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## [The Great Quake: 1906-2006](#) [Out of chaos came new Chinese America](#)

- [Vanessa Hua, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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*Destroyed records meant more immigration.*

The earth dragon has awakened, Chinatown residents are said to have screamed as the 1906 earthquake and fire flattened their neighborhood and killed untold numbers.

But San Francisco's Chinatown was already under siege. White leaders considered the Chinese an economic threat, filthy and dangerous, and were trying to push them out. The Chinese Exclusion Act, barring most Chinese from entering the United States since 1882, had slowed the flow of newcomers to a trickle of teachers, students and merchants.

Yet when government buildings were destroyed a century ago, so were the birth and immigration records inside. Scores of Chinese recognized the serendipity, claiming citizenship and bringing in their children.

In many cases, for a fee, they also brought in people who weren't their children. Hundreds of those friends and strangers, who came to be known as "paper sons," arrived in the Bay Area in the following decades, changing Chinese America forever.

"In a strange way, we as Chinese Americans are indebted to that disaster," said Felicia Lowe, 60, a Bay Area documentary filmmaker whose father and grandfather were paper sons. "It was a gateway, an opening, a possibility to allow Chinese people to come here."

And it all started with a neighborhood.

At the turn of the century, Chinatown was a neighborhood of narrow streets and dilapidated Victorians -- the oldest part of San Francisco. Immigrants, most of them bachelors, had added balconies, displaying silk-and-bamboo lanterns and other touches of their homeland: potted flowers and plants, signs in Chinese, triangular yellow flags with a dragon to signify the merchant's rank. After the quake, the city's Reconstruction Committee wanted to move Chinatown 6 miles away to Hunters Point.

"You have to understand, from the time the Chinese arrived (until) the earthquake, San Francisco City Hall was trying to get rid of them. Not to move them somewhere -- but to move them back to China," said historian Phil Choy, 79, an American-born son of a paper son.

"People ask, 'Why didn't they count the Chinese?' " he said, referring to the fact that few, if any, deaths from the earthquake and fire were recorded in Chinatown, the city's densest area. " 'Why didn't they care?' "



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"This is why," he said, gesturing to a stack of musty leather-bound books in his study: reports to the Board of Supervisors and the California State Senate about the filthy conditions of the Chinese quarter. The alleged horrors included Chinese prostitution, white women living with Chinese men and white prostitution in Chinatown.

But the effort to move Chinatown stalled when the Chinese government and white merchants warned that U.S.-China relations would suffer if Chinatown were pushed aside.

Chinese merchants quickly staked their claim by rebuilding. They devised a plan to make Chinatown a valued asset of San Francisco -- a tourist spot.

The architecture they chose was not authentic but a fanciful interpretation designed by white architects. Pagodas in the Far East are religious buildings, erected as memorials or shrines, for example, while in Chinatown they house shops.

Today, tourists on Grant Avenue photograph the curved eaves and colorful tiled roofs and wander through atmospheric alleys and into temples heavy with incense and resounding with the cacophony of fake crickets, classical Chinese zither and Muzak. "It was a ingenious move, selling a fake China to those white folks who didn't know any better; and the Chinese community since survived with a degree of prosperity on its own despite intense racial prejudice and discrimination," said Marlon Hom, chairman of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University.

To this day, the neighborhood remains chronically overcrowded and houses poor immigrants who lack the English fluency to venture beyond. About 60 percent of all housing units in Chinatown are still single rooms without a bathroom or kitchen, and most of the other 40 percent are rental apartments.

Although the neighborhood's distinctive look protected it from redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s -- a wave that transformed Filipino neighborhoods and Japantown -- Chinatown has missed out on the Bay Area's prosperity over the last half-century.

Down narrow, dank Cooper Alley off Jackson Street, which was set aside a century ago for sick Chinese prostitutes, a small building built in 1908 is home to people like Qiang-guo Wang, 69, who rents a small room with his wife for \$240 a month.

"There isn't space to move around, but there isn't sufficient affordable housing," said Wang, a retired restaurant busboy. In 1992, the couple left behind a three-bedroom apartment in Guangzhou, China, to join their five children in California. Because they cannot drive or speak English, they moved to Chinatown.

"Life is hard," Wang said. "I have to struggle for this."

Suitcases and boxes teetered on the top bunk of his bed, and the moist, sweet smell of steamed rice hung in the air. Potted plants and flowers on the windowsill brightened the dilapidated room, much as they might have in 1906.

Even after the quake, the Chinese population in San Francisco continued shrinking, partly because many Chinese residents moved to San Mateo, San Jose and the East Bay.

But eventually, the effects of the earthquake and fire -- and the ingenuity of immigrants in Chinatown -- would begin to take hold. By 1930, the city's Chinese population climbed to 10,668, from 7,774 in 1920, as paper sons and daughters grew old enough to immigrate and be

put to work.

At Angel Island Immigration Station, where 175,000 Chinese immigrants were detained between 1910 and 1940, authorities interrogated immigrants and their purported American relatives separately, trying to catch them in a lie. How many windows are in the house? What direction did they face? How many houses are in your village? Has your alleged uncle ever been in the United States? What is the name of the burial place?

Some real families were torn apart when immigrants could not answer all the questions, despite memorizing minute details about their false family and villages during their crossing. Those who survived the interrogation sank roots that today nourish tangled family trees.

Mothers came in as grandmothers, sisters as aunts, brothers as uncles of their siblings. And real brothers would take separate fake names. For decades, many Chinese American families had two surnames: their real one, used in the Chinese community, and the name used in the official, white world.

Filmmaker Lowe, who grew up in Oakland's Chinatown, realized after the birth of her first child that she knew little family history to pass on.

"I tried to fill in the puzzle, the missing pieces. For so many years, I only got hints," Lowe said. "Sometimes I'd get a story that made sense, and sometimes, it was, 'Oh, never mind.' "

Inside the chilly barracks at Angel Island Immigration Station, Ying-Ying Guan stood still and silent, pondering poems that immigrants carved into the walls decades ago.

"I can feel how lonely they are. They want to go, but they can't get out," said Guan, 19. A sliver of the bay glimmered through the window, with Richmond and Marin beyond on either side.

A great-great grandfather on her mother's side worked on U.S. railroads in the late 1800s and sent money back to his village in southern China until he died here. His son, Guan's great-grandfather, attempted to immigrate in the 1930s but he was rejected.

Guan immigrated from southern China with her parents in 1997. Now a freshman at UC Davis, she is learning about the laws targeting Chinese and their way of life, and how Chinese Americans appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court for their rights, easing the way for other immigrants.

The paper-son practice ended, for the most part, after Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, when China was allied with the United States in World War II.

In 1956, however, following a report that Communist spies could use fraudulent papers to enter the United States, Chinese who were here illegally were encouraged to confess in return for legal status. One man spilling his secret could implicate his whole family.

Him Mark Lai, a San Francisco historian and retired mechanical engineer, had to sponsor his wife, Laura, after her uncle confessed. But gaining citizenship took a decade, during which time she could not leave the country.

"We visited all the national parks," Lai said with a laugh. Born in 1925 in Chinatown, the eldest son of a paper son, he is the gregarious, unofficial dean of Chinese American history.

Roughly 30,000 people participated in the confession program before it ended in 1965 with the

passage of the Immigration Act, which allowed the large-scale migration of Chinese families for the first time, historians say. The legacy off these immigrants is in new satellite Chinatowns in the Richmond, Sunset and Visitacion Valley neighborhoods of San Francisco. One in five city residents is Chinese American.

Among the Chinese Americans who moved to San Francisco and to suburbs across the East Bay and South Bay are political leaders and tech entrepreneurs, garment workers and home health aides, tenants and landlords. They are poor, middle-income and wealthy. They are the Bay Area.

The Chinese Historical Society of America's "Earthquake: the Chinatown Story," which is being held at the Philip P. Choy Gallery at 965 Clay St., runs through Sept. 18.

Page A - 1

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