

The Yee Clan in Santa Barbara Chinatown: A Family Legacy in Gold Mountain

By Raymond Douglas Chong

Raymond Douglas Chong is a fifth generation Chinese American, born in Los Angeles Chinatown. Raymond has researched his father's family in "Gim Suey Chong: His Life from Hoyping to Gum Saan" (GSJ 2009) and now presents us with his mother's legacy. Raymond has worked for several municipalities in California and Texas as City Traffic Engineer.

Introduction

On the Gold Coast of California on edge of the azure Pacific Ocean, between the Santa Ynez Mountains and Channel Islands, a small enclave of Chinese dwelled in a Chinatown in the heart of downtown Santa Barbara, the "American Riviera." From about 1863 to 2006, the Chinese worked in laundries, restaurants and hotels. They lived in an insular community near El Presidio de Santa Bárbara. The Yee (Yu) Clan from Hoyping (Kaiping County) of Guangdong province was the most prominent family in Santa Barbara.

During the 1840–50s, many peasants arrived to seek their fortune amid the rich gold fields beyond Sacramento from Toisan (Taishan), Hoyping (Kaiping), Yanping (Enping), and Sunwui (Xinhui).

By 1855, in wood junks and sampans, the Chinese were fishing the abundant marine life on the coast between Oregon and the Baja peninsula of Mexico. Chinese were plying the sea near Channel Islands near Santa Barbara for abalone that was prized for its meat and shell. The Chinese built the roads and railroads including the Santa Ynez Turnpike

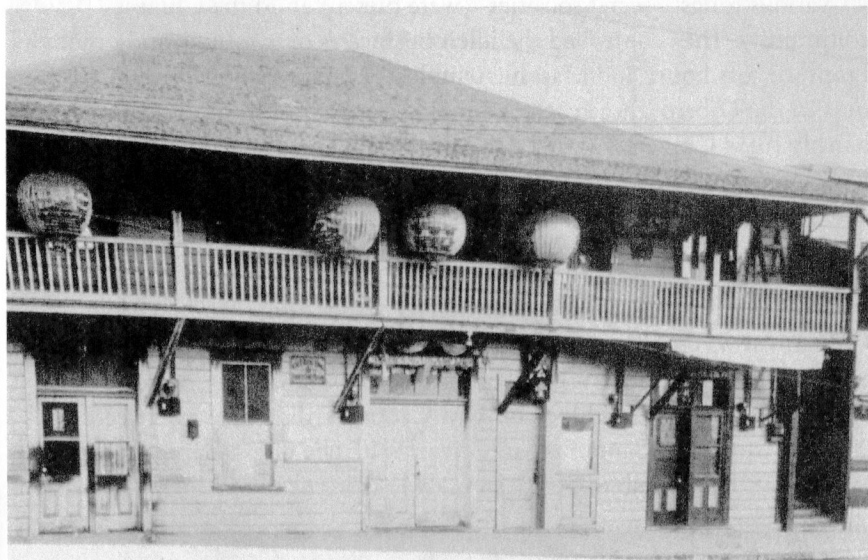


Old Chinatown.

Road in San Marcos Pass and the Southern Pacific Railroad between Saugus junction and Goleta in 1887. The single men also labored in the vegetable farms, toiled in hand laundries, and tended the gardens. In resort hotels and private homes, they served as houseboys and cooks. Merchants provided the basic needs of this labor force. Around 1865, Ah Lim opened a cookhouse (restaurant) on State Street to feed the hungry workers. Many Yee clansmen settled in Santa Barbara on the Gold Coast of California.

Santa Barbara's Chinatown

The first Chinese residents arrived in Santa Barbara in about 1863. As they became settled, they operated stores, restaurants, and laundries. Early Santa Barbara Chinatown was formed on the three blocks of East Cañon Perdido Street, around State Street—the City's main street—and Anacapa Street. Wooden 2-story buildings housed storefront businesses with apartments and gambling halls on the upper floor. At its peak, about 500 Chinese lived and worked in Chinatown.



Old Chinatown Santa Barbara.

Gambling halls and opium dens flourished as a form of recreation to escape the tedium of a cruel bachelor society.¹³ In 1894, Chinatown consisted of grocery stores, rooming houses, a temple, a tong hall, barber shops, labor contracting office, opium dens, gambling halls, and an opera house. Sing Sung Company, Sing Hop Company, and Sun Lung Company were in the abalone industry. The joss house had a gold leaf and hand carved shrine from China.

“The Chinese celebration in dedication of their new altar went off with a Fourth-of-July bang yesterday. During the noon hour they exploded \$50 worth of fire crackers in front of the joss house, while within the devout Mongolians bowed themselves to the floor, until their heads cracked. Candles and incense were burning, and their offerings included all descriptions of roast meat and fowl, and all the while the aged priest in his flowing robes was in respectful attendance. The altar is a gift to the joss house from the boys of the Sin Lung Company (sic), whose headquarters are in the store next to the opera house; the boys are nearly all engaged in abalone fishing. The altar, including freight and duty, cost \$1,000” (*Santa Barbara Morning Press*, October 4, 1898).

Various tongs—secret societies—were present amid the Chinese community. They controlled the illicit businesses of gambling and opium. From the joss house and Masonic temple at 27 East Cañon Perdido Street, next to the Lobero Theatre, the Hop Sing Tong and Bing Kong Tong harshly ruled Chinatown. In 1925, two Bing Kong Tong assassins killed Han Gin, the leader of Hop Sing Tong, in a brief tong war. The sensational assassination led to the demise of the tongs as Santa Barbara Police Department outlawed them.

On June 29, 1925, a strong earthquake struck Santa Barbara. Old Chinatown was mostly destroyed and demolished. From the ashes, realtor and entrepreneur Elmer Whittaker built a new Chinatown in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, a block on East Cañon Perdido Street between Anacapa Street and Santa Barbara Street. With the Great Depression and World War II, the hub of businesses slowly faded as the Chinese population dwindled.

13 These types of business enterprises were also patronized by many customers from outside Chinatowns.

Gip Wah Yee, Wah Hing Chung Laundry

The ancestor of the Yee family was the Reverend Chung-Sheung Yee, a prominent personage of the Northern Sung Dynasty. Jung Nim Yee was born about 1841 in Ung Yung Lee Village of Hoyping District in the fertile Pearl River Delta. In 1862 on a sailing ship from Hong Kong to the Port of San Francisco, he arrived in Gum Saan. Jung Nim Yee was a tailor on 715 1/2 DuPont Street in San Francisco Chinatown at Hing Gee Company. He married Soo Hoo Shee in 1874. They lived in an apartment on 723 Sacramento Street. Gip Wah Yee, a son, was born in 1877. After the deaths of his father in 1881 and his mother in 1890, Uncle Jung Gim Yee, a laundryman, took Gip Wah Yee to Santa Barbara in 1890. Later, Gip Wah Yee was a cook in Stockton, California, and in Williams, Arizona.

Gip Wah Yee returned to Santa Barbara in 1901 to work as a French cook at the famous Arlington Hotel. He bought Wah Hing Chung Laundry (established in 1897) at 21 West Carillo Street in 1907. In 1925, he moved the laundry to a wood building on 113 West De la Guerra Street.



Gip Wah Yee and family in China.

In Ung Yung Lee Village, Gip Wah Yee built a gray brick home. He first married Wong Shee in China in 1904. He later married a second wife, Quong Shee, in China in 1921. In 1922, he brought to America his second wife and his sons from his first wife, Thick Cheong Yee (Dan Yee) and Yak Kan Yee (James Yee Chung). They arrived at the Port of Seattle on the S.S. Silver State from Hong Kong. Chester, Helen, Mabel, and Ada Yee were subsequently born in Santa Barbara at the old Cottage Hospital. They all lived in the family compound within the laundry.

Gip Wah Yee died in 1930 at the Chinese Hospital in San Francisco Chinatown. He had seven children from his two marriages living in China and in America. He is buried in the ancestral hill near Ung Yung Lee Village.

After her husband's death, Yee Quong Shee faced difficult times as a single mother. She and her four children lived on 814 Orange Street in a modest wood bungalow. The children all attended Lincoln Elementary School, Santa Barbara Junior High School, and Santa Barbara High School. They were enrolled in the Chinese language school in Chinatown. On Sundays, they attended the Chinese Mission at First Presbyterian Church with other Yee relatives. Yee Quong Shee helped at the Wah Hing Chung Laundry. After the laundry closed in 1942, she along with other Chinese American women packed lemons in Santa Barbara.

The advent of World War II brought opportunities to the Chinese Americans. Chester worked at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, California. Later, he was drafted and served in the U.S. Army Air Force as an officer. He was stationed in Alaska as a navigator on a B-29 Superfortress bomber. Helen worked at the Marine Corps Air Station in Goleta for four years. She was a secretary, a supply clerk, and finally, a payroll clerk. In Santa Barbara, Mabel was learning artwork. Ada worked for an optometrist in downtown.

The Yee kids married and moved out from Santa Barbara. All three sisters married at First Presbyterian Church of Santa Barbara on East Anapamu Street, across from the library in downtown. In 1946, Mabel married Jimmie Young of Erie, Pennsylvania. In 1947, Ada married Harding Lee of Fresno, California. In 1953, Helen married Bill Tom of Baltimore, Maryland. Chester married Mary Young of Erie, Pennsylvania, sister of



Chinese at First Presbyterian Church.

Jimmie Young, in San Francisco in 1952. Chester completed his business education at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Chester worked for the state's Division of Workers Compensation. He later practiced with a private law firm. Helen was an office manager for the Los Angeles Unified School District. Mabel worked for Teledyne. Ada was a homemaker. Their mother, Yee Quong Shee, died in Los Angeles in 1977. She is buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Hollywood Hills. There are 18 grandchildren of Gip Wah Yee and Yee Quong Shee.

Sun Yoke Tong, Sun Tong Laundry

From Ung Yung Village, Sun Yoke Tong arrived in 1921 to the Port of Seattle on the S.S. Keystone, a steamer, from Hong Kong. He was the "paper son" of Woo Ying Tong of Los Angeles. He eventually arrived in Santa Barbara Chinatown to be with Gip Wah Yee, his uncle.

During the early years, Sun Yoke Tong lived and worked at the Wah Hing Chung Laundry. With his meager savings, Sun Yoke Tong established Sun Tong Laundry in downtown in 1938. Woo Ying Tong, his "paper father," founded the Cantonese Chinese Noodle Factory in Little Tokyo of Los Angeles. The business later became the Peking Noodle Company.

The Yee clansmen worked long hours during the week. They faced racial discrimination with little opportunities for upward mobility. They were separated from their wives and children in China, especially during the Civil War in China and World War II. It was an insular society of bachelors in Chinatown. The men socialized together and closely bonded during their free times; they were usually found in the evenings and Sunday afternoons at Sun Tong Laundry on 30 Cota Street. Tip Gin was Sun Yoke Tong's best friend and a sharp dresser. They ate communal meals, shared stories, played games, and gambled. They wrote letters to their loved ones in China. Many left Santa Barbara for better jobs in San Francisco.



Sun Yoke Tong.

In 1928, Sun Yoke Tong married Quan Shee. They eventually raised six children: Seen Hoy and Donald in China, and Rose, Lily, Wallace, and Jeanne in Santa Barbara. In early 1948, Sun Yoke brought his pregnant wife, Quan Tuey Hai Tong, to America on the S.S. Gordon. They arrived at the Port of San Francisco on February 17, 1948. The next day, she gave birth to twin girls, Rose and Lily. Wallace and Jeanne were born at the old Cottage Hospital.

The Tong family first lived together in the "warehouse loft" of Sun Tong Laundry. It had kitchen, baths, and bedrooms. In the back of the laundry, Quan Tuey Hai Tong had a chicken coop for eggs. Wallace fed the chickens. Sun Yoke Tong brought their first home on 429 West De La Guerra Street in 1952. In 1957, they moved to a Spanish Mission bungalow on 220 West Cota Street.

Rose, Lily, Wallace, and Jeanne attended Lincoln Elementary School, Santa Barbara Junior High School, and Santa Barbara High School. They were busy growing up with school, sport activities, and helping at the laundry. During the summers, they frequently swam at the Santa Barbara Beach along Cabrillo Boulevard. Wallace played baseball with Bing, Eddie, and Dorothy Yee in the back lots of downtown. They went to Sunday School at the Chinese Mission under Miss Graham at the First Presbyterian

Church. Rose and Lily latter attended Santa Barbara City College. Wallace graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara in Goleta.

The older daughter, Seen Hoy Tong, arrived in 1952 at the Port of San Francisco on the S.S. Wilson from Hong Kong. She briefly attended Santa Barbara Junior High School. In 1955, she married Gim Suey Chong of Los Angeles and gave birth to two sons, Raymond and Michael. Our Chong family frequently visited Santa Barbara which included lavish meals and excursions to the beaches, parks, and Mission Santa Barbara.



Bachelor Society at Sun Tong Laundry.

Sun Yoke Tong's laundry was his first step to his American Dream. The first laundry was located at 30 West Cota Street on the westside of State Street in downtown. Sun Tong Laundry moved to 26 East Ortega Street on the eastside of State Street in 1946. With their frugal savings, Sun Yoke Tong and Quan Tuey Hai Tong brought several properties in Santa Barbara. They built a small real estate empire. In the summer of 1967, they retired to live their golden years in Mount Washington of Los Angeles. Sun Yoke Tong died in 1988 and is buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale with Quan Tuey Hai Tong, who died in 1996. They had eight grandchildren.

The first laundry site at 30 West Cota Street has been vacant for many years. The 26 East Ortega Street laundry was demolished by the City of Santa Barbara for a parking garage. The Santa Barbara Antique Market Place stands at the site.

James Yee Chung and Tommy Yee Chung, Oriental Gardens Restaurant

James Yee Chung (Yak Kan Yee) was born in Ung Yung Village in 1910 as the son of Gip Wah Yee and Wong Shee. In 1922, he arrived at the Port of Seattle on S.S. Silver State from Hong Kong. He was raised at Wah Hing Chung Laundry. He attended Santa Barbara Junior High School and Santa Barbara High School. In 1928, he returned to China to marry Nuey Szeto. Together, they raised three children. Bill was born in China; Tommy and Barbara were born at the old Saint Francis Hospital. Nuey Yee Chung and Bill arrived in 1937. After the death of his father, Gip Wah Yee, James Yee Chung operated Wah Hing Chung Laundry.

James Yee Chung sought better business opportunity and opened the Friendly Cafe on 718 State Street in 1936. In 1940, he opened Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant at 330 West Cabrillo Street along the West Beach. In 1942, he moved this restaurant to 320 West Cabrillo Street and then in 1947, to 126 East Cañon Perdido Street in Santa Barbara's Chinatown. At the back of the restaurant was the family compound. This landmark restaurant was well-known for the finest Cantonese cuisine, gigantic egg rolls, and powerful Mai Tai's from the bar.

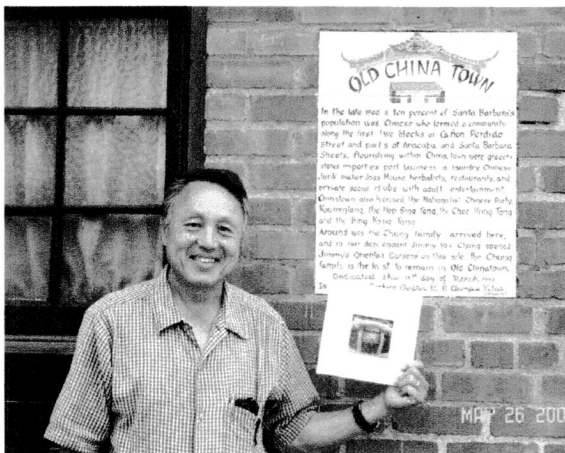
Nuey Yee Chung (Ma-Ma Chung) raised Bill, Tommy, and Barbara. They were enrolled at Lincoln Elementary School, Santa Barbara Junior High School, and Santa Barbara High School. Tommy played varsity football and attended the University of San Francisco. The children helped out in the kitchen and in the dining room during their free times. On Sundays, they attended the Chinese Mission at First Presbyterian Church.

James Yee Chung died in 1970 and Nuey Yee Chung followed in 1999. They are at rest at the Santa Barbara Cemetery that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. They had five grandchildren.

Tommy Yee Chung, James' second son, started to work for his father in 1967 and assumed management of the restaurant in 1970 until its final day. Julie, his wife, operated the kitchen. Esther and Pearl served the patrons. Sal provided support. And Willie, the bartender, mixed the high-octane

drinks in the bar. Tommy operated Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant as a venerable comfort station and watering hole for the eclectic community until Saturday evening, July 26, 2006.

During his retirement, Tommy enjoyed travels with Julie, his wife. He treasured Andy, his handsome son, and Eng, his pretty daughter-in-law. Tommy adored Nicholas, his grandson. On Monday, July 29, 2013, Tommy passed away after a valiant battle against cancer.



Tommy Yee Chung.

Reflection

The last vestige of Santa Barbara Chinatown is preserved at the old Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant. In front, a stony tile plaque acknowledges the transitory presence of the Chinese community in Santa Barbara. The Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation is preserving and interpreting the primal remnants of Chinatown.

In particular, the Yee Clan of Ung Yung Village in Hoyping played a major part in the world of the Chinese in Santa Barbara. Gip Wah Chung, Sun Yoke Tong, James Yee Chung, Tommy Yee Chung, and their descendants added to the vibrant tapestry of the Chinese community. The Wah Hing Chung Laundry, Sun Tong Laundry, and Jimmy's Oriental Gardens Restaurant briefly dotted the panorama of Santa Barbara. The Yee Clan left a family legacy in Santa Barbara Chinatown.

Editor's Note: Ella Yee Quan's article, "Santa Barbara Chinatown, The Early Years," is in CHSSC's Bridging the Centuries.