


In celebration of a community, 1906-2006...

n the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake and fire, Chinatown rose from the ashes—rebuilt and reinvented as one of San Francisco's most prominent icons, a major international tourist attraction and a touchstone for Chinese in America.

Chinatown Rising celebrates the spirit of a community recognized for promoting Chinese heritage and culture while embracing American civic life, values, and institutions.

San Francisco Chinatown

1906–2006

Selected Milestones



1906 To the east of Chinatown, the great fire burns the financial district. Firefighters would dynamite Chinatown along Stockton in an attempt to create a firebreak. (Arnold Genthe photo, courtesy Library of Congress)

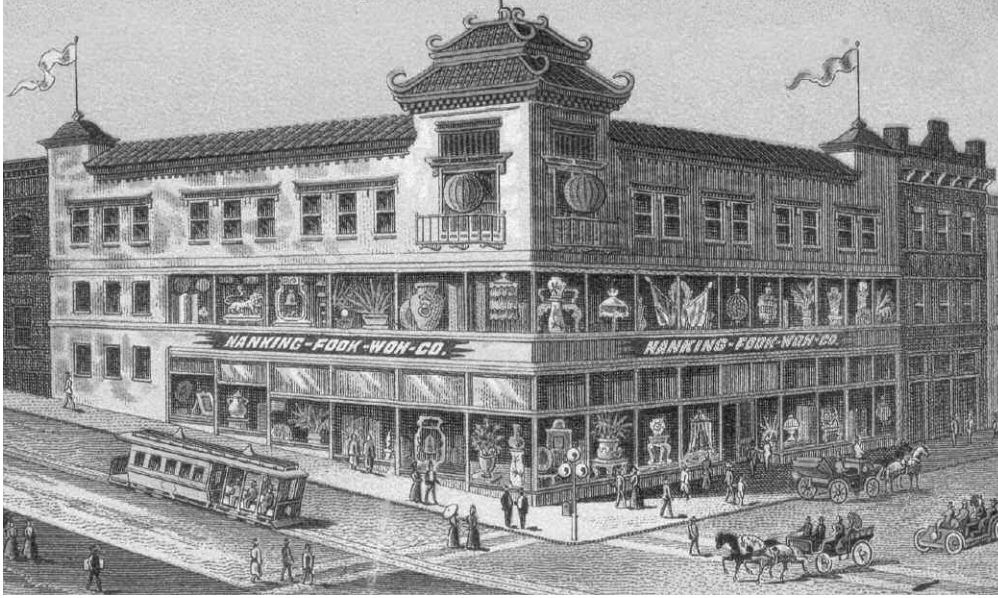
1906

The fire that follows the earthquake levels San Francisco Chinatown. In the path of destruction are homes, businesses, associations, and churches, many of which date back to the 1850s and '60s.

At the time of the quake, Chinatown is also suffering the long-term effects of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibits entrance to all Chinese except merchants, ministers, students, and travelers. The legislation splits families and reduces the number of Chinese from the 1860s and 1870s high of ten percent of California's population; by 1910, the U.S. Census records, the Chinese population of San Francisco has been cut in half, to 15,000.

More than half a century of Chinese language journalism is in crisis. Chinatown's four Chinese language newspapers lose everything. *Chung Sai Yat Po* opens temporary offices in Oakland and hand-letters issues to share news and strategies for organizing to resist civil rights abuses.

Land speculators, some of whom are city officials, are quick to push for dislocating Chinatown. The City immediately develops the Subcommittee for the Permanent [re-]Location of Chinatown, the latest in a decades-long series of attempts to claim the land of the Chinese quarter. Only after three full weeks of pressure by community members, U.S.-educated Chinese diplomats, and a coalition of Chinese merchants and white landlords are the meetings to decide the fate of Chinatown opened to Chinese San Franciscans.



c.1910 Nanking Fook Woh Company, corner of Grant and Sacramento. Later postcards show the company adding a new flag to show support for and recognize Chinatown's contributions to the 1911 founding of a democratic republic in China. (CHSA, Daniel K.E. Ching Collection)

Look Tin Eli and other Chinese merchants plan for a rebuilt Chinatown that will be welcomed by the city as an attractive draw for tourism. Leading San Francisco architects are commissioned to fulfill the vision this marketing maven articulates for a new “Oriental” city built of “veritable fairy palaces.”

Chinatown businesses and institutions publicize their building plans to help realize the recreated Chinatown. Some choose to participate in the newly created “Oriental” style, while others commission styles similar to those found elsewhere in San Francisco, using architecture to make a statement about their American identity.

1907-1910s

After the quake, San Francisco Chinatown sees a shift from looking to China to investing in building a full life in the U.S. Community members place an increased emphasis on participatory democracy, and establish the multitude of institutions necessary to nourish a vibrant civic life. New organizations include the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (1908), the Chinese YMCA (1911), and the Chinese YWCA (1916). The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associations (CCBA, established in 1863 as the Six Companies) rebuilds and shares its building with a new Chinese School. The Peace Society is formed to settle disputes between tongs, or secret societies. The Cathay Club participates in the nationwide movement of local civic marching bands. The Chinese Telephone exchange, operating since 1898, opens in a new showplace facility.

In these years of struggle and transformation, the 1895 organization for native-born Chinese Americans, Native Sons of the Golden State (formed in response to the whites-only policy of the Native Sons of the Golden West), becomes the Chinese Americans Citizens Alliance, a national organization headquartered in San Francisco Chinatown. The Chinese Primary School is reopened as the Oriental School. Although segregated, its existence was hard won, through the 1885 suit brought by the parents of 8-year-old Mamie Tape, who was denied enrollment in the local public school, Spring Valley.

The age of the Chinese American millionaire entrepreneur begins: Lew Hing, Thomas Foon Chew, kinsmen Look Tin Eli and Look Pong Shan, and later, Joe Shoong, open a range of complimentary business ventures: local and transnational banks, merchandising, shipping lines, the newly perfected canning industry, and mainstream department stores.



1912 After months of holding programs in churches, the Chinese YMCA opens its first building. (CHSA, Chinese Digest, Edward Wing Tom Collection, gift of Luella Mak)

In 1910 the Angel Island Immigration Station opens, replacing the previous detention site—a shed at the Pacific Mail docks—with a new facility for examining and detaining incoming passengers of Chinese descent. The pre-quake practice of attempting to bar Chinese and Chinese Americans with legitimate rights to entry continues, as does the practice of writing poems of lamentation and protest on the walls. In 1913, California deprives Chinese and Japanese immigrants of the right to buy land.

The U.S. joins the War to End All Wars (WWI). Chinese American women work in the Red Cross, and among Chinatown’s servicemen are the first Chinese American officers.

1920s

Chinatown community members expand the range of civic organizations, building Chinese Playground, Chinese Hospital, new large facilities for the Chinese YMCA, and new headquarters of Chinese Chamber of Commerce. The Salvation Army opens a Chinatown corps, and the Catholic Paulist Fathers establish English and Chinese schools and a community center. Chinatown public library opens.

The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association remodels the Chinese Central High School building, and it becomes the first Chinese school in the U.S. to offer instruction from primary through high school levels. The daily *Chinese Times* begins publication as the organ of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, to speak for U.S. citizens of Chinese descent.

The first Chinese American woman is hired in the public school system—Alice Fong Yu, in 1926—but a new risk to civil rights arises. Under the Immigration Act of 1924, many Chinese American women lose their citizenship upon marrying a non-citizen. (The 1932 Cable Act reformed this rule only for women not of Chinese descent.) The “Oriental School” is renamed Commodore Stockton School, and students are barred from speaking Chinese in school or on the playground. Nam Kue becomes the first Chinese school to build its own building on its own property.

1938 In Chinatown, more than a hundred women organize the Chinese Local No. 341 of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union. Their 13-week strike wins higher wages and improved benefits. (CHSA, Chinese Digest, William Hoy Collection)



U.S. prosperity is reflected in the rise of the great Chinatown movie houses. Chinese American filmmaker Joseph Sunn Jue produces his first film in San Francisco.

The laundry workers' union strikes in 1929 to demand working hours be reduced from 14 to 11 hours a day. Their strike connects with a long heritage of Chinese American unionizing work: San Francisco's very first labor strike was the 1852 Chinese masons' strike for better wages for assembling the pre-cut granite blocks ordered from China for San Francisco's first fireproof building, the Parrott Building at California and Montgomery.

The 1929 stock market crash reverses a decade-long bubble. Among those hard hit are the Chinese-American millionaire entrepreneurs, some of whom had already been crushed by early 1920s scandals. The Great Depression and the discrimination prevalent in the U.S. combine to limit a reemergence of Chinese American entrepreneurs for decades to come.

1930s-early 1940s

National and federal institutions begin responding to years of Chinatown's organizing for civil rights: the American Legion veterans' service organization opens a Chinatown branch, the U.S. Post Office opens a Chinatown office, and a Chinatown social work corps is among the Works Progress Administration branches staffed by Chinese Americans. With Chinatown's population being more than fifty percent U.S. born, WPA cultural projects inspire interest in Chinese American history, and the first Chinese Californian historical society is formed. The organization cannot survive the general poverty of the Depression.

Chinatown's population is estimated at 30,000, and two blocks of Chinatown contain the most densely populated area in all of San Francisco. After years of community activism to address Chinatown housing shortages, plans are announced for the Ping Yuen Housing Project. Delayed by WWII, Ping Yuen opens ten years later, still the first federal housing project west of the Mississippi.

Chinatown women repeatedly demonstrate their organizing power. The women's governing committee of the Chinese YWCA commissions Julia Morgan to design and build their new facility. Women exercise their right to form labor unions, and play a major role in the Rice Bowl parades and parties, raising funds to provide relief for victims of Japan's war on China.

Golden Star Radio begins broadcasting nightly hour-long programs in 1940, becoming the first Chinese language program in North America.

Chinese American entertainers, barred from performing in revues with whites, find a creative outlet performing during the brief Golden Age of Chinatown nightclubs, and find their audience largely in white businessmen and WWII servicemen.

1942-1948

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. enters WWII as an ally of China. The U.S. repeals its unequal treaties and ends the Chinese Exclusion laws, re-establishing the right of people of Chinese descent to become citizens. The Chinese Exclusion legacy lives on, however, in the establishment of a restrictive quota that permits only 105 people of Chinese descent each year to be admitted. A U.S. citizen's non-citizen wife and children were also charged to the Chinese immigration quota, an application of the rule inconsistent with the quota system for European immigrants not of Chinese descent.

While the government interns people of Japanese descent, the wider U.S. society begins to see Chinese Americans as partners in the war. In 1943 Madame Chiang Kai-shek (Mayling Soong) comes to San Francisco on her U.S. tour, and her diplomatic poise, style, and bilingual proficiency make her the first widely accepted female Chinese role model. Chinatown residents join work at the U.S. Navy shipyards, and in 1944 the San Francisco-based China Aircraft Corporation begins manufacturing airplane parts for the war effort. Rules for the immigration of wives of U.S. citizens are amended: in 1946 Chinese wives of U.S. citizens are exempted from the immigration quota, and families of resident aliens are assigned preference for admission. In 1947, the War Brides Act of December 1945, which facilitated the immigration of wives of U.S. servicemen, is finally extended to Chinese wives.

1949-1959

Fearful of China's new Communist government, the U.S. breaks off all relations. Foreign students are stranded, and Chinese American ties to family in China are broken. The following year the Korean War begins, and the U.S. further strains diplomatic relations with Asian countries. The U.S. does not begin normalization of relations with China until Nixon's 1972 visit.

Chinatown further invests in U.S. values and civic life. Victory Hall is built using the surplus funds from War Bonds and the interest that was in the hands of United China War Relief when war ended. The Chinese Recreation Center is constructed. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce cultivates the Chinese New Year Festival into a renowned public event. In 1958 the parade queen's contest becomes the competition for the title of Miss Chinatown USA.

The increase in immigration, abolition of legal prohibitions against land ownership, and Supreme Court decisions against racially-restrictive covenants by neighbors and realtors lead to an increase in Chinese Americans living outside of Chinatown, and a growing presence in the suburbs.

1940 *The renamed Commodore Stockton School, now Gordon J. Lau Elementary. (CHSA, Chinese Digest, William Hoy Collection)*





1952 The newly opened Ping Yuen housing project features a model apartment with designs by painter James Leong, shown here with creations for the child's room. (CHSA, Kem Lee Studio, H.K. Wong Collection)

Senator McCarthy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's anti-communist fervor makes Chinatown a target. 1956 sees federal grand jury investigations of immigration fraud. Chinatown family associations are asked to submit all their records within twenty-four hours. The next year, the Department of Justice announces a confession program that will allow Chinese who immigrated using assumed identities to confess to fraud and readjust their immigration status. When twenty people with the surname Huey from the Sai Kee village of Toisan (Taishan) confess, they implicate 300-400 fellow villagers in the U.S.

In 1957 a new progressive voice is heard when the Voice of Chinatown radio program begins broadcasting on an AM channel. Within two years the program makes the leap to FM.

In 1958 U.S. federal agents go through Chinatown and confiscate herbs from China. One store alone loses store stock worth \$26,000. One by one Chinese herb stores close down as they exhaust their inventory.

1960-early 1970s

Chinatown development and transformation kicks off with the 1960 groundbreaking to transform Portsmouth Square into a high-capacity underground garage topped by a relandscaped park.

The early '60s see increased appreciation for the preservation, appreciation, and promotion of Chinese and Chinese American heritage and culture. The Chinese Historical Society of America is founded in 1963, and in 1967 establishes the first Chinese American Historical Museum in the U.S. The Chinese Cultural Foundation is founded in 1965, and establishes the Chinese Culture Center in 1971.

In 1965 President Johnson signs the Hart-Celler Act, which will abolish the old national origins quota system on July 1, 1968. The limit on immigration from each country outside the Western Hemisphere increases to 20,000 per year—not including citizens' immediate family members—and the tallies will be figured using actual nationality instead of "ancestry."



1970 Students at Galileo High march to demand action on overcrowded classrooms and to make Chinese New Year's Day a school holiday. (CHSA, East-West, Leland Wong photo, Philip P. Choy Collection)

Between 1965 and the 1990s, the number of Chinese who immigrate is nearly twice the number who came between the Gold Rush and 1930.

In the atmosphere of the Civil Rights Movement, Chinese San Franciscans begin new efforts to research and disseminate information about Chinese American history and issues faced by the community today. Among them, Gordon Lew begins publishing the bilingual weekly *East-West*. From 1967 to 1989, it is the one paper to discuss many of the issues faced in the changing Chinese American community.

The 1969 strike for the creation of ethnic studies at area colleges and universities further plants seeds that lead people to refocus on serving the community. Many new organizations are created, including Self Help for the Elderly, Chinese for Affirmative Action, On Lok Senior Services, Newcomers Service Center, and the Chinatown Neighborhood Improvement Resource Center, now Chinatown Community Development Center.

Mid 1970s-mid 1980s

Chinatown residents continue struggling for recognition and rights and achieving successes. The 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision establishes a mandate for bilingual education.

In 1977 International Hotel residents are evicted. Mounted police quash demonstrations against the dislocation and forcibly remove tenants. Community negotiations eventually result in the 2005 opening of the new International Hotel housing for low income residents.

Community activism achieves downzoning of Chinatown, preventing highrise commercial and residential redevelopment and encroachment by the Financial District.

2006 Gala Dinner and Dance \$

While San Francisco officially ended the “separate-but-equal” public education system in 1947, actual conditions remain so segregated that in 1978 the NAACP files suit. A 1983 city settlement begins busing as an attempt to reduce school segregation. Dismayed at the loss of community control and neighborhood schooling, many Chinatown parents object to busing and open locally-oriented Freedom Schools. Today there is still debate surrounding how to best achieve equity in education.

In 1983 the San Francisco Board of Education renames the Hancock/Sara B. Cooper Elementary School as the Yick Wo Alternative School, in commemoration of *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, laundry proprietor Lee Yick’s 1885 suit for equal protection under the law. In doing so the city creates a physical landmark recognizing the more than 130-year legacy of Chinese San Franciscans’ legal and political struggles that have worked towards building civil rights for all.

In recognition of the civil rights activism of one of the founders of the Chinese American Citizens’ Alliance, in 1985 San Francisco renames Brenham Place, creating Walter U. Lum Place. The U.S. gains its first street named after a Chinese American.

1989-1990s

The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake spares Chinatown from physical damage, but the economic effects of the subsequent 20-40% drop in tourism and demolition of the main connecting freeway artery hit hard. To help recover, businesses and community groups work with the city to establish new festival events including the Moon Festival Street Fair.

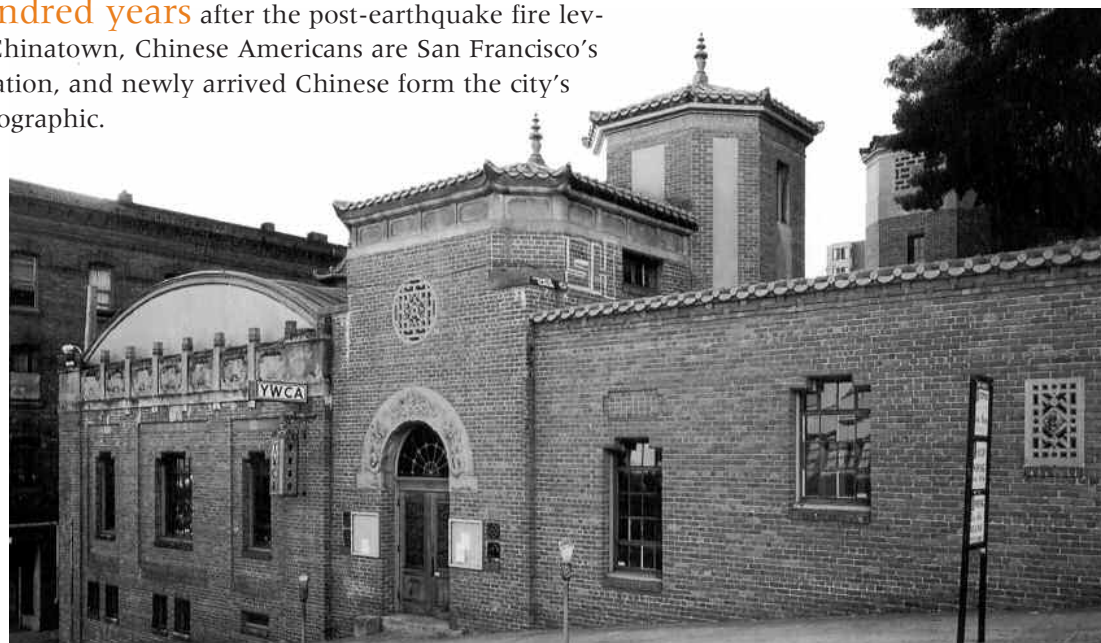
Chinese American political life continues to expand outside Chinatown; as many as four San Franciscans of Chinese ancestry serve on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Beginnings of the 21st Century

In early 2001 the Chinese Historical Society of America Museum and Learning Center opens in the newly renovated Chinese YWCA building on Clay Street.

2006—one hundred years after the post-earthquake fire leveled San Francisco Chinatown, Chinese Americans are San Francisco’s largest ethnic population, and newly arrived Chinese form the city’s fastest growing demographic.

In 1932, the Chinese YWCA opened its new Julia Morgan-designed facility. CHSA renovated and now preserves the building as its museum and learning center. The community-focused spirit lives on in today’s CHSA.





Look Tin Eli, 1909.
(*San Francisco Examiner*)

Look Tin Eli

General Manager of the Sing Chong Bazaar, Look Tin Eli (Luk Tin-Sun, 1870-1919) was the public face of the post-quake rebuilding of Chinatown. Already skilled in marketing, he articulated a vision of Chinatown rebuilt as a jewel of San Francisco, a new “Oriental City” filled with “veritable fairy palaces” of a newly created architectural style.

His family history stretched far back in California. Look Tin Eli’s father, Luk Bing-Tai, had arrived in 1860, on the sailboat *Lotus*, and married Miss Wong, a native-born Mendocino County girl, according to a 1958 genealogy by his grandson, Teng-Jung Yi-Lae. As a young man, Look Tin Eli worked for San Francisco’s Wing Cheung Wo import-export business, the Russo-Chinese Bank, and the First National City Bank, and served in the Yeong Wo District Association, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Associations, and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

Although he was Mendocino-born, officials barred his reentering the U.S. after a trip abroad. His court case, the habeas corpus case *In re Look Tin Sing*, occurring just two years after the 1882 Exclusion laws, was one of the earliest that affirmed that a native-born person is a U.S. citizen, regardless of ancestry.

Helping rebuild and reinvent Chinatown after the quake, Look Tin Eli partnered with other entrepreneurs to develop the infrastructure necessary for twentieth century business growth. With his uncle,

History Alive! Historical Figures

Look Pong Shan, and cannery magnate Lew Hing, he helped found and operate the Canton Bank of San Francisco (1907-1926) and the China Mail Steamship Company (1915-1921). Look Tin Eli married another U.S. citizen, Miss Jeung, and after Look Tin Eli’s passing, she and their children lived out their lives in Hong Kong.

Katherine Cheung

Katherine Siu Fun Cheung (1904-2005) became the first Chinese American woman to obtain a pilot’s license. A friend of Amelia Earhart, she was part of an early 20th century west coast wave of female aviators, and famous for her daredevil flying feats at expositions.

Hugh Liang

Born in San Francisco Chinatown, Hugh Kwong Liang (1891-1984) experienced Chinatown’s survival through the 1906 earthquake and fire as a 15-year-old. As an adult, his singing career accomplishments included a long run on the vaudeville circuit with the Chung Wah Quartet.

Anna May Wong

Both the first Chinese American Hollywood star and the first Chinese American to star in a TV show, Anna May Wong (Wong Liu Tsong, 1905-1961) chafed against the small range of roles Hollywood allowed a Chinese American—treacherous villains, or murderous and doomed vamps—and in Europe found a climate where artists clamored to work with her.