

Alex Ward
Professor Cavalier
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Pittsburgh's Chinatown and Its Occupants

The Chinese began immigrating to the United States in the 1850s; many of whom were young men making their way into California to mine gold. If they were fortunate enough to find gold, the trend was to return to their homeland China as rich men. For the most part, though, many did not find gold, but what they did find was an opportunity for a better life in the United States than they ever could imagine in China. This realization did not fare well with the White Anglo-Saxon population in America who felt threatened by the presence of the Chinese as an undue burden not only in taking away jobs from hard-working men, but also that the Chinese infiltration would degrade the purity of native-born Americans. Despite vehement protests, many Chinese immigrants were hired as laborers in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, which would serve as a connection between the East and West coasts of the United States. During this timeframe, there were uprisings of anti-Chinese riots, and pending legislation was brewing to limit or block Chinese immigration into the United States. Actually, it was at about the same time that the Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869 that Congress passed the first of many Chinese Exclusion Acts which instituted the limitation and eventually completely banning Chinese immigration into the United States of America (Wu, 1983, 15).

Approximately two years later, in 1872, the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company, which was owned and operated by the Harmonite Religious Society in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, was having severe issues with their employees, who were constantly going on strike and slowing production significantly, bringing the company close to bankruptcy. It was suggested by a missionary that had previously worked with Chinese laborers, Reverend J.F. Dyer, that the company consider hiring Chinese workers for a designated number of years to help the company make up for their losses (Wu, 1983, 8-9). Since the Transcontinental Railroad had been completed, most Chinese laborers were in dire need of work and were constantly searching for employment no matter what it paid (Wu, 1983, 15). The owners of the cutlery company agreed, and a representative was sent out to the West Coast in search of Chinese laborers to contract. Although, the company representative discovered that most Chinese laborers out West had no interest in traveling to the East Coast for work. Eventually, he contracted with Chinese laborers working on a rail road in Louisiana who agreed to his proposal to come and work for the cutlery company. Eventually, 100 to 200 Chinese men found employment working for the Beaver Falls Cutlery Company guaranteed for up to a period of five years with steady pay and board. The initial reaction by the local townspeople in Beaver Falls was negative to the presence of the Chinese men. Eventually, the whole matter of concern simmered down, and by the time the five-year contract ended, all 100-plus Chinese laborers quickly departed from Beaver Falls, never to be heard from again.

By the 1870s and into the 1880s, a small but noticeable population of Chinese immigrants began to show up in Pittsburgh -- possibly some of the Beaver Falls laborers. These early Chinese residents lived mostly in the Hill District of Pittsburgh (Wu, 1983,

15). Similar to most Chinese populations in other cities, they kept mostly to themselves to avoid unnecessary confrontation with angry Whites by establishing businesses that would not compete directly with White-owned establishments, such as laundries and Chinese restaurants (Wu, 1983, 2, 32). As this work was quite demeaning, very few Chinese laborers made careers out of these particular occupations. This was simply a way to make large sums of money in a short amount of time until they could move on to some better business opportunity.

By the early 20th Century, larger numbers of Chinese immigrants began to move into Pittsburgh, congregating in a small area of Downtown Pittsburgh between 4th and 2nd Avenues where they began to establish restaurants laundries and dry goods stores. This small enclave would eventually become Pittsburgh Chinatown. Many of these first-generation Chinese settlers came from the same province in China, Kwang Tung, and in some cases the same county of that province, Toisan. Also, it would seem that a large number of these first-generation Chinese were interrelated to some degree as the surnames of many of these immigrants were divided between those with the last name of Yee and those of the last name of Lee. Whether there is a direct familial connection or if this was just a coincidence is unknown. What is known, as shown by these statistics, is that the Chinese community in Pittsburgh at this time was a homogeneous group who came from the same area of China and may or may not have shared familial connections with each other (Wu, 1983, 16-17). The population of early Chinatown fluctuated greatly throughout the first few years of its existence when Chinese immigrants would pass through briefly on their way to larger cities with better established Chinatowns such as New York or Philadelphia. The transience during this time period led to confusing reports

regarding the population of Chinatown; a range of anywhere from a few hundred individuals to at least a thousand or more. According to the established census data, though, it is more accurately estimated that there were only a few hundred or less individuals of Chinese descent living in Pittsburgh in the early 20th Century (Wu, 1983, 29). This estimate was borne out by the fact that there was a strong core group who had decided to take up permanent residence in Pittsburgh. Despite there being very few Chinese women among this first generation, the population of Chinatown slowly continued to grow until it reached its height in the late 1920s with a population of 444 individuals (Wu, 1983, 30). From the beginning, the attitude of most Pittsburghers was of distrust and dislike for the Chinese presence in their city. This was evidenced by many newspaper articles at that time, when referencing the Chinese community in Pittsburgh; they would blatantly use racist and hurtful remarks such as “runt Chinaman” and “pot-bellied chinks” (Wu, 1983, 35). Despite such overt and hateful racism targeted towards them, the Chinese community, in its first 20 to 30 years of existence in Pittsburgh, flourished magnificently and prospered greatly, quickly becoming the epicenter of the tri-state area for all individuals of Chinese origin (Wu, 1983, 37). However, the good times began to fade by 1921 when the City of Pittsburgh had begun construction on a new road that would be called the Boulevard of the Allies. Cutting through the heart of Chinatown, the road construction excavated businesses and uprooted the homes of several Chinese families (Merriman, 2003). As a result of this great upheaval, many of the merchants and families that made up Chinatown decided to leave Pittsburgh for cities with larger and well-established Chinese communities. This would prove to be the beginning of the end for Chinatown. Spanning the next 40 years, businesses, institutions, and the population

would continue in a downward spiral until it would cease to function as a viable, thriving community.

In 1916, the On Leong Tong, a fraternal business organization, selected William “Willie” Hing Yot as their leader. By a majority decision of the members, Willie Yot served as the “mayor” of Chinatown. Mr. Yot was one of the few Chinese members in the community who had mastered the English language and was able to communicate on behalf of the community with the authorities in the City of Pittsburgh. Yot also served as a troubleshooter within the Chinese community and was the first person that people would seek to solve a problem (Phillips, 1936). Life was good in the Chinese community for awhile, but by 1924, internal divisions within the society threatened to disrupt this unity. The instigator was a young and brash member of the Tong by the name of George “Georgie” Lee who decided to break from On Leong over his disagreement with the elders as to how they should conduct business. Lee left the Tong with several members in tow and eventually formed and led a local version of the Hip Sing Tong in Chinatown. Tensions between the Tongs in the little community swiftly broke out into open warfare on the streets with intermittent, extremely fierce and bloody battles and assassinations occurring over a period of six years from 1924 to 1930. The death toll had been speculated to run the gamut from anywhere between five or perhaps at least a hundred. In the final determination, that is, taking any wild rumors out of the equation, there were at least five confirmed homicides involving the Tongs during this period of time (Wu, 1983 47-49). Suffice it to say, both sides had grown weary of the fighting, and by 1930, a truce had been called by the national leaders of both organizations to which the local Chinese community in Pittsburgh responded quite jubilantly. As fate would have it, the instigator

of this turmoil, Georgie Lee, never lived to see the end of the fighting as he died on December 27, 1927. Ironically, he died a peaceful death in his sleep even though he had lived a most violent life (Kury, 1927).

Throughout the 1930s, Pittsburgh's Chinatown continued to suffer, gradually losing its businesses and concomitant population and experiencing even harsher effects of the Great Depression. Unlike the rest of the country, however, most of the Chinese citizens in Pittsburgh did not take advantage of the charity and relief efforts of organizations such as the Salvation Army and Red Cross. Resonating within the Chinese culture, this would be perceived as receiving pity and publicly "losing one's face" in society, thereby disgracing not only the individual but also reflecting on a person's entire family. In order to help individuals and families who had been devastated by the Depression, the more well-to-do Chinese merchants in Pittsburgh would invite homeless and starving people to come into their homes where they would treat them as honored guests, sharing delicious meals with them as though they were old friends. In this way, those in need could be helped without being disgraced as this, technically, was not charity they were receiving but a good meal from a good friend (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1933).

By the 1940s, the population of Chinatown had dwindled to about 200 or so individuals, many of whom were the aging first generation who had come to Pittsburgh more than 40 years earlier (Wu, 1983, 30). Because there were very few women in this tiny community, only a few second-generation Chinese were born in Pittsburgh. Many would eventually leave to seek better opportunities elsewhere outside of Pittsburgh. It appeared as though Pittsburgh's Chinese community and the Chinatown in which they lived would soon become extinct. However, a ray of light peered through the dark clouds

of the future when FDR, in 1943, partially repealed the Chinese Exclusion Acts to allow new immigration from China to commence once more (Wu 1983, 2). By the end of the War and into the early 1950s, there were hundreds of new Chinese immigrants moving into Pittsburgh. Then when the Acts had fully been repealed, thousands of Chinese immigrants were making their way to Pittsburgh. This new group of Chinese immigrants, however, was very different from the original group that had arrived in Pittsburgh more than a half-century earlier. First, unlike the Chinese sojourners who had arrived in Pittsburgh by the early 20th Century who were laborers and service workers, the new Chinese immigrants were students who had come to Pittsburgh to study at one of the many universities to earn a degree or perhaps a PhD in a professional field. Once having attained their degree, they would return home to China (Wu, 1983, 139-141). Like their predecessors before them, though, many of these students found that they could be much more prosperous in the United States than they could be in China and many decided to stay in Pittsburgh and become citizens of the United States of America. The second major difference between the old group and the new group of Chinese immigrants was that unlike the older generation, which had originated from the same province/county in China and shared a familial connection of some sort, the new group of Chinese immigrants came from all over mainland China, i.e., Taiwan, Macau/Hong Kong, and other areas with large Chinese populations and very few shared any common familial connection at all. A third difference is that the old stock of Chinese immigrants in Pittsburgh had been born into peasant families or some other low-level strata in China, whereas the new group of professional students mostly came from very wealthy or high-ranking families in China and most of them probably looked down upon the earlier

immigrants as beneath them instead of empathizing with the hardship that they had endured over the past century. A fourth difference is that the earlier generation which had come from southern China in the Canton region spoke Cantonese Chinese while many of the new Chinese immigrants having come from wealthy/high-rank families spoke the official dialect of China which was Mandarin Chinese creating another gap between the disparate groups (Wu, 1983, 144-145). Summarily, while the Chinese community in Pittsburgh had been saved by the lifting of the Chinese Exclusion Acts allowing new immigrants to come to the United States, the unity and solidarity and indeed the culture of the local Chinese community was lost and further eroded by the arrival of these new students from backgrounds very different from the old-timers.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, the downward trend of businesses being closed and families moving away continued to negatively affect Chinatown. Adding to this, in 1961, Chinatown's "mayor" Willie Yot had died after serving 45 years as Chinatown's advocate and protector (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 1960). Not long after the secretary of On Leong Tong, a man named Yeun Yee was chosen to replace Yot as head of the Tong and, by extension, as the "mayor" of Chinatown. In this capacity, Yeun Yee excelled and far surpassed his predecessor in his tenure as "mayor" (Faust, 1961). Even though Chinatown was in decline, Yee still was able to bring back some of the vitality that had been lost, and he worked hard to promote the culture of the Chinese people and by extension to introduce the non-Chinese citizens of Pittsburgh to all of the traditions and celebrations of China. He worked hard to make this happen and made himself and the Chinese community more visible in Pittsburgh by encouraging more non-Chinese to attend traditional celebrations such as the Lunar New Year, which would often feature

lavish displays and performances such as the Lion Dance and folk operas and all sorts of wonderful pageantry that would excite and delight everyone in attendance. The food for these special occasions was delicious as all of the Chinese restaurants in Pittsburgh would donate their time and resources to provide their most scrumptious and elaborate offerings. Yuen Yee was a man who genuinely loved everyone and everything about Pittsburgh and just wanted to help people get along and treat each other with respect and kindness (Place, 1981).

By the 1970s and 1980s, the old Chinatown of Pittsburgh was virtually gone. Almost all of the businesses and residents had moved away by this time, and only one building still remained. It also happened to be the only restaurant in the area, the Chinatown Inn. Along with the Chinatown Inn, in the same building, was the headquarters of the On Leon Tong which had very few members left, some of which were actually living in the building as they had nowhere else to go. They would tend to the offices and the altar (Paris, 1985). By this time, the Chinese population in Pittsburgh had become almost completely integrated into mainstream American life. Many of the Chinese in the area were wealthy, professional workers who owned homes in the suburbs with people of similar social standing and had no need to live near other Chinese people let alone have a cultural center in which to congregate. For all intents and purposes, Chinatown was dead. However, that is not to say that it is necessarily gone for good because there are many people in the area who have good memories of the days when Chinatown existed. When put into perspective, this is part of the cycle of integrating into mainstream American society. At first, immigrants will cluster together into communities to try to preserve as much of their original culture as possible. Then by the time that their

children and grandchildren have grown up and lived here in the U. S., they gradually begin to adapt to the larger society and do not feel the need to hold on as strongly to the old traditions. Subsequently, the old, insular community disappears. This has happened to every group who has come to America, and the Chinese community is no exception. Thankfully, there are many individuals and groups that do realize the importance of traditions and the significance of their history and are determined to preserve that for future generations. This legacy contributes to American society by allowing others to garner a glimpse of the past and carry forward traditions and history in shaping America. The individual customs and traditions of these various cultures collectively create the diverse society as a whole that makes America the great county that it is today.

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715.211723.cp;viewid=211723CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;c=accd;c=aerial;c=allegob;c=chatham;c=cma;c=cmaharris;c=consol;c=cp;c=darlfamily;c=drisbach;c=fairbanks;c=fcox;c=fwag;c=gn;c=gret;c=gt;c=hjhz;c=iks;c=jal;c=jben;c=ka;c=kauf;c=lysh;c=mest;c=pghprints;c=pghrail;c=pointpark;c=pps;c=rr;c=rust;c=shourek;c=smoke;c=spencer;c=stotz;c=switch;c=trim;c=uapitt;c=ue;c=unionarcade;c=urban;c=wm pennhotel;cc=cp;corig=accd;corig=aerial;corig=allegob;corig=chatham;corig=cma;corig=cmaharris;corig=consol;corig=cp;corig=darlfamily;corig=drisbach;corig=fairbanks;corig=fcox;corig=fwag;corig=gn;corig=gret;corig=gt;corig=hjhz;corig=iks;corig=jal;corig=jben;corig=ka;corig=kauf;corig=lysh;corig=mest;corig=pghprints;corig=pghrail;corig=pointpark;corig=pps;corig=rr;corig=rust;corig=shourek;corig=smoke;corig=spencer;corig=stotz;corig=switch;corig=trim;corig=uapitt;corig=ue;corig=unionarcade;corig=urban;corig=wmpennhotel;lasttype=boolean;lastview=thumbnail;np=next (accessed on April 10, 2009).

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Department of Public Works, Division of Photography, September 15, 1921. From

Historic Pittsburgh Image Collections, *Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection 1901-*

2000. <http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full->

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[image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-)

[715.091514.cp;viewid=091514CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-715.091514.cp;viewid=091514CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;)

[c=accd;c=aerial;c=allegob;c=chatham;c=cma;c=cmaharris;c=consol;c=cp;c=darlfamily;c](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-715.091514.cp;viewid=091514CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;)

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[=smoke;c=spencer;c=stotz;c=switch;c=trim;c=uapitt;c=ue;c=unionarcade;c=urban;c=wm](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-715.091514.cp;viewid=091514CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;)

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[g=fcox;corig=fwag;corig=gn;corig=gret;corig=gt;corig=hjhz;corig=iks;corig=jal;corig=j](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-715.091514.cp;viewid=091514CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;)

[ben;corig=ka;corig=kauf;corig=lysh;corig=mest;corig=pghprints;corig=pghrail;corig=poi](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-715.091514.cp;viewid=091514CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;)

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[image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-)

[715.211727.cp;viewid=211727CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;](http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?evl=full-image;view=entry;subview=detail;entryid=x-715.211727.cp;viewid=211727CP.TIF;g=imls;sid=69b83cf81ee96eab322fce8489185e0f;)

[c=accd;c=aerial;c=allegob;c=chatham;c=cma;c=cmaharris;c=consol;c=cp;c=darlfamily;c=drisbach;c=fairbanks;c=fcox;c=fwag;c=gn;c=gret;c=gt;c=hjhz;c=iks;c=jal;c=jben;c=ka;c=kauf;c=lysh;c=mest;c=pghprints;c=pghrail;c=pointpark;c=pps;c=rr;c=rust;c=shourek;c=smoke;c=spencer;c=stotz;c=switch;c=trim;c=uapitt;c=ue;c=unionarcade;c=urban;c=wm pennhotel;cc=cp;corig=accd;corig=aerial;corig=allegob;corig=chatham;corig=cma;corig=cmaharris;corig=consol;corig=cp;corig=darlfamily;corig=drisbach;corig=fairbanks;corig=fcox;corig=fwag;corig=gn;corig=gret;corig=gt;corig=hjhz;corig=iks;corig=jal;corig=jben;corig=ka;corig=kauf;corig=lysh;corig=mest;corig=pghprints;corig=pghrail;corig=pointpark;corig=pps;corig=rr;corig=rust;corig=shourek;corig=smoke;corig=spencer;corig=stotz;corig=switch;corig=trim;corig=uapitt;corig=ue;corig=unionarcade;corig=urban;corig=wpennhotel;lasttype=boolean;lastview=thumbnail;np=next](#) (accessed on April 10, 2009).

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