

*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 Leuisung (Lüsong), after the island of Luzon. Some settled in Mexico, which they called Siu Leuisung (Xiao Lüsong) 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.

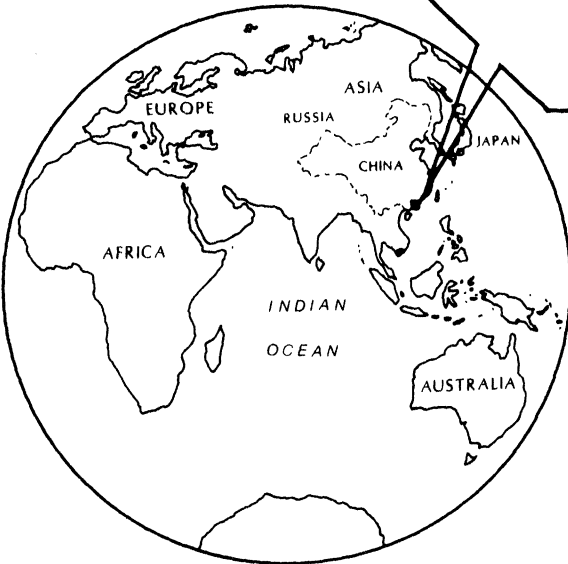
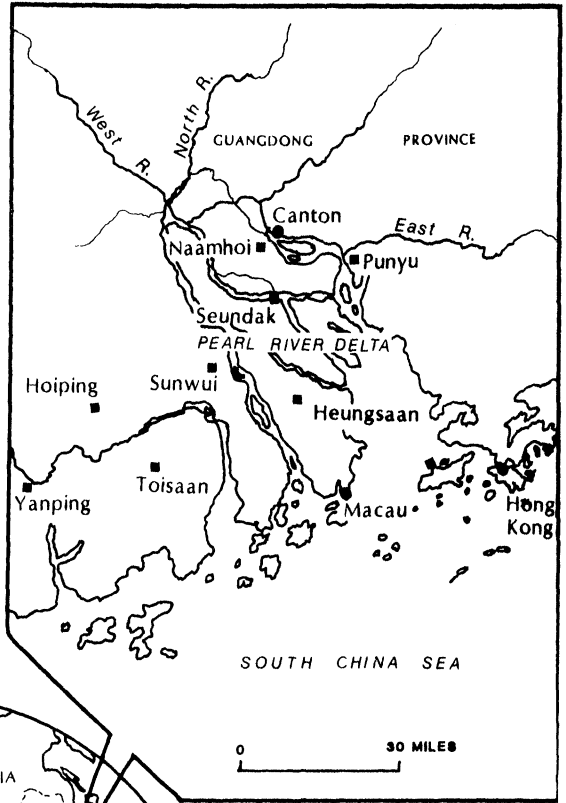
3. Chin et al., p. 6.

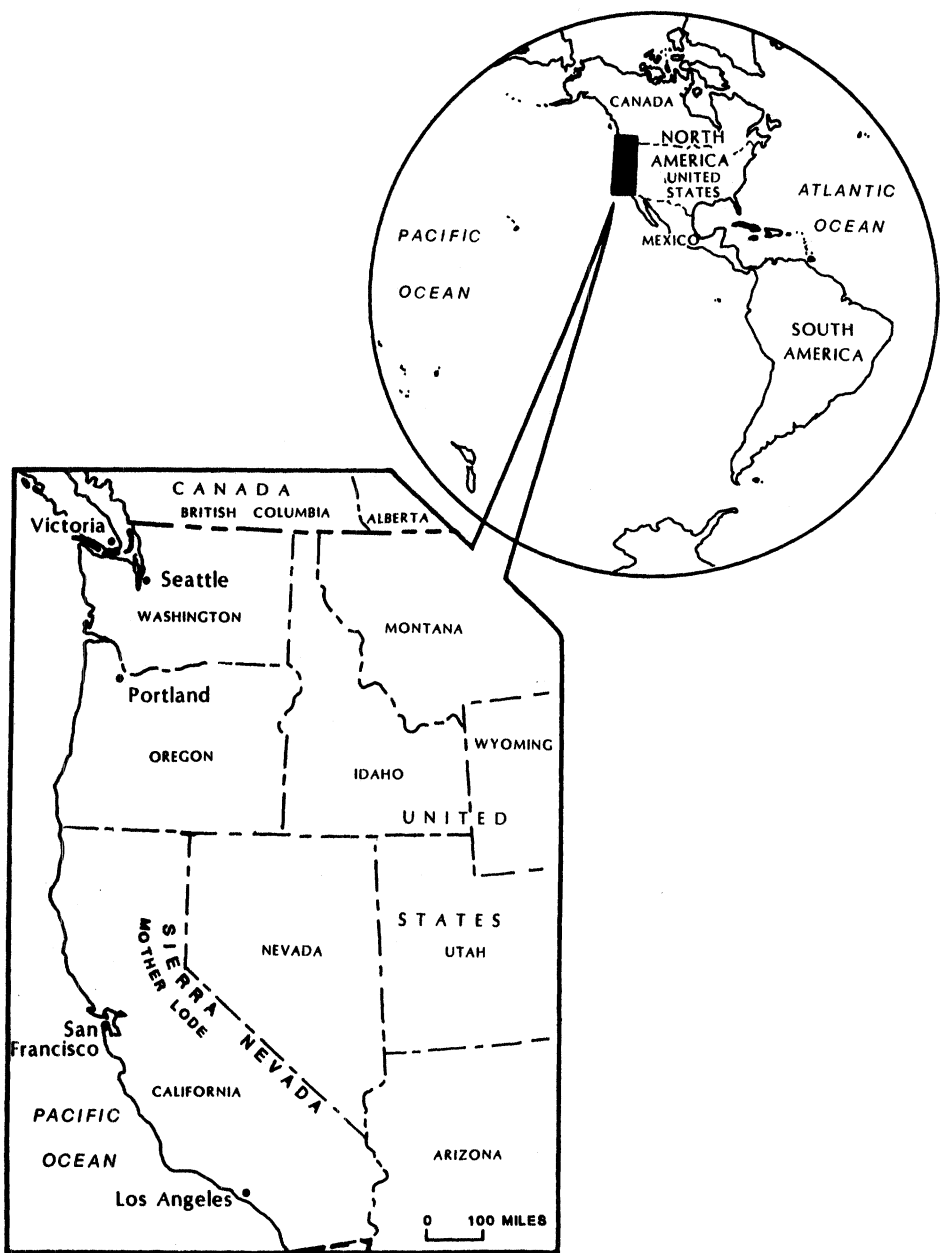
long experienced in doing business with foreigners, were seen regularly in the ports of Mexico. In 1838 the earliest Chinese reached Yerba Buena, the name for San Francisco before California was incorporated into the United States in 1850.⁴

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 (Nanhai), 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.

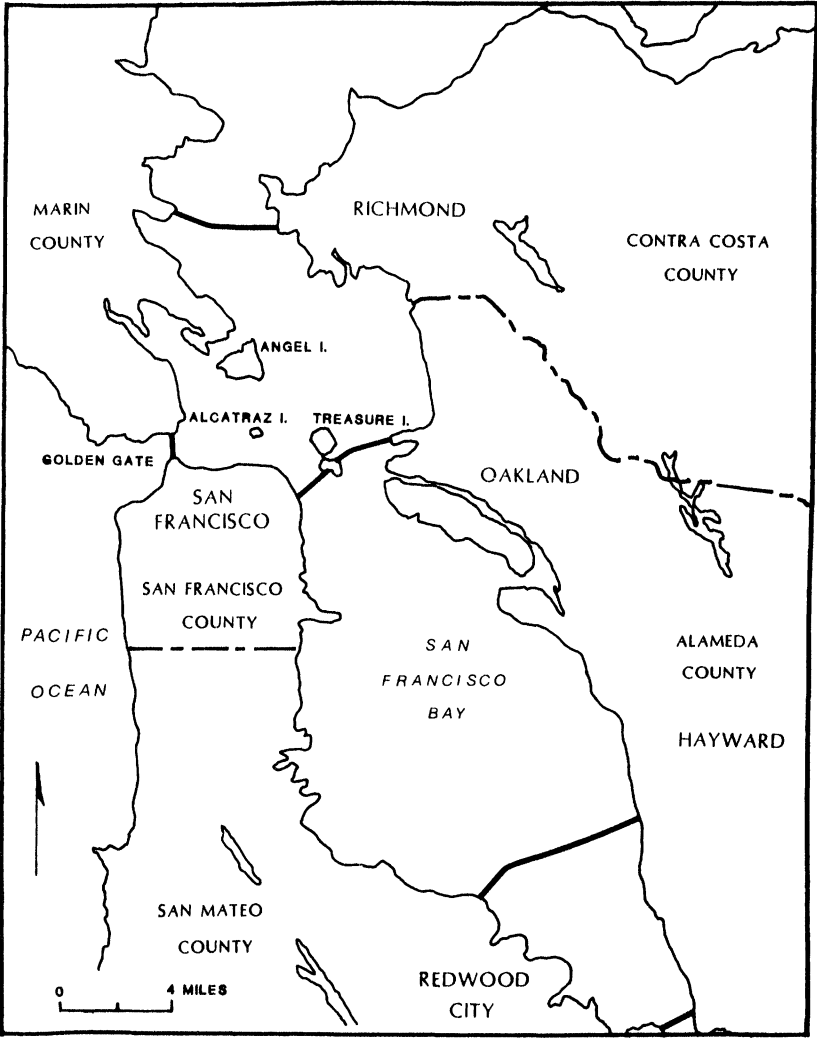
At first, the arrival in California of the "China boys" was welcomed. Aside from working in the mines, the Chinese provided the major labor force for reclaiming California land for farming. Some were skilled fishermen and shrimp harvesters. Later, tens of thousands worked, and many died, building the 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

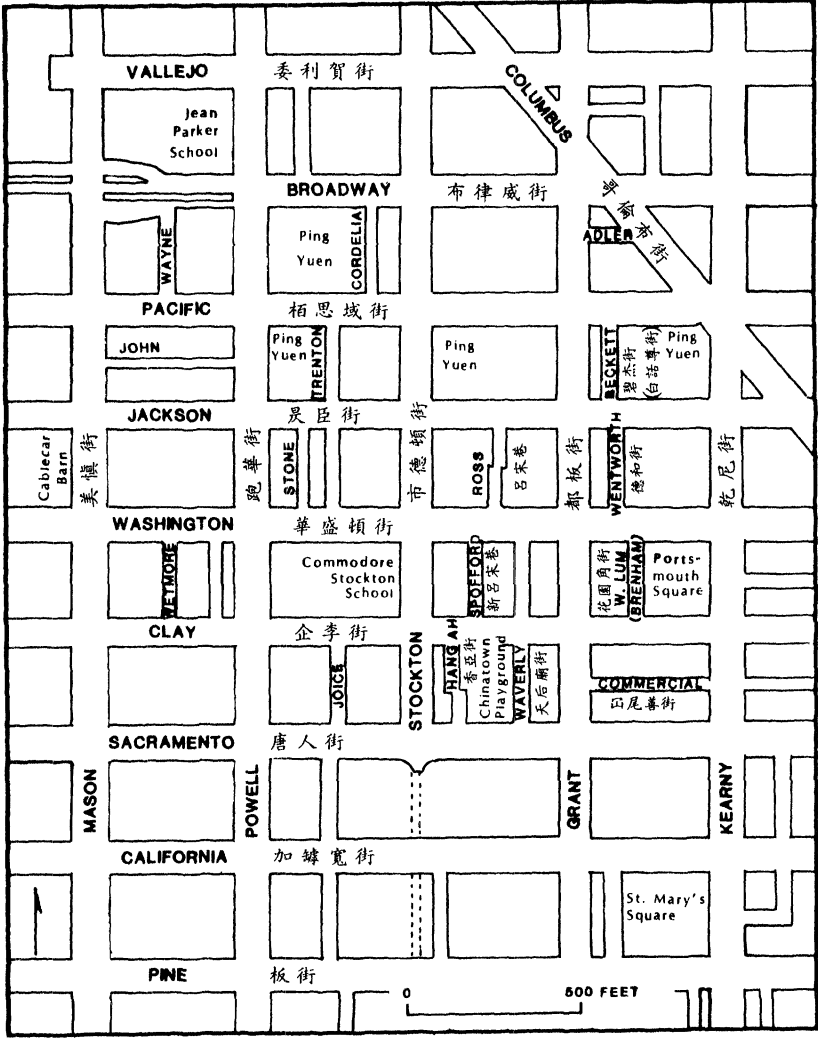
5. Chin et al., p. 4.

Chinese miners became the victims. When the trans-continental 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 gai (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: Mofat, 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).