregated with their goods. However, the increased presence of wagons and the long hours of the makeshift vegetable market became a nuisance to the city; in 1926, horses were legally prohibited on streets, making wagons an obsolete method for transporting produce.⁴ However, it was clear to the City of Los Angeles that the demand for fresh produce was only increasing; subsequently, it leased a vacant lot at 9th Street and Los Angeles Street to provide a more regulated space for the vegetable market. This new market, known as the Hughes Market, opened its stalls in 1901, expanding at a rapid rate until it outgrew its bounds and leased another vacant lot from the city at 3rd Street and Central in 1903, establishing the Los Angeles Market Company.⁵ Infighting amongst the shareholders and stall vendors led to the creation of two new markets in 1909; one was the City Market of Los Angeles on 9th Street and San Pedro, established by Mr. Louis Quan, while the other remained, in name, the Los Angeles Market Company, established on 6th Street and Alameda (the Southern Pacific railroad, wanting to run track through the 3rd and Central Streets location, exchanged this land for the lot on 6th Street). Both markets grew at a tremendous rate, and while the City

Market was able to expand three blocks south to 12th Street, and one block west from San Pedro to Wall Street, the Los Angeles Market Company soon moved to a larger space on 7th and Central Streets. The construction costs, however, soon became prohibitively expensive due to war costs, and the Southern Pacific Railroad purchased the company, completing its construction and opening the Wholesale Terminal Market in 1918.

Louis Quan was an instrumental figure in the creation of the City Market, which was unique in the ethnic diversity of its vendors and clientele. Due to his English competency and business savvy, Quan was able to raise 41 percent of the initial capital from 373 Chinese stockholders, raising \$81,850 towards the Market's development. This contribution was exceeded only by Caucasian shareholders, who contributed \$81,900, and was supplemented by Japanese owners, who contributed \$36,250 towards the \$200,000 investment required.

The day-to-day machinations of the market, and the community that began to develop around it, are not nearly as well-documented as the story of its legal establishment. In some cases, the oral histories of residents from "9th Street" (around the City Market) provide our only insight. A number of these histories are from men and women who grew up in the first two decades of the 1900s, and their accounts suggest that Quan's business venture initiated, or at least coincided with, an increasing specialization in agriculture. While the City Market itself supplied produce wholesale to hotels and restaurants in addition to individuals, exclusively Chinese supermarkets began to cater to the taste of a growing Chinese population.⁶ Several interviewees recalled that their parents often shopped at one of a few large Chinese grocery stores, such as Wing Cheung Lung and Yee Sing Cheung, which sprung up in the 9th Street district and provided groceries to Chinese residents from all over Los Angeles. Some entrepreneurs, like Chung Moy Louie's family, started produce companies to take advantage of the growing market, or rented vending stalls at City Market for \$35 a month (around \$800 in today's money).⁷

In addition, the presence of a second generation of Chinese Americans and the developing English-speaking abilities of first and second generation Chinese allowed for strong competition with Caucasian produce markets. The transition from truck farming and door-to-door or wagon vegetable

peddling to produce brokering and wholesaling allowed the Chinese to progress in the farming business. Out of the 155 Los Angeles produce companies in 1910, the Chinese owned 17. They had, of course, to compete with certain technological factors as well; the introduction of refrigerated rail cars, which allowed produce to be shipped from the San Joaquin Valley and as far as 100 miles away in mid-winter to the large Caucasian produce markets, meant that Chinese farmers and sellers had to work even harder to break even.

Some of these ventures proved quite profitable: The Louie Produce Company, founded in 1908, was able to turn a profit of \$300 a month (around \$7,000 in today's money); according to Chung Moy, the family did their business by streetcar, and delayed buying an automobile until 1940.⁸ To meet the rise in demand, other Chinese Californians upgraded from home vegetable plots to farms, often 20 to 50 acres, as did Marie Louie's family: "My father bought an asparagus farm and my eldest brother managed the farm. They hired other relatives and other Chinese people or sometimes Mexican people to harvest the asparagus and sold it at the City Market on 9th Street."⁹ But while employment opportunities as a laborer might have been plentiful, S.K. Lee noted that it was "difficult to get into [the] produce business. You have to know someone to lead you in."¹⁰ Various Chinese business associations, with membership often determined by home province and kinship, were key to organizing and differentiating the growing labor force.

These new enterprises did not, however, mean a life of affluence and leisure for the majority of the 9th Street district. While according to Keong (S.K.) Lee, most men working in the produce business had wives and families who remained in China, discriminatory legislation, financial difficulties and cultural mores meant that the growth of Chinese households, and Chinese home ownership, were slow to develop in the States. As a result, most of the men working in the City Market lived in nearby boarding houses run by Caucasians, one of which Clarence Yip Yeu recalled being on Ninth and Wall Streets, for which the Chinese boarders paid \$6 a month to lodge (about \$140 in today's money).¹¹ The fact that Chinese resided in such a small radius, concentrated between San Pedro and Crocker streets, was also a result of the grueling demands of the City Market; Mr. Louie recalls that, before the union was created in 1937, he

worked from 8 p.m. to 12 noon the following day, often putting in 18 hours a day.¹²

Others, particularly the vegetable sellers and their families, were forced to live in hastily constructed residences adjacent to the market due to the long hours and difficult labor. Unlike the Los Angeles Market Company and the Wholesale Terminal Station, the 9th Street Market opened at 2 a.m. rather than 3 or 4 a.m., increasing the demands on its laborers. In addition, as the City Market began to prosper, a number of Caucasian stockholders, discovering that they were not going to be able to squeeze out their Asian counterparts and thus eager to move to the Caucasian-dominated Los Angeles Market Company, pulled their investment out and insisted that the market be closed unless the Chinese and Japanese vendors could produce \$100,000. Luckily, the Asparagus Association supplemented the approximately \$70,000 that the Asian shareholders came up with to keep the Market open.

Hard Times

Despite their successes, the Chinese in the City Market also suffered intense competition from their counterparts in the business, the Japanese. Japanese Californians, who were usually more established and had English-speaking Nisei children to assist in translation of business transactions, were farming 15 percent of the land in Los Angeles County dedicated to produce; that is, 40,804 acres out of 270,431. With that 15 percent, they were producing 68 percent of the county's vegetables by the 1930s, including 85 percent of its celery, 60 percent of its cauliflower, and 40 percent of its potatoes and cabbage.¹³ The domination of Japanese farming and production severely depressed the Chinese American economy even into the late 1930s when other American businesses were emerging from the Great Depression. Many Chinese families like Mr. Chow's were hit hard by the Great Depression, which, in addition to Japanese competition, kept the local Chinese economy so low that families often had to sleep on the floor, and there were no *lysee* (red gift envelopes containing money) were handed out on Chinese New Year.¹⁴

The role of the Chinese *hui*, a system originating in China and found in nearly every Chinese diaspora, became particularly important during the

Great Depression. By pooling money together, groups of Chinese families, often linked by the kinship of home provinces, were able to lend significant sums to those individuals in need. The fact that the City Market continued to employ mostly Chinese meant that the produce market was keeping more families afloat than simply the vendors'. Tyrus Wong explained how he was able to get an education during the Depression despite his family's financial difficulties:

And then that was during Depression times and my dad says gee, I don't have that kind of money, and I know in your heart, you'd like to go to art school and he wanted me to go to art school. So he asked some friends from our old the same village back in China, from the City Market, they were all young men making good money so I asked him about it and he could borrow money for that. So he borrowed \$100 and he said well son, here's \$100 for you to go to Otis and so forth, but this money isn't mine and I borrowed it, so I have to pay them back! So I want you to promise me to really work hard and I said I will. So I'm assuming he must have paid them back afterwards. That part I don't remember or not, but he, that was very nice of him.¹⁵

This form of rotating credit reflects a tight community, one based largely on extended kinship, and one which was greatly concerned with the welfare of its members. When Eleanor Soo Hoo was asked how the Great Depression affected her family on 9th Street, she replied:

...It didn't really affect us. Because my brother-in-law was in the product market so it didn't affect him.

WG: How did his being in the produce market help you?

ESH: Well, they had plenty of food. Some, they distributed to people that didn't have anything.

WG: Did you know Chinese that were affected by the Depression?

ESH: Well, Chinese. They don't spend a lot of money on a lot of things.

WG: So can you think of any examples of Chinese that were hard hit?

ESH: No. Because you know a lot the Chinese people would go to these family associations they would take care of them.

WG: When you say take care of them you mean...

ESH: They would give them food and lodging. And that's all they needed.

WG: So these family associations worked as a kind of welfare system?

ESH: Yes right.¹⁶

The Chinese community thus became a source of both economic and social support. With the destruction of Old Chinatown in 1933 to make way for Union Station, some displaced Chinese residents began to create a community around the City Market in the late 1920s, making the nearby streets of West Adams a kind of Chinese suburb. Other families lived on Crocker, 9th, 10th streets and Towne Ave.¹⁷ As a result of this proximity, and because New Chinatown and China City would not be built until five years later, it was the City Market that became, at least temporarily, a stable Chinatown for Los Angeles in the pre-WWII years. The oral histories provide us with some insight into the differences between the "Old Chinatown" and the new 9th Street district:

WG: How was the Chinatown on 9th Street different than Chinatown?

PSH: It's smaller, a little more spread out. You really couldn't identify it as a Chinatown, but there were a lot of Chinese grocery stores and the Ninth Street market was close by. There was a church there, and some Chinese residents. I'm not sure what the numbers were but enough to make it look like a Chinatown but it wasn't.¹⁸

WG: What was the difference between Old Chinatown and Ninth St?

ML: The old Chinatown had been there a long long time and then the Union Station was built there so they had to move away. They couldn't seem to find one specific place to move to. A group would move here, a group would move there. A little group went to China City, which was on Spring and Ord, another group went to the main Chinatown on North Broadway and another group went to Ninth and San Pedro. There were a lot of produce houses there. So there was a small Chinatown with some stores and restaurants. Hong Kong Noodle Company was there. Sometimes my mom would pick me up after school and we'd go to Ninth Street that was closer than going to Chinatown and we would buy what we needed.¹⁹





The City Market at 9th and San Pedro Streets.
Courtesy of Peter Soo Hoo Sr. Collection.

WG: In terms of this area around the produce market, the 9th Street area. The difference between 9th Street Chinatown and Chinatown itself... Was there ever any tensions between the people?

JY: They were different types of people. They were more or less professional. They owned business. They lived in homes, old homes. But they had their own bathrooms that we didn't have. We lived in flats and took baths in big tin tubs. We didn't have any hot water. The people in 9th Street might have been a little more affluent than we were.

WG: Was there ever any rivalry?

JY: No no. Must have been a lot of envy what they had and what we had. The break up of Chinatown was in two phases. East of Alameda they were evacuated about five years before west of Alameda. We were the west part. We didn't move until during the war. That's when my family moved in with my brother. Prior to that, the east part of Alameda moved about five years [earlier]. So it was in two phases. They got out of the ghetto before we did. Let's put it this way. They were more Americanized.²⁰

The influx of Chinese families from Old Chinatown, joining with the already present Chinese families near the City Market, created a need for a number of newly-built institutions, such as schools and churches, which eventually had an exclusively Chinese membership. Children who had remained in China or were sent there for schooling, now arrived in the United States as a result of the Japanese invasion of China in 1939, further changing the dynamic of a Chinese bachelor society.²¹ The younger ones attended the 9th Street Elementary School, often working alongside their parents in the produce market all morning before attending.²² Rodney Chow, a teenager at the time, recalled that the junior high school in the 9th Street district had a mostly Black population, and that many Chinese children used false addresses in order to enroll elsewhere. Many of them seem to have returned to the area to attend Poly High School, where Mr. Chow recalls high school students making extra money by pulling rickshaws for tourists; others were able to make \$25 a week (around \$600 today) as an all-around helper at the grocery store.²³

Years of Plenty

This change in fortunes for the 9th Street Chinese came almost overnight with the passage of Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. The hasty internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps along the West Coast meant that all Japanese businesses, the majority of which were farms, produce wholesale and brokering companies, and grocery stores, had to be sold immediately for far below market value. Chinese and Caucasian entrepreneurs were quick to seize this opportunity, leasing or buying up much of this property for rock bottom prices. Along with the employment of thousands of Chinese in the war industries, the elimination of Japanese competition, which had comprised 10 percent of Los Angeles food stores, created a massive boon in the Chinese American economy by the mid 1940s.

The City Market, and the Los Angeles Chinese population, underwent significant changes as a result of the economic surge during World War II. This meant, however, that many residents were now able to work outside of Chinatown in various war industries, and in some cases to move outside of the area with the increase in salary. There seem to be multiple hypotheses for the collapse of the City Market's prominence by 1950. Mr. Louie cited the lack of re-investment in farmland that he felt characterized many Chinese businesses: "The landlord offered to sell the Louie family farmland for \$30 an acre, the Louie family rejected the offer and replied, 'You keep your land, I keep my \$30. I take my \$30 home to buy an acre of good land. I can pass my life easy.'" Chung Moy Louie noted that this led to increasing transience of the Chinese American population, which was not tied to the land in the same way as the Japanese, who even reestablished themselves in the produce business after their release from internment. The return of Japanese Californians also changed the landscape of the City Market "Chinatown:"

WG: Was there any problems... After the war, how did the neighborhood become Japanese again?

JY: Slowly. Slowly. They were moving them out. There was quite a few Chinese restaurants down there. They almost had to close up too because they lost all that Japanese business.

WG: Did the people that were living give the businesses back? How exactly did it work?

JY: I guess they couldn't make it. And slowly the Japanese came back in. Just like the produce. Same thing. All the produce, about 25 percent were owned by Japanese. And they lost everything. A lot of these big places. Venice Celery. Lot of big produce down there owned by Japanese. They lost everything. But they came back. They were so industrial.²⁴

The construction of China City and New Chinatown, the slow breaking down of discriminatory housing practices, and the emigration of second generation Chinese Americans to employment opportunities beyond Chinatown all contributed to the decline in the City Market community. The majority of its residents moved to the area between New Chinatown and China City, bounded by Sunset Blvd and Bernard Street on the north and south, and Yale and Alameda Streets on the west and east. This sharp post-war decline in City Market population meant that it lost much of its prominence as a community and residential center for Chinese Americans. By 1952, only 25 Chinese families remained in the City Market area. Today, the City Market remains an integral part of downtown Los Angeles, but is no longer a Chinese American hub as it was half a century ago. Though there are a number of Chinese produce sellers occupying stalls, the Market has begun to focus its attention on the wholesale merchandising of garments, made more relevant by the fact that the City Market is now adjacent to the Fashion District.

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Tsin Nan Ling booth selling scholar's stones at the Cleveland World Fair. Courtesy of Ruby Ling Louie Collection.

Building a Chinese Village in Los Angeles: Christine Sterling and the Residents of China City, 1938-1948

By William Gow

In 1938, China City must have been a sight to behold. Located near Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, only a few blocks from the nearly completed Union Station, the walled city featured buildings adorned in Chinese-style architecture, a lotus pond and Chinese rickshaw rides. There was a temple and replica buildings from the set of the 1937 Hollywood blockbuster, *The Good Earth*. Costumed Chinese American workers greeted tourists and a Chinese opera troop performed live shows in front of the shop of Hollywood recruiter Tom Gubbins. Those who visited the community in 1938 can be excused if they overlooked the tall man named Tsin Nan Ling who had set up a table outside one of the many curio shops,

where he and his family members sold artifacts carved from the stones of his native village in China.¹

Some days it seemed that even other Chinese immigrants treated Mr. Ling as an outsider. Unlike most other Chinese immigrants, Mr. Ling did not hail from Guangdong province in southern China, or from the district, Toisan. Rather, his family made its home farther north, in the province of Zhejiang (Chekiang).² For this reason, Mr. Ling and his family were different from the many other Chinese who had settled the nation's many Chinatowns. Maybe this was why this tall man had spent so many of his previous years in America working as an itinerant merchant, traveling the United States with his family from one World's Fair Exhibition to the next, selling the carved scholar's stones for which his home village was so famous. Mr. Ling settled his family for as long as business allowed before moving on to the next city: Chicago in 1933, followed by Cleveland in 1936, and finally San Diego later in 1936. While he may have hailed from a different section of China than many of his countrymen in America, his travels around the United States made him comfortable in new environments and adept at dealing with a variety of people.

Despite all he gained from his travels, Mr. Ling knew that this nomadic lifestyle was difficult on his wife and four children. Earlier that year, word had spread through the Chinese community up and down the West Coast that there was opportunity in Los Angeles, a new Chinatown of sorts, selling the magic of Hollywood, and catering to the city's many tourists and service men. The venture was called "China City" and it was the brainchild of Christine Sterling, an Anglo-American entrepreneur who had created a mock Chinese village directly across from the new Union Station. Storefront rentals in the walled tourist district were supposedly cheap and while the family couldn't live in China City itself, nearby housing was plentiful. Ling had come to Los Angeles knowing that if he could settle here and sell the village stones, he could provide his family with some much needed stability. Little could Ling or any of his family members have known so soon after arriving in Los Angeles in 1938, that life in China City would provide not only the stability heretofore lacking in their lives but that missing sense of community as well.

Little has been written about Christine Sterling's ten-year venture known

as China City, which opened on June 7, 1938 and was mysteriously destroyed by fire September 2, 1948.³ The project was Sterling's attempt to fill a gap left when most of Old Chinatown was destroyed to make way for the new Union Station. Sterling envisioned a Chinese-themed tourist attraction, modeled after a Hollywood movie set, that would attract visitors to the Old Plaza area while at the same time providing jobs for the Chinese American community. Relegated by most historians to a footnote in the history of Los Angeles, China City played a pivotal role in the lives of many Chinese Americans who lived in the city in the 1930s and 1940s.

While Sterling's project lacked the backing of any of the major Chinese American community organizations, for the Chinese Americans who worked or rented property there, the development provided not only a means of commercial livelihood but a sense of community as well. Many who found work in China City were those who, for whatever reason, fell outside of the traditional networks of Los Angeles' Old Chinatown. Some like Ling hailed from different regions of the country or spoke different Chinese dialects than most of their neighbors, while many others lacked the financial means to own their own stores elsewhere. In this way, the makeup of China City was distinct from other Chinese American communities in the area. While most of the buildings, ponds and attractions were stylized sets or recreations, the friendships and bonds the workers and entrepreneurs of China City forged were real. Despite its artifice, China City, the community, became an integral part of the identities of so many of the Chinese Americans involved in the project. For those who worked, played and grew up in the area, the story of China City is a story of bonds formed, in this, the most unlikely of locales.

Project Development

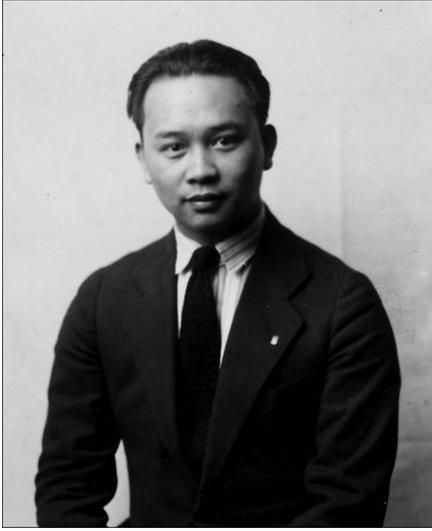
By 1933, as the slow destruction of Old Chinatown began, people both within the community and without realized the economic potential in creating a new Chinatown.⁴ In the decades prior to 1930, Old Chinatown developed a substantial business catering to tourists. Between 1903 and 1923, the number of Chinese restaurants in Los Angeles Chinatown grew substantially from five to 28.⁵ Most of these restaurants were so-called "Chop Suey" houses that catered not to Chinese residents but to interested visitors. This period also saw an explosion of curio shops catering to the same

cliente. As the destruction of the old neighborhood progressed, two competing visions of a tourist-friendly replacement to Old Chinatown developed.

On the one hand, there was New Chinatown, or “Chinatown on Broadway”, as its promoters originally called it. Backed by major merchants and restaurant owners in the community, this business district was the work of Peter SooHoo Sr. and the Chinatown Project Association. Funded completely within the community, New Chinatown was the first Chinatown in the United States owned, controlled, and operated solely by Chinese Americans. SooHoo believed that New Chinatown should be controlled completely by Chinese Americans, and yet the cost of buying into the project and the established nature of many of its prime investors, left some in the community unwilling or unable to invest.

The city’s other major project was China City, the brainchild of an Anglo American reformer and developer by the name of Christine Sterling. Only a few years earlier, Sterling had transformed Olvera Street from a corner of central Los Angeles, long forgotten by the city elites, into the tourist attraction sine quo non of Los Angeles city proper. In Olvera Street, Sterling created and marketed a version of the city’s past that glorified Los Angeles’ days as a Spanish outpost, while downplaying many of the messier details of the region’s history that might drive away potential visitors. By the mid-1930s, Sterling was ready to start work on her China City project, which she hoped would replicate the stylized showmanship and success of her neighboring Olvera Street.

Unable to agree on a vision or to form a working partnership, by late 1935 both SooHoo and Sterling announced their separate, competing plans for new business developments.⁶ Over the next three years, a war of words between the two projects played out in the city’s papers as each project tried to paint the other project as doomed to fail. Sterling claimed that New Chinatown would not be accessible to the poorest members of the Chinese-American community and that SooHoo and the Chinatown Project Association lacked the business acumen to pull the project off, while SooHoo and his group claimed that only Chinese Americans could successfully build and create an authentic replacement for Old Chinatown.



Peter Soo Hoo Senior. Courtesy of Peter Soo Hoo, Sr. Collection.

China City finished first, opening on June 7th, three weeks earlier than New Chinatown. The event was covered by most of the city's papers. Following the opening day gala, the *Los Angeles Times* described the event: "Ten thousand Southern Californians bid a smiling hello last night to the new China City... They thronged the cafes and shops. They ate Chinese delicacies and purchased coolie hats, fans, idols, miniature temples' images."⁷ Sterling's association with *Los Angeles Times* publisher, Harry Chandler went back to Olvera Street, and Chandler's paper featured coverage of Sterling's venture both in the buildup to the area's June opening and in the months that followed.

For most of its first year China City attracted ample crowds. Then on February 20, 1939, less than a year after opening, a large part of the district burned down in a mysterious fire. Despite original claims by Sterling that she would not rebuild, she did. China City would remain a distinct part of the downtown landscape for nearly a decade. Then in 1948, the district burnt down again. This second fire proved to be a setback from which the community would never recover.

China City

Like New Chinatown, China City was a tourist development, primarily

created to capitalize on the desire by many non-Chinese for a Chinatown in which to spend their money. Sterling was an astute reader of the popular conscience who wanted to create a Chinese-themed tourist attraction that appealed to the changing tastes of the average American consumer. Her China City project built on the growing fascination with Chinese culture that was only then beginning to become an integral part of the America cultural diet. Throughout the late 1920s and earlier 1930s, a new fascination with China began to seep its way into American culture in ways quite distinct from the yellow peril fears associated with the country in the later part of the 19th century. Newspapers carried stories of the ongoing civil conflict in China; a cycle of Chinese-themed films and to a lesser extent novels peppered the market place; and Hollywood developed its first genuine Chinese American star—Anna May Wong.⁸

China City sought to capitalize on this new fascination by transforming the experience the average tourist had in Chinatown from one defined by dark unpaved alleys, old red brick buildings and rumors of tong wars, prostitutes and opium addiction, into a bright, almost romanticized trip to “the Orient.” China City featured a walled shopping arcade replete with rickshaw rides, a temple, lotus ponds, and even a recreation of the set from *The Good Earth*. There were nightly shows for tourists featuring Chinese American performers and costumed workers speaking in English. In fact, unbeknownst to most visitors, some of the very extras that peppered the background of the most popular Hollywood films of the day worked in the storefronts of China City. Similar in goal to her earlier Olvera Street project, this was not an attempt to recreate any type of realistic facsimile of contemporary Chinese society nor was it meant to accurately reflect the lives of Chinese Americans living in Los Angeles in the 1930s. Rather, with China City, Sterling was trying to meet a very specific expectation held by many of the area’s visitors. China City was first and foremost a tourist attraction.

Workers, Shopkeepers and Their Children

While China City may have been conceived of as a tourist attraction, Sterling’s project also provided jobs for many in the Chinese American community. Sterling saw this as an integral part of the district’s purpose: “Los Angeles is under obligation to the hundreds of Chinese, many of them early-day residents here, who have been uprooted from where they have

made their home for years.” She continued on, “The new China City will give these Chinese new opportunities to preserve their racial and cultural integrity by bringing them together in one district.” Those in the community who worked and rented shops in China City were more than grateful for the opportunities the area provided. For immigrant merchants and entrepreneurs, China City created a space for those who, for whatever reason, could not or did not want to join Peter SooHoo’s New Chinatown. These men and women rented space in China City; they developed their own stores; and they created the China City Merchant Association to speak collectively to Sterling and the other directors of China City. While Sterling provided the vision for the project, it was these workers and shopkeepers who kept that vision alive on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Ling is emblematic of both the possibilities of success and the realities of the limitations that faced Chinese Americans who chose to run businesses in China City. When Ling arrived in Los Angeles, he did not have any money to open his own store even in China City where rents were quite affordable. But this did not deter him. Ling worked out a deal with Jake and Dorothy Siu, who ran a curio store in China City called the Flower Hut. The Sius allowed Ling to set up a table in front of their store to sell his wares on a trial basis. The trial was a success and soon Ling was able to open his own store in China City, which he named Chekiang Importers, after the province of his birth.

In time, Ling would run three stores in China City. He was so successful that he was able to bring a village cousin to the area and help him get started in the business as well. Ling soon became active in the China City Merchant Association and became a high-profile member of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. Yet for all his success, Ling would never be able to own a piece of China City the way many merchants in New Chinatown did. While the China City Merchants Association served to voice many of the concerns that the merchants had, the ultimate decisions about the direction China City would take lay in the hands of Christine Sterling and the other directors. Despite these limitations, for Ling and many other merchants like him, China City provided the foothold into established respectability that Sterling had promised.





Ling Family in front of their Chekiang Importers in China City.
Courtesy of Ruby Ling Louie Collection.



**Tsin Nan Ling in front of Chekiang Importers.
Courtesy of Ruby Ling Louie Collection.**

China City offered many Chinese Americans a path to a more successful means of livelihood for themselves and their families. Rents in China City were relatively cheap and the area by nature attracted enough customers to support most businesses. In return, the Chinese Americans who worked there traded some of the autonomy that was available to merchants in the competing New Chinatown development. Those who worked in China City found themselves working in an environment that created certain expectations on how they should dress, act and speak. Most people who worked in China City wore costumes of some sort — Mr. Ling's appears to have been in a black Chinese robe and straw brimmed hat — and many others performed jobs or activities—such as pulling rickshaws — that they never would have performed anywhere else in 20th century Los Angeles.

Mr. Ling, like so many of his colleagues in China City, gladly made these trade-offs in order to support his family. In return, Ling's children, like so many of the other American-born children that grew up in China City, looked on the community fondly. One of Ling's daughters, Ruby Ling Louie recalls her childhood in China City, "My two older sisters had to watch the stores. Especially since we had three stores we were in need of a lot of supervision. But I, the youngest one, was the freest. So I was able to visit the other children that were in the community. We really had a community of children because most of the families were large and all related... I was often with Choey Lan Fong in her father's basketry store, we were playing dolls and eating minced ham sandwiches. We were having a fun time."¹⁰ Ruby's friend, Choey Lan, remembers the large number of young people fondly, "We lived in a fantasy. We all knew each other really well, played together. The people there were like a family more than a business."¹¹ The large number of children that both Fong and the youngest Ling daughter remember reflected a demographic shift then occurring throughout Chinese America. By the time of the 1940 census, native-born Chinese Americans outnumbered their immigrant parents in America for the first time in U.S. history. The large number of children who worked or spent time in the area created a real sense of community among the youth.

Life was difficult for many of the families that worked in China City. One of Ruby Ling's neighborhood friends was Esther Lee Johnson. Esther's family felt the weight of the Depression much more heavily than did the Ling family, and yet despite their differences they shared a common bond

through China City. Esther described the small upstairs apartment her family called home, "It's actually one big room and a kitchen and a bathroom, no bathtub. We had the pull chain toilet, and my mother had a carpenter come in and partition two bedrooms and that big living room. So my mother and father and younger sister slept in one room which was partitioned and then the other room was for the three of us girls."¹² Behind the artifice, it seems, many in China City continued to struggle.

At around the age of 12, Esther and her older sister found after-school, part-time jobs in China City at the Man Sing Bakery earning money to help support the family. The younger Lee daughter recalls the experience, "We worked at the main bakery, [we'd] make the cookies and then we go down to China City. We'd go down there around seven and we worked until ten. We'd just sell the cookies..." Despite having to work a part-time, Esther also remembers the large number of children that hung around or worked in China City, "It was fun because we had all these kids around there. We'd get together and there was an arcade there... One of my other sisters watched the bakery while I'd run over to the penny arcade and, you know, played the jukebox and danced. We just had fun...it was nice clean fun." Choey Lan Fong remembers the dances at the penny arcade as well, "During that period, there weren't a lot of people around then. One of my best friends worked at the penny arcade, she worked as a cashier there and we used to jitterbug everyday... We would just dance all day and all night. It was great for her to pass the time away. Either there were no customers or else I didn't notice them." Thus youth in the area were able to bring a meaning to China City that was separate from the somewhat contrived nature of their surroundings. As a result of the large number of children who spent time in the area, young people forged bonds and friendships as organically as they would have in any other community. In fact, the nature of China City insured that friendships and acquaintances formed between individuals from quite different backgrounds.

The community that developed around China City appears all the more impressive when one considers that almost no one lived in China City proper. The area was built as a business district and tourist attraction, and there was very little, if any, specified housing within its walls. While most who worked in the district lived in the area, many did not. For some youth, like Marian Lee Leng, who lived in completely different areas of town,

China City provided a connection to the Chinese American community that they lacked in the neighborhoods where they lived. Marian's mother, Elsie Lee, moved the family to Los Angeles from their home in Portland at the behest of Marian's uncle, who wrote to tell them of opportunity in the area. The family arrived shortly after the first fire in 1939 and eventually ran both a coffee shop and a gift shop in China City. Despite their business commitments, they lived a fair distance away. Marian recalls, "At the time, we lived in East L.A. and we had to take the street car from Brooklyn Ave. down to Main St. That got us to China City."¹³ Because Marian didn't go to school with other Chinese American youth her age, most of the Chinese American friendships that she did have she had met in China City.

While she befriended many of the other youth who worked or spent free time in China City, she did not have the same luck with the other Chinese American youth from outside Sterling's development. Marian recalls, "I was more or less an outsider because I didn't grow up with the other kids here. I had cousins, but they lived near 20th Street, way out there. I was just in China City all my life." In this sense, China City provided the common space where Chinese Americans from different disparate parts of the city could interact. While the adults often formed partnerships and friendships despite their differences, for the youth who worked and played in the area, their association with China City became a part of their identity.

When Sterling first envisioned China City, little could she have known that her short-lived project would have such a profound effect on the Chinese Americans who worked and spent time there. The bonds that were formed between people in China City existed across generations: between older adults such as those in the Ling and Siu families; and between the younger American-born children, like Esther Lee, Ruby Ling, Choey Lan Fong and Marian Lee. The project may have been the brainchild of Christine Sterling, but the workers, shopkeepers, and merchants were its life's blood. While the community lasted only ten years, its existence is pivotal to understanding Los Angeles's Chinese American community in the 1930s and 1940s. Overshadowed in part by Ms. Sterling's competition with Mr. SooHoo's project, the real story of China City is not the competition with New Chinatown, but rather the space China City provided for those who worked within its borders to succeed financially, to provide for their families and to form bonds despite their differences.

Notes

1. On the life of Mr. Ling, see Dr. Ruby Ling Louie, interview by William Gow, March 28, 2008, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
2. The earlier Wade Giles transliteration of Zhejiang province is Chekiang province. Chekiang is also the way the province was referred to by English speakers of the day.
3. In many publications the date for the fire is incorrectly given as 1947; the second fire occurred in 1948. See "China City Fire Burns Shops," *Los Angeles Times*, September 3, 1948.
4. Partly as a result of the prodigious efforts of Peter SooHoo, the destruction of the Old Chinatown occurred slowly over the course of five years. The first section of Old Chinatown was destroyed in December of 1933, but residents and shops in the Union Station construction zone continued to live and work in the area as late as 1937. While most of Old Chinatown was razed by the time Union Station was completed in 1939, a small section of the community along Los Angeles Street continued to be occupied until 1949. Today, a little less than one block of the original Chinatown remains.
5. Ivan Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction: The Moral Career of American Chinatowns, 1880-1940," *Pacific Historical Review*, 43:3 (1974).
6. On SooHoo and Sterling's unsuccessful attempt at a partnership see Edwin S. Bingham, "The Saga of the Los Angeles Chinatown," (Master's Thesis, Occidental College, 1942).
7. "China City Lures Crowd," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1938.
8. On the changing notions of China, see Karen Leong, *China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2005).
9. Quoted in "Chinatown to Rise Again," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1937.
10. Dr. Ruby Ling Louie, interview by William Gow, March 28, 2008, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
11. Choey Lan Fong, interview by William Gow, September 1, 2009, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.
12. Esther Lee Johnson, interview by William Gow, March 9, 2008,

Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

13. Marian Lee Leng, interview by William Gow, March 16, 2008, Chinatown Remembered Community History Project, Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

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