

*An Introduction to
Cantonese Vernacular Rhymes from
San Francisco Chinatown*

Early Chinatown: A Historical Overview

ESTABLISHING THE OLDEST
AMERICAN CHINATOWN

The French sinologist M. de Guignes wrote in 1761 that the Chinese had first come to the American continent one thousand years before the European explorers, when Hui Shen, a Buddhist monk, came to a land called Fusang, which de Guignes identified as the west coast of North America. Upon returning to China, Hui Shen reported in detail on the livelihood of the Fusang natives. His account appears in the sixth-century A.D. historical text *Liang shu*.¹ However, no other conclusive

1. French Sinologist M. de Guignes's study was based on the account in volume 54 of the *Liang shu* (History of the Liang dynasty), a historical work written between 502 and 556. Some later scholars rejected this study, or tried to identify "Fusang" as another place. A brief summary regarding this issue and further references are given in Thomas Chin et al., *A History of Chinese in California* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969), pp. 1-2.

documents are available on this so-called early discovery of America by the Chinese. Recent Chinese anthropological studies have, however, drawn comparisons between the Chinese and the natives of America, showing some similarities in language and culture between the two peoples now separated by the Pacific Ocean.²

The verifiable Chinese presence in America came much later. In the mid-seventeenth century, Chinese seamen traveled on board Spanish trading vessels via the Philippine Islands, which were known in Cantonese as *Luisung* (*Lüsong*), after the island of Luzon. Some settled in Mexico, which they called *Siu Luisung* (*Xiao Lüsung*) or Little Luzon, probably because Spanish was spoken in both countries and they thus appeared similar in culture. These Chinese settlers became a part of the local community, making their living among the Mexicans.³ Merchants and traders from southeastern China,

2. Wei Juxian, *Zhongguoren faxian Meizhou chu kao* (A preliminary investigation on the Chinese discovery of America) (Taipei: Shishi chuban gongsi, 1975). Wei uses archaeological evidence of similarities between Native American and Chinese culture to suggest that Native Americans are Chinese in origin. See also Wei's *Zhongguoren faxian Meizhou tiyao* (A summary regarding the Chinese discovery of America) (Rpt., Taipei: Shishi chuban gongsi, 1975) in which he claims that ancient China had a long history of communication with natives in the American continent. *Fusang* is often identified as a hibiscus plant. In Chinese writings, its red blossom alludes to the sun, hence it becomes the name for the eastern part of the world where the sun rises and, consequently, for the island nation of Japan, which literally means "sun's origin." However, Wei in his studies argues that *fusang* must be the redwoods of America. He also cites the mention of hummingbirds, native birds of America that never appeared in any Chinese writings prior to that entry in the *Liang shu*, as proof of his theory, since it was Hui Shen who introduced these new items to China.

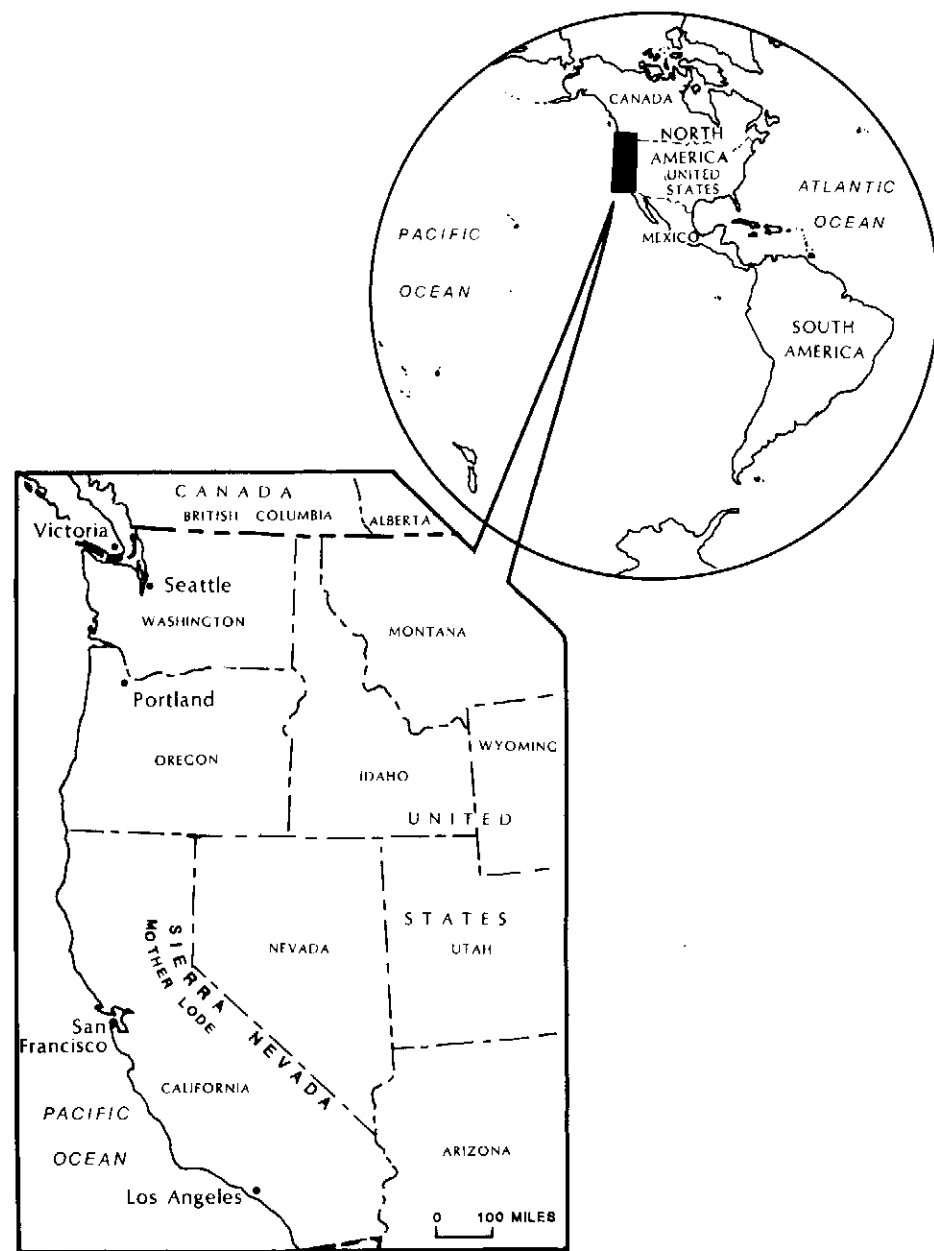
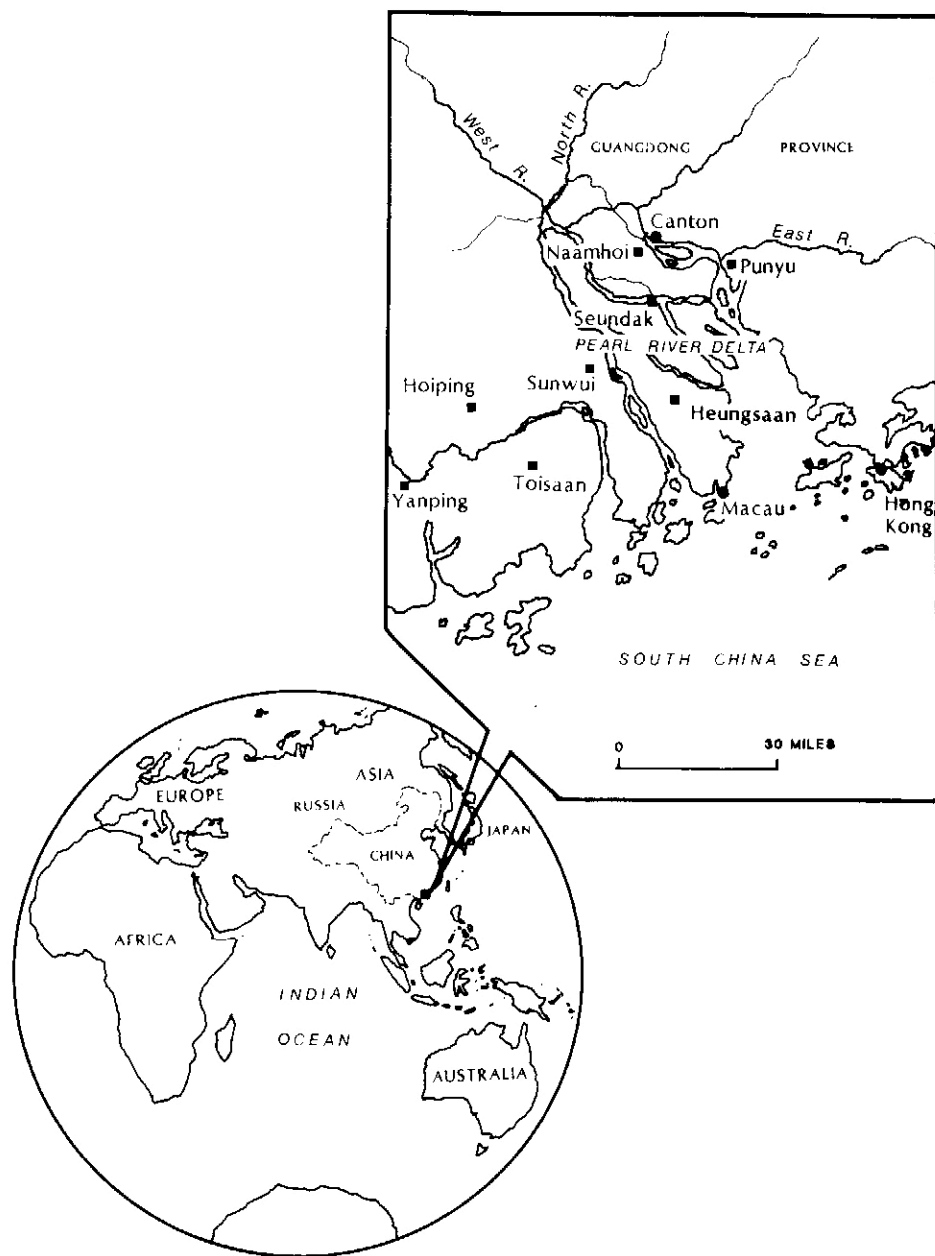
3. Chin et al., p. 6.

long experienced in doing business with foreigners, were seen regularly in the ports of Mexico. In 1838 the earliest Chinese reached Yerba Buena, the name for San Francisco before California was incorporated into the United States in 1850.⁴

In 1849, the news of the discovery of gold in California reached China, and hundreds of Chinese began arriving in the early months of 1850. Thousands followed in subsequent years, as mining, farming, and railroad construction boomed. Then, as now, the Chinese called the United States *Gamsaan* (*Jinshan*), or Gold Mountain, a term deriving from the 1849 Gold Rush. It was also called *Fakei* (*Huaqi*), or Flowery Flag, a name inspired by the fancy graphics of the American flag.

Instead of the cruel coolie system of slavery found in Southeast Asia and South America, the Chinese workers usually came to the United States under the "credit fare" system. A man would repay the loan that paid his passage by working under contract for a specified period. He was then free to pursue his own living. Workers were largely Cantonese, natives of Guangdong province in southeastern China, an area that had prospered from foreign trade since the sixteenth century. Specifically, they came from two regions around the Pearl River delta. The *Saamyup* (*Sanyi*) area consisted of the "Three Counties"—*Naamhoi* (*Nanghai*), *Punyu* (*Panyu*), and *Seundak* (*Shunde*). The *Seiyup* (*Siyi*) area encompassed the "Four Counties" of *Sunning* (*Xinning*)/*Toisaan* (*Taishan*), *Sunwui* (*Xinhui*), *Hoiping* (*Kaiping*), and *Yanping* (*Enping*). *Saamyup* natives in

4. Chin et al., p. 10. In 1946, Americans renamed Yerba Buena "San Francisco."



Map 1. The Pearl River Delta and the American West Coast

America often engaged in mercantile and other business trades; Seiyup natives, mainly laborers, accounted for 70 percent of the total Chinese population in the United States.⁵

In San Francisco, the Chinese soon formed fraternal organizations based on their county of origin to assist those who came to earn a living in America. In the early 1850s, most Chinese workers did not stay long in the port. For them, as for their white Gold Rush counterparts, San Francisco was only a stopover on the way to the vast interior. Merchants, traders, and providers of services and supplies would stay. In the mid-1850s, more Chinese began to settle in San Francisco, engaging in service industries, which provided stable employment and income. The so-called Chinatown of San Francisco was formed in those early years, as a concentrated area of Chinese commercial and other business operations began to take shape. The owners and workers usually occupied living quarters located behind the storefronts. However, Chinese were scattered throughout this frontier city, living an integrated existence among San Franciscans of various ethnic and cultural origins.

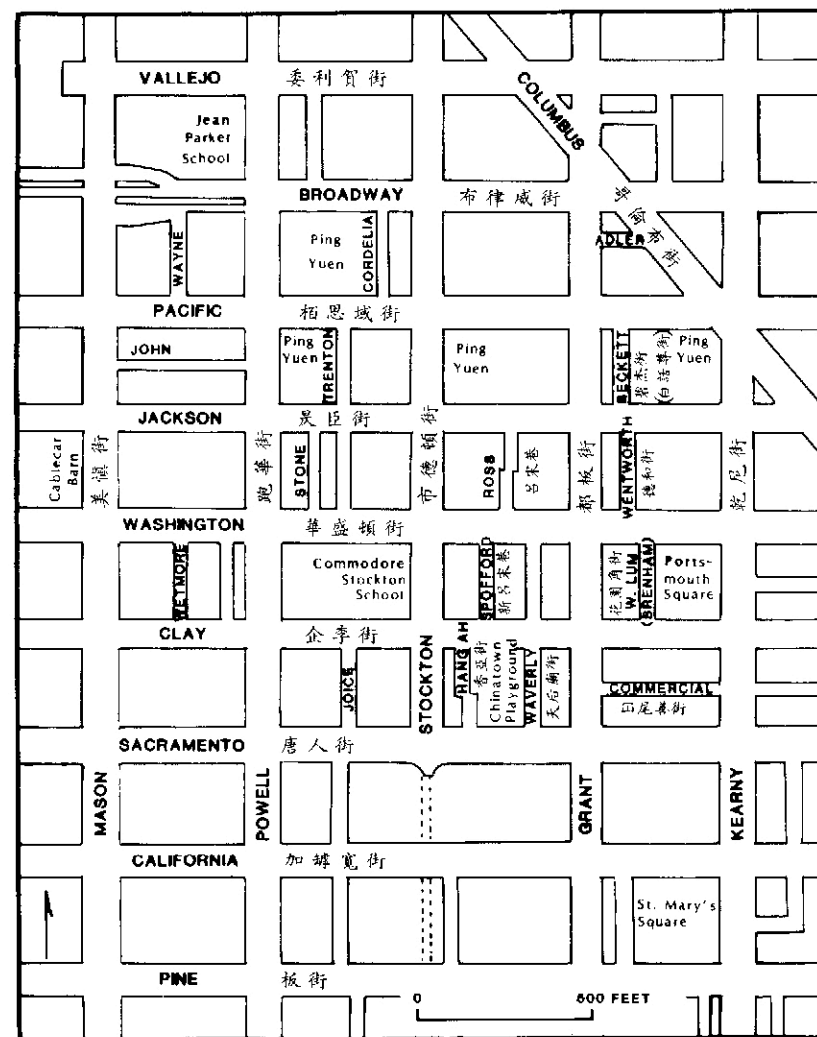
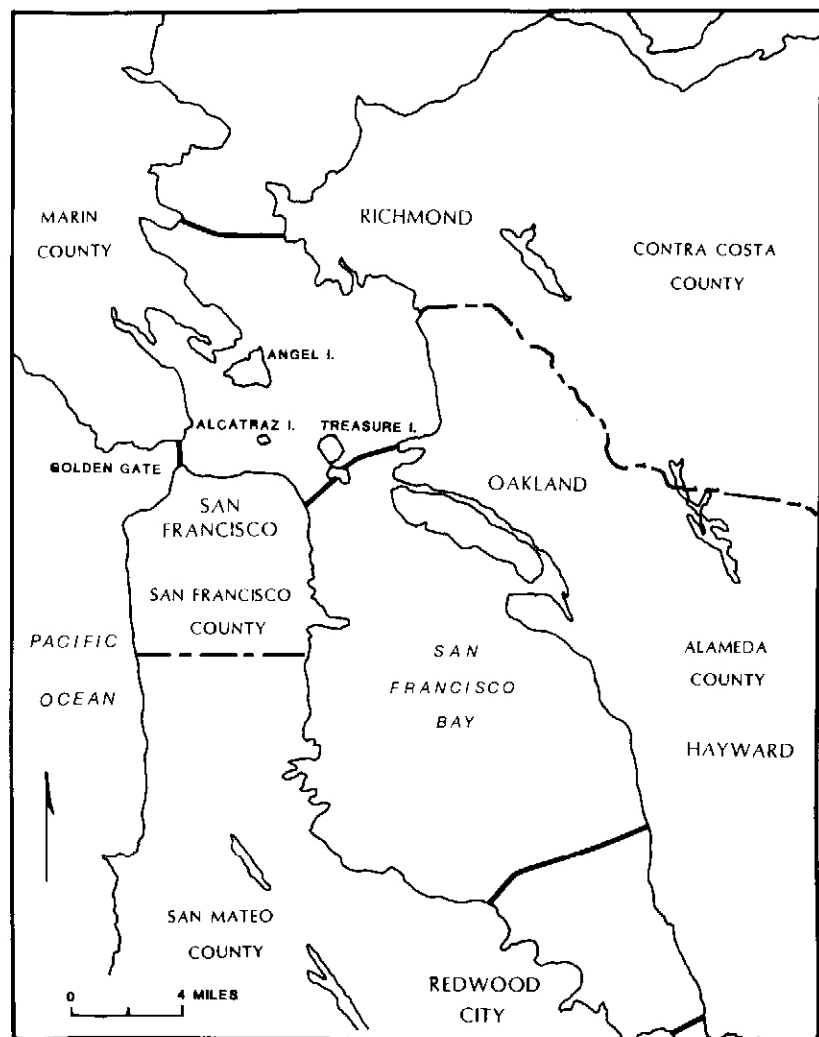
At first, the arrival in California of the "China boys" was welcomed. Aside from working in the mines, the Chinese provided the major labor force for reclaiming California land for farming. Some were skilled fishermen and shrimp harvesters. Later, tens of thousands worked, and many died, building the transcontinental railroad, even laying a record-breaking ten miles of track in a single day on April 28, 1869. However, by the mid-1850s, conflicts had developed in the mines, and

5. Chin et al., p. 4.

Chinese miners became the victims. When the transcontinental railroads were completed in 1869, a massive labor surplus was created. Some Chinese workers left for the farms, but many turned to San Francisco, now the major urban center in the West. However, the railroad was also facilitating the movement of workers from the depressed East Coast cities into an already saturated West. Conflicts arose, fueled by the belief in "manifest destiny" by the white men who would claim the American continent. This created a tremendous hardship for the Chinese on the West Coast, who became the objects of attack by and exclusion from the greater American society. The benign tolerance of times past turned into hysterical rejection. "The Chinese must go!" became an accepted slogan, serving the self-interest of both the white working class and the opportunistic politicians, as wealthy capitalists exploited cheap Chinese labor for their own gain.⁶ Chinese were attacked everywhere as white workingmen and labor unionists and their supporters tried to drive the Chinese away.

California had the largest concentration of Chinese; many lived in San Francisco. Although discriminatory practices were severe in the city, there was no safer or economically more feasible place for them to go. The Chinese realized that the presence of so many of their countrymen would enable them to render mutual as-

6. For an excellent analysis of the conflict in the triangular relationship among the white working class and white unionists, the capitalists, and the Chinese workers, see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). Saxton views labor conflicts between the Chinese and white workers from a class perspective, in which the capitalists manipulate the two groups to advance their self-interest and their profits.



Map 2. San Francisco Bay Area, with Street Map of Chinatown

sistance and comfort in a time of crisis. As it turned out, while the Chinese were often stoned or physically abused in non-Chinese neighborhoods, once inside their own enclave they were relatively safe. As a result, a large Chinese community, sometimes called the "Canton of the West," existed in San Francisco by the early 1870s. It was located two blocks west of Yerba Buena Cove, the city harbor (today the landfilled area occupied by the financial district and the Embarcadero). The area surrounding Portsmouth Plaza (now Portsmouth Square) and Dupont Street (now Grant Avenue, but in Chinese still called by its former name) was San Francisco's downtown, but later, when Chinese businesses and residents moved in as white ones moved out, it became part of Chinatown. Sacramento Street was called Tongyan gaai (Tangren jie), the Street of the Chinese. By the time the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restricting Chinese immigration was passed, the Chinese population in America had reached 132,000.⁷ Nearly 10 percent of San Francisco's 1880 population of 233,959 were Chinese.⁸

San Francisco Chinatown became well established as its residents grew to represent an integral part of the work force of the city. They were dominant in industries like shoe making and shirt and cigar manufacturing, and in service industries like the laundry business. Meanwhile, the trans-Pacific mercantile trade provided Chinatown with goods that were not otherwise available in America. Well-defined social organizations were established in Chinatown through clan, district, and fraternal affiliations, all of which were governed by a

7. Chin et al., p. 18.

8. Chin et al., p. 21.

supreme joint administration known as the Six Companies (later the Consolidated Chinese Benevolent Association). Where the San Francisco city and other government agencies failed, the Six Companies maintained and protected the welfare and interests of the Chinese residents. After the 1906 earthquake and fire completely destroyed Chinatown, efforts were made to move Chinatown from the downtown area bordered by Kearny, Stockton, California, and Broadway to a remote southeastern corner of the city. However, the attempt failed and the Chinese returned to the old site to rebuild among the ruins.

The Chinese population in the United States began to drop as the Exclusion Act was enforced. Because of the numerous discriminatory immigration laws and local ordinances of the ensuing years, many Chinese already in America were unable to stay on. They were not allowed to become naturalized citizens, nor could they own land. In California, interracial sex and marriage were prohibited. San Francisco's Chinatown was frequently raided, and Chinese residents caught without proper identification were arrested and often deported unless they could prove they were legal immigrants. U.S. immigration officials often denied re-entry even to Chinese travelers with valid re-entry certificates, on grounds that their documents had been invalidated by new immigration regulations. The Chinese regularly challenged the many unfair laws in courts. Even so, by 1900, the U.S. census reported a drop in the Chinese population to less than 90,000; by 1910, to 71,531; and by 1920, to 61,639—about one-half of the reported figure in 1882.

Despite the abundance of exclusionary laws, many Chinese nevertheless found ways to circumvent them.

Crossing the border from Mexico was one common practice. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, moreover, gave the Chinese an immigration reprieve. Official birth records had been destroyed by the fire, and many Chinese oldtimers in San Francisco took the opportunity to claim citizenship, saying that their American birth records had been destroyed. This opened up a new avenue for the younger generation, who could then claim to be the foreign-born, unmarried children of American citizens, a category unaffected by the exclusionary laws. Actually, many of the oldtimers had married shortly before coming, and had left their brides in China. Another practice was to come as a "paper son," assuming a false identity and claiming to be the offspring of an American citizen.⁹ As the early Chinese population was overwhelmingly Cantonese, the immigrants who came through these methods were from the same Cantonese locale. Hence, the Saamyup and Seiyup population distribution in America did not dramatically change, although the Seiyup immigrants, being mostly laborers, were the major target of the exclusion.

9. Him Mark Lai et al. briefly explain the "paper son" practice as follows: (1) a Chinese with United States citizenship rights would return from China and report the birth in China of a child, usually a son, thus creating an immigration slot for the newborn; (2) the slot would be sold to a relative, friend, or even a stranger through a broker (price in 1930 was \$100 per age year; thus, a slot for a seventeen-year-old would cost \$1,700); (3) the paper son would be coached on his immigration testimony in preparation for his interrogation upon arrival to the United States. See Him Mark Lai et al., *Outline of the History of the Chinese in America* (San Francisco: by the authors, 1971), p. 96. All newcomers and returnees to America were meticulously interrogated by immigration officials. Like anyone else, paper sons who failed would be denied entry and deported back to China. Usually, a bribe was one recourse to ensure safe passage through United States immigration.

Nevertheless, the Chinese population in America survived, despite everything. Discrimination only served to fortify the independence of the Chinese community and to make racial differences all the more apparent in the greater American society. Contrary to the claim of many critics in the past, the formation of San Francisco Chinatown was not just a result of the Chinese immigrants' unwillingness to assimilate. Nor was it formed merely as the product of the Chinese immigrants' desire to preserve their own way of life. Part of the historical basis for its emergence can be found in the Chinese response to racism. Chinatown was created as a means of survival during a time of rampant racial intolerance, when the Chinese were forced to retreat from an integrated existence to an alienated one. Chinatown's independent internal social structure resulted from social injustices from without, as experience showed that the Chinese could not depend on local laws, which discriminated against them and perpetuated their hardship. Chinatown had to establish itself and prosper on its own for the survival of its inhabitants.

LITERARY DEPICTIONS OF CHINATOWN LIFE

Although San Francisco Chinatown was always viewed as an ethnic Chinese enclave, a "city within a city," its street life was actually "vibrant with a curious and colorful mix of Chinese and non-Chinese," with its stores displaying goods to be consumed by Chinese and non-Chinese alike.¹⁰ Chinatown's inhabitants were ac-

10. John Kuo Wei Tchen, *Arnold Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), p. 19.

tively engaged in making a living, just like other hard-working San Franciscans.¹¹ They worked in factories adjacent to Chinatown; they managed their own businesses and peddled their goods and wares. The Chinese community, though fearful of white man's intrusion and disruption, was open to exploration and observation by non-Chinese. Some whites even became Chinatown tour guides, creating a picture of an exotic, mysterious Chinatown for tourists by hiring poor souls to display their bound feet or smoke opium. A tremendous quantity of writings on the Chinese and Chinatown, most of it critical and negative, appeared in local newspapers and in the influential *Overland Monthly*, a local publication whose contributors were recognized American writers from the West.

Writings appearing after the 1880s tended to depict Chinatown in an extremely negative light, appealing to fears of the "Yellow Peril," the white man's xenophobic fear of Asians. The emphasis was on Chinatown as a foreign and exotic place, thus perpetuating its mystery. As Alexander McLeod later found in his studies of the early Chinese in America, the non-Chinese regarded San Francisco Chinatown as "mysterious" and totally "different."¹² American frontier writers, including Jack London, wrote about the Chinese with bias and distortion based upon an unfounded fear that an onslaught of

11. Liu Boji, *Meiguo Huaqiao shi (A history of the Chinese in the United States of America, 1848-1911)* (Taipei: Liming wenhua shiye gongsi, 1976), pp. 106-7. (Hereafter cited as *History*.)

12. Alexander McLeod, *Gold Dust and Pigtales* (Caldwell, Ida.: The Caxton Printers, 1949). McLeod describes mysterious and exotic practices of San Francisco Chinatown since the 1850s. Chapter 10 (pp. 268-81), for example, describes Chinatown as a "different world" from the white America.

Chinese would conquer America.¹³ The literary hysteria fanned the flames for stricter laws to exclude the Chinese. On the other hand, a few writers were less prejudiced. Mark Twain called the Chinese "harmless," and said they should be left alone.¹⁴ Francis Bret Harte was of the opinion that the Chinese were wise and could not easily be taken in by white men's trickery.¹⁵ However, most popular writers in the pulp genre engaged in vicious muckraking, depicting Chinatown as a sinful, foreign, crime-ridden ghetto.

Amidst these negative and distorted treatments, the works of Arnold Genthe (1869-1942) and Edith Eaton (1867-1914) stand out for their fair treatment of the authentic Chinatown. They were able to capture the vivid and vibrant livelihood of Chinatown in the late 1890s and the early 1900s, because they were actively present in the community and knew Chinatown resi-

13. William P. Fenn, in *Ah Sin and His Brethren in American Literature* (Peking: College of Chinese Studies, 1933), provides the first critical analysis of the Chinese in American literature, showing how the Chinese are often portrayed as foreigners, in a very negative light. Limin Chu's *The Image of China and the Chinese in the Overland Monthly, 1868-1875, 1883-1935* (Duke University, Ph.D. dissertation, 1965), gives details on xenophobic writings published in San Francisco since 1870. William F. Wu, in his *Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850-1940* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1982), also shows how American writers, including the "local colorists" of the West, created a villainous image of the Chinese in America with racist distortions and stereotypes. Such writings catered to a popular demand to perpetuate the image of Chinatown as mysterious and foreign as well as crime-ridden. None gave a valid, objective portrayal of the Chinese way of life in Chinatown.

14. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: New American Library, 1962), pp. 291-97.

15. Francis Bret Harte, "Plain Language from Truthful James," *Overland Monthly* 5, no. 2 (September 1870): 287-88.

dents personally. Genthe recorded and preserved the life and images of Chinatown in his photographs;¹⁶ Eaton did so in a score of short stories whose protagonists were Chinatown residents.¹⁷ Genthe's photographs of Chinatown before the 1906 disaster showed its bustling street scenes, telling a lively pictorial story of its men, women, and children. Edith Eaton, under the pen name of Sui Sin Far, depicted the trials and tribulations of Chinatown families as they tried to establish homes in America. She also effectively probed behind the laughter and tears of contact between the Chinatown residents and the white majority. Both artists, in their respective media, captured a true-life picture of Chinatown that was rarely depicted by other American artists of the time.

CHINATOWN LOW LIFE:
THE THREE VICES

Racial intolerance and xenophobic practices have accounted for most of the negative depictions of China-

16. See John Tchen's introduction to *Arnold Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown*, pp. 3-18. Genthe published his photographs first in *Pictures of Old Chinatown* (New York: Mof-fat, Yard, and Co., 1908) and again in *Old Chinatown: A Book of Pictures* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1913). Because the old Chinatown was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire, Genthe's photographs are most valuable today to the study of old Chinatown. John Tchen's 1984 publication provides an excellent explanation and analysis of these photographs.

17. Sui Sin Far (Edith Eaton), *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1912). The short stories that are particularly of interest in dealing with family and social life in Chinatown during the late 1890s and early 1900s are "The Wisdom of the New" (pp. 47-85), "Its Wavering Image" (pp. 85-95), "The Story of One White Woman Who Married a Chinese" and "Her Chinese Husband" (pp. 111-44), "The Americanizing of Pau Tsu" (pp. 144-61), and "In the Land of the Free" (pp. 161-78).

town life since the 1880s. No one could deny that Chinatown was different, nor that it had its share of serious social problems in a society that accepted and practiced racial discrimination and segregation. Chinatown was criticized particularly for its social vices—prostitution, opium addiction, and gambling. It was frequently attacked as a place of filth and sin, whose values were in direct contradiction to the Christian ethics so valued by white American society.

However, if viewed objectively, the vices of early San Francisco Chinatown seem no worse or more malicious than the vices of any other frontier town in the West during that period. Ever since the Gold Rush days, prostitution had prospered throughout San Francisco. Mining and railroad construction work encouraged a tremendous influx of male workers to the West, but the migratory nature of the work discouraged most of them from establishing normal family lives. Prostitution was recognized as a necessity and was in full operation wherever there were a large number of male workers. As the center of the West, ever since the 1850s San Francisco's downtown district was littered with houses of ill repute, some of which were more "reputable" than others based on the reputability of their clientele. At first, the prostitutes came from various Caucasian backgrounds. Soon, Chinese and Japanese prostitutes also appeared. Only Chinatown's proximity to downtown and the existence of a separate Chinese operation in Chinatown made it a part of that infamous scene.

Ever since the early period of immigration, prostitution had been a community concern in Chinatown, since Chinese women often were prevented from coming to America and Chinese men were denied the

opportunity to live a normal family life in America.¹⁸ The sex ratio of the Chinese population in San Francisco was extremely imbalanced. At its worst, in 1880, there were only 1,781 Chinese women in a Chinese population of 21,745.¹⁹ Predictably, this sex ratio provided a favorable climate for the emergence in 1852 of Hip Yee Tong, a fraternal group that engaged in a profitable operation, importing Chinese women from China to be prostitutes. Thousands were brought over by the organization, which came to monopolize the traffic. In the beginning, some prostitutes came voluntarily on their own. Later, young girls and women in their teens were brought over and groomed for the business, most coming from impoverished families that had sold them to agents operating in China. Many were victims of kidnapping and other means of deceit and enticement.²⁰ One recent point of view holds prostitution to be a form of labor, in which women offer their sexuality in exchange for a fee,²¹ but what went on was hardly the same as male workers offering their labor and strength to earn a wage. Life for these Chinese women, commonly known as "slave girls," was cruel and inhumane.²² They were treated like merchandise, often sold and resold many times. Societal attitudes stripped away their self-respect and pride. A few lucky ones were pur-

18. Lucie Cheng, "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II*, ed. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 405-6.

19. Mary Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (1909; rpt., New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 502; and Chin et al., p. 21.

20. Cheng, pp. 407-08.

21. Ibid., pp. 424-25.

22. McLeod, pp. 173-86.

chased by the rich and powerful as mistresses or concubines. Most, however became diseased by their profession and were often left to die in the most pathetic way, without human dignity.

The importation of prostitutes was prohibited by law in 1873, but many still landed in America through illegal means. Anti-Asian groups in San Francisco criticized Chinatown for its prostitution. Reform efforts from within Chinatown failed to halt Hip Yee Tong's ruthless activity, however, as the latter enjoyed the law's protection and collaboration through bribery.²³ Nevertheless, prostitution declined city-wide after the 1900s, when Victorian Christians reaching San Francisco actively moved to transform this once freewheeling frontier city into a metropolis of stable families and industrial growth.²⁴ White missionary women in Chinatown, led by Margaret Culbertson and later by Donaldina Cameron, were able to "rescue" many slave girls and provide shelter for those who fled from their owners.

These missionaries were successful mainly because, like most Chinese in the early days, the Hip Yee Tong avoided getting involved in disputes with Caucasians unless it was absolutely necessary. The Hip Yee Tong might go after the Chinese who helped the prostitutes escape, but not Caucasians. Hundreds of Chinese women were able to lead a normal life as a result of Donaldina Cameron's tireless rescue efforts. Her accomplishment won praises but at the same time overdramatized the problem of prostitution in Chinatown. The focus on prostitution in Chinatown, in a city where the immoral trade was rampant, also revealed the "paternalistic atti-

23. Liu Boji, *History*, pp. 128-30.

24. Cheng, pp. 423-24.

tude" of the white missionaries and their "racial hypocrisy,"²⁵ and contributed to the concerted attack on the Chinese. White houses of prostitution just around the corner tended to be ignored, however. The missionary attitude tended to perpetuate white supremacist attitudes and strengthen the already negative image of the "heathen Chinese" in America during a period of hysterical exclusion.

Opium was equally targeted for attack. This potent drug was brought to southern China in large quantities by the British merchants of the East India Company, the very same company involved in the Boston Tea Party. Opium smoking was a lethal addiction, but it was passed off as something healthful. British merchants and their agents in China promoted opium, a product of the British colony of India, as an elixir of life, a cure-all. As addiction became widespread in Guangdong province, it created epidemic social disorder, with addicts wasting away their lives and bringing ruin to their families. An all-out campaign to eradicate the import in the late 1830s failed, only giving the British imperialists an excuse to champion their "gunboat diplomacy." Britain won the infamous Opium War of 1840, colonized Hong Kong, and expanded her opium trade in China. As a result, opium addiction took its toll on the Chinese population. The Japanese would later call the Chinese "the sick men of Asia" because of the withered physiques of addicts in the Chinese coastal cities.

British promotion of opium smoking made it an acceptable social pastime among the Chinese. Many deeply believed in its medicinal power. For a long time, the habit was regarded highly as a privilege of the elite

25. Tchen, p. 96.

class. The Cantonese immigrants brought the habit with them to America, since there were no specific regulations on the substance prior to the 1860s. In 1869, the Burlingame Treaty between China and the United States prohibited the Chinese in America from importing opium. However, the treaty did not stop the import of the drug through non-Chinese operations. Opium came from Hong Kong through the Fook Hing Company, a company that served as a refiner and distributor for the British, and the customs house in San Francisco levied a hefty tariff on it. This duty-paid substance, known as *gung yin* (*gong yan*), "taxed opium," was packaged in tins the size of sardine cans and sold openly in San Francisco Chinatown.²⁶

It is said that over two hundred opium dens once operated in San Francisco Chinatown, many of them shady operations located in basements and tiny alleyways.²⁷ They were considered by white Americans to be the most disgusting sight in Chinatown.²⁸ Their existence testified to the gloomy side of the Chinese immigrant way of life. The small, crowded opium dens were usually dimly lit; the walls were black with years of smoke; the thick air was totally smoke-filled. In them addicts lay sideways on crudely prepared beds, busying themselves with the chemical substance and the smoking apparatus, silently puffing away their savings, their families, and finally their own lives.

[26. McLeod, p. 155. For a detailed study of the opiate problems in the United States, see David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: Opiate Addiction in America before 1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); pages 62-86 cover the situation in San Francisco at the turn of the century.

27. Liu Boji, *History*, p. 120.

28. McLeod, p. 156.

City officials paid little attention to the opium addiction in Chinatown, which they regarded as primarily a Chinese problem that did not affect the white population.²⁹ Later, however, as whites became addicts and as opium dens catering solely to white patrons sprouted on California and Pine streets, the local authorities became alarmed. By the 1880s, opium addiction was a citywide issue, and the Chinese were blamed for it. Local ordinances were passed to control and punish operators and patrons of opium dens.³⁰ However, the drug was still sold openly and the customs house still collected a hefty duty annually on its import.

In 1909, federal laws were passed to ban the import of opium. As supplies dwindled, the price soared, from \$12 per pound to \$70 in 1917.³¹ As a result, smuggling and bribery became the norm in the attempts to bring in the drug. The shortage, the price hikes, and the possibility of criminal prosecution, coupled with a vigorous campaign to eradicate opium addiction in Chinatown, brought about its eventual demise.

The popularity of opium smoking during this period had its roots in the fact that the Cantonese had long been exposed to the drug and accepted it as they did tobacco smoking. Their life in America—an abnormal existence punctuated with hardship, loneliness, and alienation—and the availability of the drug in the open market only led more people to the drug as they tried to seek solace by means of a temporary escape. However, the Cantonese had also witnessed the destruction of their homeland in the Opium War of 1840, which sowed hatred

29. Liu Boji, *History*, p. 120.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 122; also Courtwright, p. 83.

toward the drug among Cantonese intellectuals. Some came to America and, in local Chinese newspapers, advocated a ban on opium long before the United States passed that law in 1909. Not one piece of Chinatown writing can be found in support or defense of opium smoking. However, for nearly sixty years after the massive Chinese immigration began, American authorities allowed the import and sale of opium and regarded it as only a Chinese problem, forgetting that the problem had originally been brought about by the British imperialists. It is disheartening to note that the ills of opium addiction, which inflicted so much misery for so long on San Francisco Chinatown, were ignored and nothing was done until it finally started to take its toll on the Caucasian population.

Finally, there was gambling. Man's interest in games of chance is universal, and Chinese immigrants, like their European counterparts, brought their favorite games with them to America. Gambling, like alcohol and prostitutes, was a fixture of the saloons of Western frontier towns. However, since the Chinese could not patronize the white man's saloons at the time, they had their own gambling operations in their own community. These establishments were also frequented by Caucasians, Filipinos, Japanese, and other ethnic groups.

Many Chinese games of chance were popular in America in the early period.³² The most famous were *faantaan* (*fantan*), literally, "turn over the display," *baak-gaap piu* (*baige piao*), literally "pigeon's note" but better known as the "Chinese lottery," *paaigau* (*paijiu*), or

32. See Stewart Culin, *The Gambling Games of the Chinese in America* (1891; rpt. Las Vegas: Gambler's Book Club, 1982).

"arrange in nine" but better known as "Chinese dominoes," and mahjong—all games that are still played today. Mahjong, a time-consuming game, is a kind of clubhouse game played more for socializing than for gambling, as seen in the Chinese American novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1962) by Louis Chu, and has become popular with some segments of the Jewish community.

Among all ethnic groups, the most popular games of chance were the simple games. For example, *faantaan* is simply a game of elementary counting. An unknown number of Chinese coins are covered by a bowl, and players bet on four numbers, one to four, or on "even" or "odd." After all bets have been placed, the dealer removes the bowl and quickly counts off the coins with a chopstick, counting four coins at a time, until four or less remain. For example, if two remain, bets on "two" and "even" would be the winners. The game's apparatus can be improvised easily. Instead of coins, beans can be used. Hence, the game was very popular at work camps during the early days. The Japanese laborers' indulgence in this Chinese game of chance was immense.³³

Baakgaap piu is a lottery game based on the first eighty words of the "Thousand Word Prose" (*Qian zi wen*), a well-known four-word-per-line prose-poem. No words are duplicated in the prose; hence there are eighty different spots on which the players can bet. A player wins if his choice of word(s) matches the winning word(s). Two lotteries were held each day by each operator in San Francisco Chinatown, one at noon and one in the evening. The game's popularity was due to the fact that, in addition to being a simple lottery that required no skill

33. Liu Boji, *History*, p. 120.

but only luck, it did not require presence of the player, who could carry on his usual business while playing the game. Agents in storefronts wrote up the lottery tickets for the players; in addition, couriers for the operators were readily available to pick up or deliver bets and winnings. This game was also well received by non-Chinese players. The Japanese mockingly called it *baka* ("foolish"), a play on its Chinese name, *baakgap* (lit., "pigeon"). It was also immensely popular among white players, so much so that, according to Stewart Culin, white casinos later adopted it and turned it into the game of Race Horse Keno, and later, simply Keno.³⁴ Here, eighty numbers, written from left to right and top to bottom, replace the original Chinese characters, which were arranged from top to bottom and right to left.

There were over seventy gambling operations in San Francisco Chinatown in the 1880s, most of them located in alleys and patronized by more than just Chinese players. Gambling was so popular in the West that local authorities simply could not stop it. Weekly bribes to local police ensured its smooth operation.³⁵ The immense interest in gambling was indicative of the social realities of the American West. Workers were attracted to the West by its promise of work and an improvement in their impoverished lot. This economic incentive was perhaps also the driving force behind the popularity of gambling. In a game of chance a person's lot could quickly change, and large sums of money, otherwise unattainable, might be won with no effort.

In sum, the so-called vices and low life of Chinatown,

34. Introduction to the reprint of Culin's work; no page number [p. 1].

35. Liu Boji, *History*, p. 120.

often cited by anti-Chinese elements to justify Chinese exclusion, were part and parcel of the nineteenth-century American West. Prostitution and gambling were everywhere. Opium to the Chinese was like alcohol to the white men. In fact, alcohol created just as many social problems in the white community as opium did in the Chinese one, if not more.³⁶ Therefore, most of the criticism was actually racially motivated. The prevalence of these problems in San Francisco was also due to corruption within the government: the authorities allowed the import and sale of opium until addiction became more than a Chinese problem; and, by accepting bribes from the operators of Chinatown brothels, opium dens, and gambling houses, they allowed these vices to continue without interference. The true victims were, of course, the participants who ventured into such an existence in search of a moment of solace, a dream of wealth, or simply an escape from reality.

CHINATOWN HIGH LIFE:
A LITERARY PRIDE

The literary legacy of San Francisco's Chinese Americans is not widely known because in studying the past the major focus has always been on the labor aspects of

36. When Ng Poon Chew, a well-respected Chinese Christian and publisher of the well-regarded San Francisco Chinese daily, the *Chung Sai Yat Po*, was confronted with the issue of Chinese opium addiction, he supported the call to eradicate opium but rejected the anti-Chinese rhetoric behind it. Likening the ills of opium addiction to alcoholism, which was prevalent in white society, he stated that opium weakened the user, disarming him from endangering anyone else, whereas alcohol made the drinker a dangerous person whose unruly behavior would harm others. He joked that a wife could beat her opium-addicted husband, but she would be beaten by her alcoholic husband.

post-1860s Chinese immigration. Because of subsequent years of segregation, however, Chinese Americans also became second-class citizens in the English language. The population of school-age Chinese American children grew from about five hundred in 1867 to four thousand in 1900, with at least 75 percent of them residing in San Francisco.³⁷ However, until the 1930s, hardly any of them excelled at creative expression in the English language. This area of intellectual endeavor remained beyond their reach. Chinese Americans gained English-language skills first through missionary programs in Chinatown and later in segregated public schools.³⁸ But fluency in English was not enough to enable them to break into the white man's white-collar society. A Chinese American who was fluent in both English and Chinese might use this language ability to become a *cheut faan* (*chu fan*, lit. "out to the barbarians"), a kind of translator-representative hired by Chinese organizations to negotiate with the white men. At best, he might be employed as the official *chyun wa* (*chuan hua*, interpreter) for court or immigration cases involving non-English-speaking Chinese. Thus, early Chinatown residents could demonstrate practical English skills, but not literary ones.

However, this was not the case insofar as Chinese-language skills were concerned. Rampant racial preju-

37. Coolidge, p. 436.

38. For an extensive study of the history and issues of education confronting the Chinese in San Francisco, see Victor Low, *The Unimpressible Race: A Century of Educational Struggle by the Chinese in San Francisco* (San Francisco: East/West, 1982). Chinese Americans have consistently challenged racial segregation. However, in 1906, a public school located north of Stockton Street, between Clay and Washington streets, was established for "Oriental" students. Only the Japanese were able to successfully challenge segregated schools.

dice had early on convinced most Chinatown residents of the merchant class that the future of the younger generation would be in China, because they would never be accepted in America. Thus, many parents made special efforts to equip their offspring with Chinese skills in preparation for their future in China. There were over a dozen private Chinese tutorial schools in Chinatown in the 1870s,³⁹ and in 1888 a community-supported Chinese-language school was established. Students were taught from the traditional Chinese texts—classics, belles lettres, and historical writings. Also, many youngsters were sent back to China to receive a Chinese education, a practice akin to that of San Francisco high-society families who sent their children to the East Coast for a “proper” education. Many American-born Chinese excelled in their Chinese studies; some were even able to pass through the imperial examination system. For instance, an American-born Chinese named Jeung Siucheung (Zhang Shaoxiang), a graduate of the Chinatown Chinese-language school, sent back to South China for further studies at the age of fourteen, later passed the regional level of the imperial examination (i.e., *xiang shi*) and obtained the prestigious *xiucai* degree in 1904.⁴⁰

Thus, there was no shortage of cultural expression among the immigrant generation in San Francisco

39. Him Mark Lai, “Meiguo Huaqiao jian shi” (A brief history of the Overseas Chinese in America), 38th installment of a serialized column in San Francisco’s *Shidai Bao* (December 24, 1980), p. 2.

40. Liu Boji, *History*, pp. 356–57. The Chinese imperial examination system had three major testing levels; each consisted of a battery of examinations to test the candidates’ writing skills. The first (base) exam was conducted on the local/regional level; successful candidates would be conferred the *xiucai* (“talented man”)

Chinatown. In fact, their literacy level must have been quite high, since the first community newspaper began to circulate in 1854⁴¹ and several more papers appeared in later years. In 1900, the *Chung Sai Yat Po* was established by Ng Poon Chew, a Christian. It became an influential daily in the Chinatown communities. In 1908, it instituted a daily supplement that frequently printed historical writings, prose, fiction, poetry, and popular Cantonese vernacular rhymes and satires. Then in 1909 the *Sai Gai Yat Po* also came into existence. Its editor, C. K. Leang (Liang Chaojie), was a leader of the Chinatown literati community. The two dailies frequently advertised books and other writings from San Francisco Chinatown’s ten bookstores. Tai Quong, Fat Ming, and Sun Tai Lok were the best-known booksellers and publishers, and carried numerous dictionaries, English-language primers, and books on accounting, health and hygiene, current Chinese and world affairs, and geography. They also sold works of popular Can-

degree. The intermediate examination was conducted on the provincial level, usually in the provincial capital; successful candidates would receive the *juren* (“outstanding man”) degree. The highest level, the “palace examination,” was held in the imperial capital, and successful candidates would receive the *jinshi* (“advanced scholar”) degree, with the top three candidates receiving special designations. The examinations were held once every three years, with special ones held on exceptional occasions as decreed by the emperor. The imperial examination system was the only ladder to success for men of letters who desired to hold government office. This system was abolished in 1905. For an extensive study of the system, see Deng Siyu, *Zhongguo kaoshi zhidu shi* (A history of the Chinese examination system) (Taipei: Xuesheng shudian, 1966).

41. Karl Lo and Him Mark Lai, “Introduction,” in *Chinese Newspapers Published in North America, 1854–1975* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Chinese Research Materials, Association of Research Libraries, 1977), p. 2.

tonese literature as well as traditional Chinese classics and histories. Hence, Chinatown's population was able to sustain a market for books ranging from popular to highbrow.

In addition, the leaders of the organizations under the umbrella of the Six Companies were men of letters of their respective districts who held at least the *xiucai* degree. They were appointed by the district organizations in San Francisco as district presidents or chairmen for a tenure of a specific number of years before returning to China. The president of the Six Companies was appointed in a similar fashion. Therefore, there was always a group of Cantonese literati in the San Francisco Chinese community. They often held gatherings known as the *nga jaap* (*ya ji* "refined meeting," a euphemistic expression for a gathering of poets taken from the *Book of Songs* [*Shi jing*]). At each meeting a topic would be suggested and members would write poems on that subject. Poems and parallel couplets (*duilian*) were the most popular form of creative expression among Chinatown literati. Huang Zunxian, a Cantonese and well-known Chinese poet in the late Qing period who was consul general in San Francisco from 1881 to 1885, actively organized and encouraged them, holding frequent gatherings to inspire their writings. A poetry society was formed.⁴² Men of letters from Victoria, British Columbia, another major Chinese settlement in the West, later joined Huang's well-publicized group and participated in the literary exchanges among group members.

42. Liu Boji, *Meiguo Huaqiao shi xu bian* (English title: *A History of the Chinese in the United States of America, II*) (Taipei: Liming wenhua shiye gongsi, 1981), p. 404. (Hereafter cited as *History II*.)

In the spring of 1886, another literary society, the Xiao Peng Shi She (Paradise Poetry Club), was founded in Chinatown. In May that year, its members wrote over one hundred poems and presented them to Zhang Yinhuan, the envoy of China to the United States, gracefully asking for Zhang's comments and evaluations.⁴³ This practice of submitting one's writings to officials of higher rank was a common practice in imperial China, serving as a form of self-introduction in the process of seeking recognition and acceptance.

Other literary societies such as the Tong Wen She (Associates of Letters) and the Wen Hua She (Literary Splendor Society) were well established years before the 1906 earthquake and had numerous members. In 1888, the Tong Wen group also sent out their poetic couplets to Zhang Yinhuan when he toured Peru on behalf of the imperial government. This group's reputation for couplet-writing activities reached far beyond the Chinese communities in the San Francisco Bay area. When the group, to celebrate the Spring Festival of 1911, sponsored a couplet-writing competition, contestants from as far away as Canada, Peru, Mexico, and Cuba sent in compositions. Thus, there was a well-organized and established literary network among the Chinese on the American continent.

The Wen Hua Club was even more influential and active on the local level. It had over one hundred and fifty dues-paying members and a clubhouse at Brenham Place (recently changed to Walter Lum Place), opposite Portsmouth Plaza, where a shrine to Wen Chang, the patron god of letters, was installed. Incense was burned

43. Liu Boji, *History II*, p. 404.

and offerings were attended to daily, and celebrations marked festive occasions throughout the year. The society strictly observed the Confucian emphasis on and respect for writing, to the point of showing reverence for all writings. Hence it employed a "paper collector," who, carrying a club-issued gray cloth sack, would patrol the streets of Chinatown from early morning until late afternoon, picking up all discarded paper on the streets and collecting it from the stores.⁴⁴ He would then take the paper back to the clubhouse, where it would be burned. To show the club's respect for the privacy of others, no one ever looked at the contents. An incinerator was built in the shrine for this ritual burning. The ashes were placed in the gray sack, and, once a week, the club would hire a horse and wagon to take them to the pier; a boat would then ferry them out to the Golden Gate and empty them into the ocean. This elaborate ceremony for "paper garbage" was the club's demonstration of its utmost respect for writing, showing themselves as true disciples of the Confucian teaching that writing was the constitution of literacy. However, the non-Chinese looked upon this extremely dignified activity as only one more baffling example of Chinatown's exotic behavior, one among the many curious and eccentric practices of Chinatown.⁴⁵ Without understanding the Confucian motive behind the action, they saw it as merely "strange," and the ritual served to perpetuate the stereotype of the Chinese as an "unimpressible race."

The Wen Hua clubhouse was destroyed in the 1906

44. Tchen, p. 52, plate 52.

45. McLeod, pp. 256-69.

disaster, and the paper collection was discontinued shortly thereafter. However, the group continued its literary activities in the post-1906 years, as, rather amazingly, did most of the other literary groups. Shortly after the quake and fire, announcements of literary activities were to be found alongside those of community organizations and district groups rebuilding their destroyed Chinatown, especially in the *Chung Sai Yat Po*. Between 1906 and 1909, over a dozen literary groups announced activities, for the most part poetry and couplet writing contests. Some groups established temporary headquarters across the bay in Oakland. This feast of literary activities was quite unusual, given the destruction and chaos of the time, and, later, the community emphasis on economic reconstruction. But it demonstrated the unbroken existence of literary life in Chinatown at a time when the common perception of Chinatown in many non-Chinese writings dwelled on its "low life."

The early 1900s was a period of continuous growth for literary Chinatown, aided by the presence of many prominent and progressive men of letters such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, who fled China after the reform movement failed in 1898. Although Kang never went to San Francisco, only to Victoria and Los Angeles, his followers nevertheless established a strong base in San Francisco Chinatown. In 1909, Kang's political party, the Bao Huang Dang (Royalist Party, later renamed the Xianzheng Dang, "Constitutional Party"), started the Chinatown daily *Sai Gai Yat Po*. Its editor, the scholar C. K. Leang, was a leader in literary activities, as we have seen, and through the *Sai Gai Yat Po* press, he also published many of his own

writings.⁴⁶ In subsequent years, community literary activities expanded to writing competitions in various genres, including classical poetry, prose, and political essays. Their topics ranged from leisure-class interests ("A Warm Night by the Lotus Pond") to contemporary ones ("Riding an Airplane over the Rockies") to political and social ones ("On China's National Affairs"), with each competition attracting over a hundred contestants.⁴⁷ In July 1915, the topic of a poetry competition sponsored by the Hua Zhi Club was "Hardships of the Chinese Overseas," a subject dear to their own experience in the United States.

The many literary contests were publicly announced and entries were judged by well-respected scholars in the community. Top winners were usually awarded cash prizes and citations, and some of the works were anthologized and published.⁴⁸ Literary life in Chinatown continued to be active in the 1920s, when another influential poetry society, the Jinmen Yin She (Golden Gate Poetry Club), was formed by literati from the Seiyup and Saamyup districts. The society published an anthology of poetry in San Francisco in 1924.⁴⁹

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, an unpre-

46. C. K. Leang, under the pen name of Chuyun Guan Juren, published many books, including two collections of essays both entitled *Chuyun Guan wen ji* (1922, 1926) and poetry collections that included *You Mei si ci cun gao* (1930), *Liang shi xiao ya* (1934), and *Wu guang shi se* (1941).

47. Liu Boji, *History II*, p. 406.

48. For example, a collection from the Caoxiang Group entitled *Cao xiang ya ji* (A collection of poems by the Caoxiang Club) (San Francisco: Nanhua shuju, 1934).

49. Jinmen Yin She, ed., *Jinmen Yin She shi ji* (A collection of poems by the Golden Gate Poetry Club) (San Francisco: Fat Ming Company, 1924).

cedented literary reform movement, later called the May Fourth literary movement, was launched in China. Many of its advocates were American-trained. They called for a reform in the Chinese written language, replacing classical Chinese with vernacular language.⁵⁰ However, this "New Literature" movement apparently had no effect on the Chinatown literary climate at the time, despite the strong emphasis of the Chinatown literati on cultural and ethnic identification with China during the period of rejection in the United States. Chinatown's indifference to the cultural reform is even more interesting if one considers the fact that the reform was first advocated by writers like Hu Shi, who had studied in the United States and whose philosophy for reform was basically American-based. The failure of literary reform in China to make an impression on Chinatown's literary community can perhaps be best explained by the fact that Chinatown's resident literati were mostly traditionally educated Cantonese. They had little if any social interaction with the Chinese reformers, who were non-Cantonese. Earlier political reformers such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yatsen were Cantonese and had come to America to solicit support and build a power base in the Chinatown community. However, although cultural reformers like Hu Shi had studied for many years in the United States, they had never made an effort to become active in the Chinatown community.⁵¹ In fact, Hu's

50. For an excellent study of this movement, see Tse-tung Chow, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution In Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

51. Perhaps one notable exception was Wen Yiduo (1899-1946). When Wen was studying art in New York as a student in

advocacy of the modernization of China's literary tradition was based on the idea of a "wholesale Westernization" of China, something most unlikely to be accepted in Chinatown, as the community jealously safeguarded its Chinese tradition and cultural heritage. Its literati were intent on maintaining a sense of belonging, dignity, and purpose in an America whose political system and social practices had denied Chinese the right to participate in national life. Hence, literary Chinatown remained basically conservative, unaffected by the literary reform, and holding on to traditional literary expression. The situation did not change until the 1930s, when the Sino-Japanese War and the rise of Marxist ideology in China became forces that brought about a new literary era in Chinatown.⁵²

Cantonese Folk Literature about the American Experience

THE AMERICAN SOJOURN AS SEEN FROM GUANGDONG

The massive emigration of Cantonese natives to the United States beginning with the Gold Rush days had a tremendous effect on the social and economic condi-

1924-25, he wrote a poem entitled "Xi yi qu" (Laundry song) about a Chinese laundryman. Wen used the hardship of the laundryman to illustrate his displeasure that this kind of life was humiliating for the dignified Chinese race. "Xi yi qu," first published in 1925, was later included in Wen's *Si shui* (Dead water) (Shanghai: Xinyue shudian, 1928).

52. For a brief reference to the literary development in Chinatown, see "Chinatown Literature during the Last Ten Years (1939-1949) by Wenquan," translated by Marlon K. Hom with an introduction, *Amerasia Journal* 9, no. 2 (1982): 75-100.

tions of the Guangdong region. Not only were the people's livelihood and education markedly improved with the inflow of remittances and other means of support from outside, but the emigrant experience also affected the literature of the region. The emigration created a new content for its oral literature of folk songs and other popular narrative rhymes. These works of folk literature were commonly known as *Gamsaan go* (*Jinshan ge*, or "Gold Mountain songs"), and their content dealt primarily with the effects of the natives' emigration to America. For example, one popular song told, in hyperbole, of a Cantonese native's sojourn in the United States in 1852:

咸豐二年造金山，
担起蓬仙萬分難；
竹篙船，
撐過海，
離婦別姐去求財；
唔掛房中人女，
唔掛二高堂。

In the second reign year of Haamfung, a trip
to Gold Mountain was made.
With a pillow on my shoulder, I began my perilous
journey:
Sailing a boat with bamboo poles across the seas,
Leaving behind wife and sisters in search of money,
No longer lingering with the woman in the bedroom,
No longer paying respect to parents at home.⁵³

53. Anon. (Tan Bi'an), "Jinshan fu xing" (Songs of the wife of a Gold Mountain man), *Xinming zazhi* 1100 (January 1949): 68. The second reign year of Haamfung (Xianfeng) of the Qing dynasty was 1852.

A song expressing the sojourner's sentiment from a participant's perspective was, however, a rarity. Most of the songs that circulated among the immigrants' homes focused on those who remained at home while husband, father, or relatives went to the United States. In 1929, Sun Yatsen University in Canton (Guangzhou), in a concerted effort to promote folklore studies advocated by the Academia Sinica in Peking, published an anthology of folk songs from Toisaan (Taishan),⁵⁴ whose natives constituted the largest Chinese group in America. Of the 203 locally collected folk songs, many deal with going overseas. Most of these are explicitly about the American journey; of these, some are children's ditties and some, songs of wives left behind. They have two basic themes: the expectation or promise of wealth from America and the wives' inevitable sorrow of separation.

The journey to America was regarded as an economic necessity, an opportunity for a man to secure a bright financial future for his family:

燕鵲喜，
賀新年；
爹爹去金山賺錢，
賺得金銀成萬兩，
返來起屋兼買田。

54. Chen Yuanzhu, ed., *Taishan geyao ji* (A collection of Taishan folk songs) (1929; rpt. Taibei: Folklore Books, 1969). There is also another collection of Cantonese folk songs available: Hu Zhaozhong, ed., *Meizhou Guangdong Huaqiao liuchuan geyao hui bian* (A collection of folk songs popular among the Cantonese in America) (Hong Kong: Zhendan tushu gongsi, 1970). Most of the 250 entries in Hu's collection can also be found in Chen's 1929 publication. Its claim that these folk songs were popular among the Cantonese in America has never been verified, though Chen's book shows that some of the songs were indeed concerned with the Gold Mountain journey from a non-participant perspective.

Swallows and magpies, flying in glee:
Greetings for New Year.
Daddy has gone to Gold Mountain
To earn money.
He will earn gold and silver,
Ten thousand taels.
When he returns,
We will buy a lot of land.⁵⁵

爸爸去金山，
快快要寄銀，
全家靠住你，
有銀好寄回。

Father has gone to Gold Mountain.
Hurry up, send money home:
The whole family is depending on you;
When you get money, send it back, Hurry!⁵⁶

The economic incentive for going to the United States is further seen in another song, in which a journey to America is preferred to a journey anywhere else:

金山客，
有一千有八百；
南洋客，
銀袋包，
大伯大伯；
香港仔，
香港賺錢香港使。

O, sojourner returning from Gold Mountain:
If you don't have one thousand dollars,
You must have at least eight hundred.

55. Chen, song 87, p. 104.

56. Chen, song 127, p. 146.

O, uncle returning from the South Seas:
Just look at your money bag,
It's empty; it's all empty!

O, young man returning from Hong Kong:
You have earned money in Hong Kong
And spent it all in Hong Kong, too!⁵⁷

With America held in such high regard, it naturally followed that to marry "a man from Gold Mountain" was most desirable, far superior to marrying anyone else:

少小離鄉邦，
三十始回唐；
媒人來往走忙忙，
女母聞聲心中喜，
三句唔到就攞糖！

He left home at a young age, finally returning
to South China at thirty.
A matchmaker runs about in great haste.
A mother with a daughter hears about him,
joy fills her heart.
In less than three words, candy is accepted
as a proposal gift.⁵⁸

有女莫嫁讀書君，
自己門門自己略；
有女莫嫁耕田人，
滿脚牛屎滿頭塵；
有女快嫁金山客，
一上船時銀成百。

57. Chen, song 59, p. 72.

58. Chen, song 38, pp. 49-50.

Don't marry a daughter to a man of books:
He locks himself behind doors and sleeps by himself.
Don't marry a daughter to a man who farms:
His feet covered with manure and his hair full of dust.
Hurry and marry the daughter to a man from Gold
Mountain:
Once he gets off the boat, he has money all in hundred
dollar bills.⁵⁹

Other songs are expressions of the feelings of lonely wives left behind in China while their husbands eked out a living in America. On the surface, these women, who were commonly known as *Gamsaanpo* (*Jinshan po*, or "wives of Gold Mountain men") and were the envy of those who lacked this American connection, lived on handsome remittances, and led comparatively affluent and comfortable lives. On the emotional level, however, due to the customary practice of wives staying home while the men worked abroad,⁶⁰ the *Gamsaanpo* suffered greatly, enduring a long and agonizing separation from their spouses, who sometimes vanished in America without a trace. One common practice was for

59. Chen, song 1, p. 1.

60. As briefly mentioned earlier in the text, most Chinese men were married before they came to the United States. It was customary for a Cantonese family to ensure that before leaving home the man was married, in order to establish in him a sense of responsibility and obligation to support the family. Another reason why wives were left behind is that early Chinese emigration to the United States was a labor movement. The conditions in America were not suitable for many of them to establish permanent homesteads in America, as was the case for most European immigrants during the same period. American laws also disallowed Asian women from coming. In 1924, the United States implemented exclusionary laws specifically barring the entry of Asian women.

a marriage by proxy to be arranged for a young woman to a man who was still in America. The young bride would go through the entire wedding ceremony, but the marriage would not be consummated until the man returned.⁶¹ Given this peculiar form of involuntary widowhood, it is not surprising that Seiyup folk songs about Gamsaanpo are full of complaint and grievance:

我君貧窮到金山，
本錢細小未得返；
想起金山條路十分艱難，
家裏淒涼望穿眼；
不及在家耕田好，
半年辛苦，半年閒，
朝見父母晚見妻子，
齊齊歡喜笑連連，
節節客客年卅晚，
夫男妻女幾風繁。

My husband, pressed by poverty, took off
to Gold Mountain.
With a petty sum of money, he cannot make
the journey home.
The road to Gold Mountain is extremely
perilous and difficult;
At home, in grief and pain, my longing eyes
pierce through to the horizon, waiting for
his return.

61. In this proxy marriage practice, a rooster was used to represent the sojourning groom. The bride would go through the entire wedding ceremony with the rooster by her side as her husband-to-be. This practice was common among the Cantonese in the Pearl River delta and has been described in many creative writings. See "Jinshan fu xing" (n. 53 above) for an example.

O, no way is such a life better than that of
farming at home:
Toiling for half a year, relaxing the rest;
You greet parents in the morning;
You are with your wife at night;
Everyone is happy, with smiles all over their
faces;
Festivals, parties, New Year's Eve celebrations—
You and I, husband and wife, O, how loving
would that be!⁶²

別鄉井，
出外洋，
十年八載不思鄉；
柳色氍毹陌頭綠，
閨中少婦惱斷腸。

You bid farewell to the village well, setting out for
overseas.
It's been eight years, or is it already ten, and
you haven't thought of home.
Willow branches are now brilliant, fields exuberantly
green;
In her bedroom, the young woman's bosom is filled
with frustration and grief.⁶³

青春守生寡，
枕冷令人怕；
想來想去亂如麻，
千里遙遙難共話；
細想他，
輾轉猶然也；

62. "Jinshan fu xing," p. 68.

63. Chen, song 37, p. 49.

雖在天邊雲腳下，
三更尤望佢回家。

I am still young, with a husband, yet I'm a widow.
The pillow is cold, frighteningly cold.
Thoughts whirl in my mind, as chaotic as hemp
fibers.

Separated by thousands of miles, how can I
reach him?

Thinking of him tenderly—
I toss and turn, to no avail.

He's far away, at the edge of the sky by the
clouds.

At midnight, I long all the more for his return
now.⁶⁴

Given the misery and frustration of such an existence
it should come as no surprise that, despite its promise of
a comfortable life, such a marriage is held up to question-
ing in several folk songs:

有女儘嫁金山佬，
金山箱仔任你教；
有女莫嫁金山佬，
丟奴冷薄熬砂煲。

O, just marry all the daughters to men from
Gold Mountain:

All those trunks from Gold Mountain—

You can demand as many as you want!

O, don't ever marry your daughter to a man
from Gold Mountain:

Lonely and sad—

A cooking pot is her only companion!⁶⁵

64. Chen, song 201, p. 238.

65. "Jinshan fu xing," p. 69.

有女勿嫁讀書君，
自己關門自己睇；
有女勿嫁耕田人，
滿身泥氣鬱死人；
有女勿嫁金山客，
別個家庭唔記得；
有女盡嫁生意仔，
朝魚晚肉好心才。

Don't marry a daughter to a man of books:
He locks himself up behind doors and sleeps by
himself.

Don't marry a daughter to a man who farms:
His body is filled with the smell of mud and will
suffocate her to death.

Don't marry a daughter to a man from Gold Mountain:
Once he leaves home, home he will forget.

It's best to marry a daughter to a young merchant:
With fish for lunch and meat for supper, he's the
most considerate.⁶⁶

Other Cantonese vernacular genres also adopted Gold
Mountain themes in their depiction of the life of the
sojourner. In the genre of rhythmic chants known as the
muk yu go (*mu yu ge*, or "wood-fish songs"),⁶⁷ there are

66. Chen, song 89, p. 106.

67. *Muk yu go* is a Cantonese vernacular rhymed narrative.
There are two theories as to its origin. One claims that it comes
from the folk songs of the Cantonese boat people living along the
Pearl River and its tributaries. The other theory is that it is bor-
rowed from the Buddhist practice of chanting sutras to the beating
of a red wooden block, shaped like a fish head. The rhythmic
chanting tells a story. These narratives have been published, mostly
in Canton and Hong Kong, for readers to use as a chant-along. This
genre of vernacular oral/written story-telling is popular among
both Cantonese peasants and the merchant class, and its wide circu-
lation in San Francisco Chinatown is indicated by book advertise-

a few extant pieces on the Gamsaanpo's life that were also in circulation in America's Chinatown. One piece, entitled "Laments of the Wife of a Gold Mountain Man" ("Jinshan po zi tan"),⁶⁸ is a first-person narrative of a young wife waiting anxiously for her husband to return. The chant manipulates monthly calendar events and seasonal festivals to emphasize the wife's state of separation-induced loneliness and grief. On each occasion, the gaiety of the outside world is juxtaposed against the wife's sadness. She perpetually wishes for her husband's return, a futile expectation that only fuels her despair and resentment upon the arrival of Chinese New Year, traditionally a time for family reunions:

...

夫君你好回歸轉，
等你不歸眼望穿；
入到房中嘆大氣，
只估我君在床前；
雙手隨床摩到邊，
摩着衣裳照見面，
縱然命短死亦甜。

...

待等明年還再望，
家家主主貼紅錢，
揮春大吉多興旺，
福祿壽三星貼在門前。
人家團圓夫妻樂，

ments. For a study of this genre, see Liang Pui-chec, *Wooden-Fish Books, Critical Essays and an Annotated Catalog Based on the Collection in the University of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1978).

68. Anon., "Jinshan po zi tan" (N.p.: Cang ji chubanshe, n.d.).

香花燭臘千萬千；
鳳鷄豬頭還多買，
竹炮燒响起塵烟；
自己團圓捱苦練，
蜜糖入口都不甜。
來世學花不做女，
疊埋心水練神仙。

...

Dear Husband, it's time to make the journey home.
My longing eyes pierce through the horizon.
You are nowhere in sight.

I return to the bedroom with heavy sighs.

In a flash I see you by the bed.

I hold myself by the bedside, with both hands
on the edge;

I try to touch your clothes; I want to feel
your face.

O, even if this means a shorter life, I won't
begrudge it!

...

So comes the New Year;

Still I must wait for you.

Red paper coins decorate houses everywhere;

New Year scrolls proclaim good fortunes.

Images of the Three Immortals of Happiness,

Longevity, and Prosperity grace the front door.

All over the place, thousands of flowers are sweet and
candles bright.

Families are together as husband and wife unite.

In abundance, chicken and pork are prepared;

Loud firecrackers burst off clouds of smoke.

And for me—

A time for reunion means a solitary retreat.

The taste of honey now is not at all sweet.

O, I shall be wise and never reborn a girl again!
I shall cultivate celibacy and the immortal deed!⁶⁹

In the genre of vernacular prose narrative, a tale entitled "Jit haau Waanwan" (Jie xiao huanhun) ("Chastity, filial piety, and reincarnation"),⁷⁰ written before the 1900s by a Cantonese writer named Tong Santin (Tang Xintian), tells the story of Chan Baakhong (Chen Bokang), a native of Sunwui (Xinhui, of the Seiyup), who goes on a journey to America to seek a living for his family. However, he is barely able to survive, let alone support his family. A laborer, he is stranded for nineteen years in the mines, unable to contact his family. His wife and mother live a meager existence while awaiting his return. Years pass and rumor has it that Chan has died in America. His mother is in poor health, and his wife, who is a filial daughter-in-law, pawns what is left of her belongings and clothing to prepare a good meal for her elderly mother-in-law, telling her falsely that Chan has finally struck it rich in America and is sending money to them. The old woman is overjoyed, but later, when she hears a rumor of her son's death, she dies in grief. After the mourning period, the people in the village suggest that Chan's wife remarry, but she steadfastly refuses and commits suicide instead.

Meanwhile, Chan still toils in America. One day,

69. "Jinshan po zi tan," p. 5.

70. The publication data for this story are unknown. It is the first entry in a collection entitled *Yong yan she qu* (Trivial but interesting words), vol. 2, pp. 1-12. It is written in colloquial Cantonese. There are two editions of this anthology. One has no publication data. The compilation of the other edition is attributed to Tang Yincai. It was published in Canton in 1896. Tang Yincai and Tang Xintian appear to be the same person.

luck finally comes to him when he claims a huge gold nugget in a mine. With that comes plenty of money, and he hurries home after his prolonged absence, only to find out what has happened. The story then moves into the supernatural realm, as Chan's wife returns to life in a surrogate body, and they are rewarded for their filial piety and for her chastity.

This story is significant in that Chan's journey to America is consistent with the economic aspects of the early Chinese labor immigration patterns. His hardship in America is only casually mentioned and not discussed in detail, probably due to the narrator's lack of personal experience. However, the American experience functions effectively as the catalyst for the story's development: the hardship endured by Chan in America is the cause of all the grief at home. In fact, the story is an indictment of the glorified journey that does not necessarily reward the participants with the promised wealth.

On another occasion, a Cantonese man of letters from the late Qing period (ca. 1880s) looks at the sorrow of a forsaken wife and poignantly states that it was a direct result of the economic hardship endured by her spouse in America:

At first, there were indeed a couple [of emigrants] who returned with some profit. Subsequently, many flocked over there. Gradually the gold mines were exhausted. Many became displaced drifters in a foreign land and died there. Those who were able to survive numbered no more than one or two out of a hundred.

When they first put up their fare for the journey [to Gold Mountain], they could do no better than borrow money from friends and relatives, or sell land and property. As their wishes were betrayed and they were

unable to save even enough money to return home, they simply showed no more concern for their parents, wives, and children.⁷¹

CANTONESE RHYMES FROM
SAN FRANCISCO CHINATOWN

The experience of the Cantonese immigrants in the United States at the turn of the century has been vividly preserved in vernacular writings and folk songs. Numerous Cantonese popular writings had appeared in newspapers in Chinatown. Most of them were humorous pieces, poking fun at prostitutes, opium addicts, gamblers, and so forth. There were always folk songs and other vernacular writings published in the supplement to the *Chung Sai Yat Po*. The widespread popular acceptance of the genres among the Chinese American communities was probably due to the fact that creative expression in the Cantonese vernacular was widely accepted among the Cantonese men of letters living in Chinatown. They might write formal poetry (i.e., classical poetry) on serious or "refined" occasions, but they would also write vernacular pieces for entertainment on other less serious occasions.

Besides being published in Chinatown, some works found their way to publication in China, as a result of the close relationship between the "home" community and the Chinatown abroad. Many Cantonese vernacular pieces appeared in Canton during the 1905 national movement to boycott American goods in protest of the United States' unfair extension of Chinese exclusion laws. For example, there is a *muk yu* narrative entitled "Lamentation of a Gold Mountain Man at Night"

71. "Jinshan fu xing," p. 68.

("Jinshan ke tan wu geng"),⁷² written anonymously in the first person about immigrant life in America. In addition to expressing economic concerns, the work keenly relates feelings of banishment and indignation over the agony and injustice of the American sojourn; none of these concerns is to be found in any other Cantonese folk song from China. The participant's perspective is also found in another piece of prose, entitled "Preface to Detention in the Wooden Barracks" ("Muwu juliu xu").⁷³ It was first published in the *Sai Gai Yat Po* (which deleted a few lines that were critical of the Manchu government). A year later, the complete version appeared in the *Xinning zazhi*,⁷⁴ a Toisaan publication that also enjoyed wide circulation in America. The prose work deals with the harsh and unequal treatment that the Chinese received in the American immigration station. This complete version also reveals a politically explicit and critical voice.

More significant in the development of early Chinatown literature was the publication in San Francisco of two anthologies of Chinatown folk rhymes. The first, entitled *Jinshan ge ji* (Songs of Gold Mountain) and consisting of 808 pieces, was published in 1911 by Tai Quong Company, a noted Chinatown bookseller and publisher. It cost one dollar. There was no exact count as to how many copies were printed and sold; however,

72. This piece is collected in A Ying, ed., *Fan Mei Hua gong yinyue wenxue ji* (A collection of literature opposing the American exclusion of Chinese laborers) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), pp. 677-78.

73. "Muwu juliu xu," *Sai Gai Yat Po* (January 16, 1910). For an English translation of this prose work, see *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island*, comp. and trans. by Him Mark Lai et al. (San Francisco: Hoc Doi, 1980), pp. 138-41.

74. "Muwu juliu xu," *Xinning zazhi* 28 (1911): 76-78.