

Chinatown

A walk with my great-grandfather through the last foreign country in New York City

BY BRUCE EDWARD HALL

Mott Street is like the spine of a dragon. Its head lies on Canal, at the pagoda-roofed headquarters of a secretive tong society; its back curves down beyond Bayard, past restaurants and trinket salesmen; its forked tail whips through Chatham Square and loops back around the Bowery to reach toward Mott again as two tiny lanes called Pell and Doyers. In fact, the dragon has grown far beyond these boundaries in the last twenty-five years, but this remains its core, the nerve center through which throbs all the essential life of New York City's Chinatown.

Chinatown's narrow thoroughfares are still full of the smells of the Middle Kingdom, its festivals explode with ancient traditions, and its air rings with the sounds of a language that is sung, not spoken. It is a place where an obsession with tradition can be mixed with a curious disregard for the past. Chinatown is where everyone seems to be selling something, where firecrackers are used to frighten evil spirits, where the arrangement of furniture in one's apartment can affect the outcome of a business deal. Chinatown is hustle. It is ritual. It is magic. And for several generations it was my family's home.

The Chinese patriarch of my American clan arrived on the shores of California in the early 1870s, just as the anti-Chinese xenophobia there was picking up steam. Starting in 1847, when a grand total of three Chinese sailed for San Francisco, residents of the rural area south of Canton known as Toi-shan began looking to the United States—the “Gold Mountain”—as a way out of poverty and famine. Apparently those original three sojourners did quite well; after only four years, twenty-seven thousand of their Toi-shan neighbors were working the California goldfields, toiling in cigar factories, operating truck farms, and opening laundries to wash the clothes of grubby white men who disdained to perform such a task themselves. Then, in the mid-1860s Chinese labor was imported for work on the new transcontinental railroad, further increasing their numbers on the West Coast. The California economy was booming, fueled largely by Chinese sweat.

Despite the fact that the Chinese were being brought in specifically to do work that whites wouldn't, the white population reacted with increasing hostility toward the seeming horde. Vigilante groups conducted wholesale massacres in Chinese mining camps, and entire Chinese communities were expelled from Seattle and Tacoma.

Chinese were denied American citizenship on the technicality that the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed it only to whites and blacks. The state of California went on to do everything it could

to harass its Chinese residents. As conditions became steadily worse, stories began circulating about a more tolerant city at the eastern end of the railroad the Chinese had just finished building. Little by little Chinese began considering New York.

Fast forward a hundred years. I am a gawky suburban teenager in bell-bottoms, walking down the spine of the dragon with my parents on the way to a semiannual banquet with our Chinese relatives at the Port Arthur restaurant, one of the fading eating palaces of lower Mott Street. I am only half-Chinese, reared in Connecticut, so these trips to Chinatown seem like a journey back in time to the other side of the world. We trudge down the crooked streets, pause in front of a certain old store whose interior is garnished with magnificent carvings that family legend says my great-grandfather created, and then cross the street to climb the brass-railed staircase to the wonderful old restaurant and tuck into a twelve-course banquet in a room dripping with dragons and teakwood and mother-of-pearl.

These things seemed eternal then. Alas, they were not. Almost imperceptibly the old places departed one by one, their rich decorations tossed into Dumpsters like so much kindling, until only the ancient store containing my great-grandfather's handiwork was left, hanging on by a thread. Later, as an adult living in Manhattan, I could see that Chinatown was still Chinatown, but its visible history seemed to be fast running down some drain that I couldn't plug. I determined to look for its past wherever I could find it and thereby stem the flow.

My search started not in the crowded streets of old Chinatown, however, but in a branch of the National Archives on Varick Street, just below Greenwich Village. Prof. Betty Lee Sung, a Chinese-American scholar, had a few years previously discovered a New Jersey warehouse full of unsorted Chinese immigration files going back over a hundred years, bursting with colorful imperial Chinese passports festooned with stamps and gold seals, meticulous transcripts of immigration interrogations, personal letters, government evaluations, and, most important, photographs. In theory those files contained the photographs of every Chinese person who had entered the United States through the port of New York between the 1890s and the 1960s, and it was all moldering away. Professor Sung quickly obtained a grant and marshaled a little army of Chinatown volunteers to catalogue the tens of thousands of papers, so that researchers like me could access them and learn.

But even after a couple of years of painstaking computer cataloguing, finding records wasn't easy. An individual Chinese person had many names to choose from—a family name, a generational name, a given name, a three-part marriage name, and an adopted American name—and any one of them might have been used by immigration authorities, who sometimes transliterated in very creative ways.

My great-grandfather Hor Lup Chut, Hor Pooh, Ho Pook, or Hor Poa—take your pick—was especially hard to find. No one in my family was even sure of his name before I started my quest; I finally got it off the ancestral tablets in the Ancestors' Hall in the little Toi-shan village from

which he had come some 125 years before. I knew almost nothing about him beyond some exceedingly vague family legends about how he had once been the “mayor” of Chinatown and a leader in the tong wars.

My grandfather and his siblings were easy to locate in the National Archives computer, however, and it directed me to a stack of fragile onionskin carbon copies of interviews he had had with government officials—for a 1930s job application as a government interpreter, for example, and for the trip when his parents dragged him off to China as a fourteen-year-old in 1911, to meet the bride they had chosen for him. The Chinese Exclusion Acts, first passed in 1882, made immigration to the United States impossible for Chinese unless they fitted into the very strictly defined categories of merchant, diplomat, teacher, or student. Laborers—which meant virtually every profession from ditchdigger to surgeon—were to be excluded at all costs. Women could get in only if they convinced the authorities that they were legitimate merchants’ wives, which was so hard to do that most didn’t even try. So, despite the fact that Grandfather was born in New York and was an American citizen, he still had to prove it to skeptical immigration authorities if he ever expected them to let him return to the United States once he left.

But where was my great-grandfather? I started calling for the dossiers of anyone bearing the family name Hor who came from our home village, and finally I found gold.

His picture was pinned to the immigration application of a young kinsman. He looked solid, respectable, and handsome with his short haircut and vested business suit—just like my uncle, like my father, like me. The thrill was indescribable. And the documents that went with it! Great-Grandfather had apparently been as prominent in Chinatown as the family legend said he was. As a respected elder and successful merchant, he would vouch for the character of a clansmen coming to or going from New York. Over and over he was made to tell about his own personal history, his original trip to San Francisco in 1873 (or, as he remembered it, the twelfth year of the emperor T’ung-chih) and his subsequent move to New York in 1881. There were the details of his family (he had had three wives, one in New York, two back home), the specific dates of his numerous return trips to China, and the ships on which he sailed. As a way to entrap possible illegal immigrants claiming to come from his village, he had to describe its details; if their descriptions didn’t match exactly, it meant instant deportation. On the other hand, sometimes my great-grandfather’s employees were brought in to be grilled on the exact nature of his business, for if he had been caught working with his hands, he would have lost his “merchant” status and been given a one-way steerage ticket to Hong Kong.

“Isn’t it true that you were working as a carpenter?” the inspectors trumpeted on one occasion. “You were seen sawing wood for the shelves and the counters! Do you deny it?” Yes, he denied it, most vigorously, but I knew he had been lying. And from that exchange I also knew that he really did build the wooden interior of that marvelous old store that is the sole survivor from the days when every shop and restaurant in Chinatown was draped with carvings of lucky bats, and fish, and grillwork to confound the evil spirits lurking in the street. I doubt the immigration

inspectors believed him either, but they let him stay.

My next stop after the National Archives began my real exploration of Chinatown. I went to the tiny Museum of Chinese in the Americas located in a couple of rooms of the former Public School 23, at 70 Mulberry Street. Built in 1897, this building was then scarcely more than a block from the heart of Chinatown yet was considered firmly in Little Italy. The very few Chinese children who attended classes there (according to one 1898 estimate, there were only thirty-six Chinese wives and thirty-two Chinese children among a Chinatown population of some six thousand) did so in constant fear of being beaten up the second they left Mott Street.

The museum's octagonal exhibition room is full of displays depicting the Chinese experience: a group of laundrymen's irons, each weighing a gruesome eight pounds; a trunk spilling over with costumes from a traveling Cantonese opera troupe; another trunk full of a World War II veteran's memories. In the archive room I sat at a wooden table hemmed in on all sides by books and papers stacked to the ceiling and battered old file cabinets and, with the help of the collections manager, Sushan Chin, started to put pieces in the Chinatown puzzle into place. I found more references to my great-grandparents in books and articles written a hundred years ago—a history that begged to be traced on foot.

I walk out the door of the old P.S. 23 and make a left down Bayard Street (the corner of Bayard and Mulberry was once the beginning of Mulberry Bend, the most notorious stretch of that most infamous of festering slums, Five Points) past the same street vendors who are always there: the fortuneteller, the cobbler, and the peddler of jade trinkets. Each sits on his or her tiny wooden stool. Pausing at the last open window of the old school, I listen, as always, to the lovely music rippling out onto the street. Inside, traditional Chinese musicians are playing centuries-old tunes on their graceful instruments for the benefit of the senior citizens' center operating in the former school cafeteria, one room over. Their music is piped in as background to razor-sharp gossip shouted over mahjong and steaming glasses of tea. For some reason the musicians insist upon remaining invisible to their public. No one has ever been able to tell me why.

At the corner of Mott Street, looking to the left, I can just make out the pagoda-roofed headquarters of the On Leong Tong at the corner of Mott and Canal Streets. Canal on the north and Chatham Square on the south were the absolute limits of Chinatown during my grandfather's lifetime, but after immigration restrictions were lifted in the 1960s, the place absolutely exploded, swallowing up other ethnic neighborhoods on all sides.

But today I am concerned with old Chinatown, the Chinatown that my family knew, so I turn right, past more street vendors. Looking up, I sometimes glimpse caged songbirds hanging outside a dingy apartment window. Collecting rare and often very costly songbirds is a favorite hobby among Chinatown's older men, and very early in the morning they can be seen taking their birds, still in their cages, for walks in the park, to keep up their little avian spirits and make their songs sweeter.

My destination is 34 Mott Street, just past the intersection of Pell. Here is the site of the building where Chinatown, as we know it, began. In 1873, the same year my great-grandfather arrived in California, an enterprising merchant named Wah Kee rented a townhouse here and converted it into a kind of Chinese cultural center. On the parlor level he installed his store, which had previously been a few blocks away. It was the hub of a thriving import-export business that would eventually deal in everything from dried lotus root to silks to firearms.

On the lower, kitchen level was one of New York's first Chinese benevolent societies, complete with a temple and meeting room. Upstairs, above Wah Kee's store, the society maintained a dormitory for its members and a place for rolling cigars; the tobacco industry was then the chief employer of New York's Chinese. The dormitory, like the early Chinese boardinghouses on Cherry Street, was just a room lined with three-tiered bunk beds, with a kettle always on the boil for tea. Most Chinese in New York lived this way, and many still do, with all their worldly possessions in a canvas sack, their life savings carefully hidden in a jar somewhere.

Clan- or regionally based benevolent associations were the glue that held the American Chinese together, especially in an era when Chinese society in New York consisted entirely of lonely men anxious to make enough money so that they could return as big shots to their families back home. Members paid nominal annual fees that went toward maintaining the Taoist shrine and supporting anyone in need. The organizations also provided one other very important service: If a member of a benevolent society should die on the Gold Mountain, a proper funeral would be held and the body shipped back to China. For as every good Chinese son knew, if you weren't buried in your home soil, your spirit would wander the earth forever.

Wah Kee had a runaway success with his store, and before long he was known as one of the richest Chinese in the eastern United States. Almost overnight other Chinese businesses sprang up on Mott Street in the little block between Pell and Chatham Square: a couple of basement boardinghouses, a grocer, a tailor, and, in a real landmark development, New York's first bona fide Chinese restaurant. It was a no-nonsense affair, with tall stools clustered around small tables to serve the neighborhood's solitary Chinese bachelors, who tossed their bones over their shoulders. Before long adventurous white men began sniffing out the wonders of stir-fry, and an American obsession was born.

Another landmark development in the neighborhood would also change the face of New York for decades to come: the first Chinese laundry, just across Chatham Square at the corner of Catherine Street and East Broadway. A giant steam laundry in Belleville, New Jersey, had imported some seventy Chinese laborers from San Francisco, and the brother of one of them decided to strike out on his own in Manhattan. That was in 1870. By 1885 there were more than a thousand Chinese laundries in New York.

Walking next door to 32 Mott Street, I can really see into the past. As Chinatown grew and Chinese businesses filled Mott between Pell and Chatham Square, they swallowed up tiny Park

(now Mosco) Street and took over Pell and little, crooked Doyers. Uptown tourists began to discover the neighborhood as well, and the local businesses reflected that in the luster of their decoration. Chinatown's buildings were bedecked with balconies covered with elaborate iron and woodwork and painted in dazzling reds, golds, and greens, the colors of prosperity and good luck. The signs hanging in a jumble from the stores were a rich ochre; festive tasseled lanterns shone a brilliant red; long, colorful silk banners proclaimed a new year in the emperor's reign or celebrations like the Autumn Moon Festival.

Splendiferous restaurants like the Chinese Delmonico's and the Oriental and the Port Arthur, upstairs at 7-9 Mott, dazzled white customers with their mother-of-pearl-inlaid ebony furniture, gilded dragons, and giant painted-glass lanterns. And then there was the food—succulent ducks, seemingly roasted whole yet actually just shells of skin stuffed with shredded meat and fried rice; lobsters dripping in black-bean sauce; roasted crabs; steamed sea bass; bird's-nest soup; dumplings filled with shrimp, or pork, or beef—all of it lost on the average tourist who wanted one thing and one thing only. “There are times when the gnawing hunger for chop suey, and for nothing else, draws him to dingy Chinatown,” someone wrote in 1898. Of course, the fact that chop suey was invented by a West Coast cook combining kitchen scraps to appease drunken miners who had pushed their way into his restaurant after hours (the phrase may mean “leftovers”) did not bother hungry sightseers. It was chop suey they wanted and chop suey they got.

But I have digressed. Number 32 Mott is the Quong Yuen Shing & Company general store. It has been here since 1899 and was in business across the street before that. Quong Yuen Shing sold herbs, fancy groceries, laundry and restaurant supplies, and, at the right-hand counter, beautiful silk brocade to be made into magnificent clothes for men and women to wear at New Year's, or weddings, or the celebration of the birth of somebody's first son. Quong Yuen Shing is the place my elders always pointed out to me as an example of my great-grandfather's handiwork, and the walls are still lined with the wooden shelves he cut, dark with stain and age. There are his venerable counters and the old wooden ceiling fan whirling above. The ticking schoolhouse clock occupies the same place it did when the store was new, as do rows of portraits of delicate Chinese ladies, painted when there was still an emperor on the Peacock Throne. Against the back wall is a counter that once served as a dispensary for myriad medicinal herbs stored in distinctive square drawers. And over that counter is what should be the pride and joy of Chinatown—an arch, fantastically carved with flowering trees, and peacocks, and lucky bats, its surfaces still tinted with red and gold, the colors of wealth. These were once common in stores and restaurants, but Quong Yuen Shing's is the only carved arch to have survived whole in a public place in Chinatown, as younger generations have felt that Formica and glass put people in a better mood to buy. Far from being merely decorative, these arches were strategically placed to ward off evil spirits; the tangle of carvings would confuse them in their inexorably straight path toward mischief within. My elders told me my great-grandfather actually carved this arch, and we would always troop in and ooh-and-ah and take pictures—until I discovered the Chinese

signature and address of the actual carver in the lower corners of the piece. So Great-Grandfather had merely installed the fancy woodwork the store's owner imported from Hong Kong. Nevertheless, you can still feel his presence.

But the most interesting thing about Quong Yuen Shing is what the public can't see, for in the back room my great-grandfather constructed a maze of storerooms and cubbyhole offices, some of which still have massive Victorian safes that were used to store hardworking launderers' money until it could be shipped to their wives and parents back home. On top of the cubbyhole offices, Great-Grandfather built sleeping lofts, some single, some double; Quong Yuen Shing, just like many other stores of its kind, functioned as a refuge for the clan of the owner, in this case the Lee family. Homeless Lees could sleep in back and receive mail at the store. Today the safes are empty, and the bunks aren't used for sleeping anymore, but there is still a little wire rack for mail by the front door, and there still are Lees who think of Quone Yuen Shine as a home away from home.

Stepping out onto the street again, I look across to 21 Mott, where a midwife delivered my grandfather in 1897, and 19-A Mott, now an exquisite antiques store but once a small import-export business to which my great-grandmother's family came around 1890 and where Great-Grandfather paid twelve hundred dollars to make her his number three wife in 1896. Twelve hundred dollars would be a fortune in Toi-shan, and her father hightailed it back to China for good as soon as he received his money.

If only 18 Mott could talk. It was the home of Tom Lee and what would become his infamous On Leong Tong. In what was probably the first Chinese purchase of real estate in New York City, Mr. Lee bought the building in 1883, having first rented it for several years, and it became his headquarters. A diminutive man, he had had, since his appearance in the 1870s, one hand in every gambling room and opium den in Chinatown and the other lining the pockets of the local constabulary, to make sure they didn't cause trouble. White people viewed these activities as proof of Chinese natural depravity, but Tom Lee simply considered himself a provider of some of life's necessities. After all, opium was just a way to relax, and as for gambling ...

Gambling is the Chinese national pastime. As one Chinese commentator wrote in 1888, "The Chinaman will gamble with his last cent ... he will bet with his toes if all other conveniences are taken away." Back then it was over fan-tan or pai gao; now it's more likely to be poker and blackjack, with mahjong the eternal constant. Just about every door and storefront in old Chinatown has concealed a gambling room at one time or another, and some still do. Tom Lee also had a share in Chinatown's notorious brothels, like the one that was upstairs at 11 Mott in 1901. In fact, the "working girls" of Chinatown were overwhelmingly white. Chinatown was wedged between Five Points and the rollicking Bowery, after all, with most of the women coming from the former and the clientele from the latter. Still, at Number 11, if one paid an extra dollar to the madam, she would bring in a Chinese woman who would take off her clothes just so the white customers could see what she looked like. As for actual Chinese prostitutes, with only

thirty to forty Chinese women in Chinatown, they were too valuable to waste in such common degradation, although Tom Lee would broker likely young girls—like my great-grandmother—as wives for his loyal followers.

Opium was another source of income for Tom Lee, although since it was perfectly legal in the United States until 1914, income flowed primarily from the considerable markup he imposed as an importer. Unfortunately, there were a lot of Chinese opium addicts, largely because the British had so aggressively marketed their India-grown product in China. After two opium wars the Celestial Empire was at the mercy of drug dealers disguised as English gentlemen. In New York, however, contrary to popular belief, opium was primarily the drug of white people, both men and women, who wanted to walk on the wild side—twenty-five thousand of them by one 1896 estimate. Chinatown's "smoke houses," dark, mysterious holes secreted in basements or back-yard buildings, were populated not only by tired and lonely Chinese laundrymen but also by white prostitutes and showgirls from the Bowery along with their swaggering beaus and uptown tourists looking for adventure. The big shots favored the expensive Li Yuen, opium pills that cost a dollar a hit. More humble users would spend a quarter for less potent pen yen. Thus opium came to have a lasting effect on the language, as people started speaking of having a "yen" for something.

So from about 1881 onward, 18 Mott Street was the central clearing-house for Tom Lee's Chinatown vice operations. It also housed a temple for use by his tong and dormitories for his loyal foot soldiers, where I discovered, much to my surprise, my own great-grandfather went to live when he first arrived in New York. Apparently he was involved in a little bit more than carpentry.

In 1888 Tom Lee tore down the old wooden townhouse at 18 Mott, and Great-Grandfather helped do the finish work on the elaborate new building that took its place. At the same time, the Chinese Charitable (later Consolidated) Benevolent Association, or CCBA, was building its own shiny new headquarters next door at 16 Mott. The CCBA was and remains the unofficial government of the Chinese community in New York, having applied for recognition in 1884 not with the government of New York State but with the Imperial Court in Peking. (It finally got around to registering with New York in 1890.) The CCBA mediates disputes, registers new businesses, and regulates (or at least tries to) every aspect of the lives of the Chinese of New York. It also in the past collected (or at least tried to) annual dues from every single New York Chinese for the privilege of being governed so well. The CCBA might squirm a little under Tom Lee's "friendly" influence, but 16 Mott would be the chief guiding force of Chinatown for years.

I continue down Mott and into Chatham Square, the space wide open and sunny now but once entombed by the iron cage of the elevated railway, which had a terminus here for some seventy years. Turning left, I pass nondescript stores and nondescript street vendors—and end up face-to-face with one of Chinatown's most lurid and enduring legends.

Every old book, every tourist's tale about Chinatown, seems to center on the tong wars, those epic midnight battles between hatchet-wielding Chinese warriors who whaled away at one another in the tiny lanes only to disappear when the police arrived, vanishing through trap doors and hidden panels into some secret network of tunnels snaking away under Chinatown. I knew this was nonsense. I knew these were sensationalist stories made up to sell papers at the turn of the century—until one day I was poking around in Chatham Square and went through the ordinary-looking door next to Off-Track Betting and found a tunnel. It does, in fact, snake around under Chinatown, with other branches sealed off with gates and locked doors. It's not very sinister, though. The Chinatown tunnel is now lined with little shops: an herbalist; a travel agent; an adviser on feng shui, the ancient art of arranging the physical elements of one's life to influence the spirits in one's favor. But it is a tunnel, and it made me realize that those old stories might not be as fanciful as I thought.

This particular tunnel once led into the basement of the old Chinese Opera House at 5 Doyers Street. Chinese opera is incomprehensible to most Western ears, but for a turn-of-the-century Chinese, it was a trip back home, with splendid costumes and classic tales going back hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Tom Lee's On Leong Tong, which affected a certain gentlemanly hauteur, favored the opera, and its members, my great-grandfather included, could be found thronging the plain basement theater on most Sunday nights. Such was the case on August 6, 1905, when suddenly, midway through the six-hour performance, the men in the front and rear rows—all members of the archrival Hip Sing Tong—stood up, turned to face the On Leongers, and opened fire with their .44s. Needless to say, there was pandemonium. The On Leong men drew their weapons and fired back as actors and musicians dived for cover. Outside on Doyers Street there was a near riot as police from all over the Lower East Side converged on the tiny theater and clubbed their way through the people and smoke down the stairs—to find nothing but four dead or dying tong soldiers. All the rest had vanished, dragging their wounded down the tunnel in which I am now walking. I can almost hear their screams as I climb the stairs at the end and find myself on Doyers Street.

I love Doyers Street. It is so narrow that a single car can barely squeeze through. It is so crooked that those straight-flying evil spirits won't get far. Doyers Street is now known primarily as a home to barbershops and, at 13-15, the Nom Wah Tea Parlor, an ancient dim sum dumpling restaurant that my father used to eat in as a little boy. But early in this century it was a battleground. The tong wars, which raged intermittently from the late 1890s to the 1930s, nearly tore Chinatown apart. Doyers was supposedly the scene of some of the grimmest action—the white press dubbed one of its narrow twists and turns “the Bloody Angle”—but Pell Street really saw more gunfire.

If one follows Doyers to the left, it dead-ends at Pell, another nerve center of old Chinatown. To the right, at Number 16, is the current headquarters of the Hip Sing Tong, although during the wars it was situated across the street at 13.

The tongs were an American outgrowth of the ancient Triad society of China, which for some two hundred years had been trying to oust the Ch'ing (or Manchu) Dynasty and restore the Ming. In America they were purely self-serving, extorting "protection" money from merchants and raking in profits from vice rackets. The Hip Sing and the On Leong were at each other's throats as soon as the first Hip Sing operatives arrived in New York and tried to horn in on some of Tom Lee's operations in the 1880s. At first each tried to intimidate the other through the police organizations they held in their pockets. The Hip Sing convinced Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt that it wanted only to "aid the Chinese to learn American ways, and to advance them in religion and mutual helpfulness"; the On Leong paid the officers of the local precinct a share of the sixteen dollars a week it received from each of the dozens of gambling tables it controlled.

Each tong, therefore, could expect regular harassment from the other's police stooges for a dozen years or so. That is, until one dark Saturday night in 1897, when the up-and-coming head of the Hip Sing, one Mr. Mock Duck, was attacked by a hatchet—and knife-wielding mob in the doorway at 12 Pell. Mr. Mock survived that assault—in the ensuing forty years he would survive all sorts of stabbings, beatings, and shootings, thanks to the chain mail he always wore under his shirt—but plenty of Hip Sing and On Leong bullets would find their targets. There were periodic truces and treaties—my great-grandfather was one of three senior officers of the On Leong who signed the 1906 pact—but before long the shooting would erupt again. It wasn't until the 1930s that the Depression and a new, common enemy, the Japanese, caused the tongs to patch up their differences. The warring parties agreed to split up Chinatown, while the police sealed off the tunnels. Thus, when you are walking on Doyers or Pell Street, you are in Hip Sing territory. But Mott Street is really the prize, and it is firmly under On Leong control.

I walk down Pell toward Mott. Straight ahead of me at 33-37 Mott is an apartment house still called Sun Lau, or "New Building," despite the fact that it went up in 1914. It was the first modern apartment house in Chinatown, with real bathrooms and central heat. And it was the birthplace of my father, in 1923. He was the youngest in a family of five brothers and sisters, his parents, his grandmother, and his aunt—nine people in three rooms. Like most of their neighbors, they all slept on wooden planks set up on sawhorses at night. During the day the ladies and older children strung beads that the man from the garment factory brought them once a week. The pay: \$1.50 a gross.

Great-grandfather had died in that apartment of tuberculosis in 1919; the disease was five times as common in overcrowded Chinatown as in the rest of the city. His store, a more modest version of Quong Yuen Shing, had been next door at 39 Mott. Upstairs in that building was the office of the Chinese inspector, a humorless man who slow-roasted New York's Chinese when they tried to leave the country or wanted to bring a relative over. The Chinese Exclusion Acts were so effective that Chinatown's population was in a steady decline after 1900. The law would not be repealed until 1943, when, with China as our ally in World War II, our government could not keep up the sham any longer. So Chinese immigration was once again allowed—at the

staggering rate of 105 persons a year. And after 1943 Chinese were finally eligible to become naturalized American citizens, a standard immigrant right never extended to my great-grandfather despite his forty-six years' residence here. There has never been another nationality singled out for exclusion during peacetime by this government in all its history, not even the Japanese.

Turning left, I see the venerable old Church of the Transfiguration, built in 1801 and one of the most historic buildings in Chinatown, at the corner of Mott and the neighborhood's tiniest street, Mosco. Transfiguration now holds mass in Chinese every day, but for decades after Chinese had started moving to this corner of Five Points, the Irish and Italian congregation barricaded themselves against the Asian invasion. "On Sunday the place swarms with Chinamen from all parts of the city and from out of town, who make of the neighborhood a perfect hell!" wrote a priest in 1883. It wasn't until after World War I that their defenses began to crack.

Turning the corner onto Mosco Street, I step down the hill, just beyond the church wall, to a tiny little shop at Number 104, and remember my grandfather. My grandfather the bookie. Everyone called him "Hock Shop." His Chinese name was Pun, pronounced "pawn," hence pawnshop and then ... well, it suited. Today I can go up to just about anyone over a certain age who has lived in Chinatown for a long time and say, "You might have known my grandfather. He was called Hock Shop," and the person will laugh and say, "Ooh, Hock Shop! I lost a lot of money in his store!" He was Chinatown's favorite bookmaker from the 1930s to the 1970s and could always be found at his shop or his favorite restaurant, figuring the odds over pots of "tea that burns" (scotch). He cut quite a figure in his sharp suits and fedoras, roaring down Mott Street in his 1938 LaSalle convertible, which he could barely wrestle around the corner to park in front of his store.

Grandfather inherited a certain position with the On Leong Tong from his father, which was all he got from him, since my great-grandfather left all his money to the son of his number one wife back in China. He tried a number of legitimate careers, such as government interpreter (rejected because of his suspected long connections) and life insurance salesman (rejected by the Chinese man in the street, who would recoil, saying, "You just want to make money off my death!"). But gambling was my grandfather's first love.

He did end up as a legitimate businessman in a way, as the front of 104 Park Street was the most minuscule flower shop that you could imagine, which always confused me as a child, since all my WASPy mother would say about Grandfather's profession was that he "made book," which made me expect to see fine leather bindings instead of gaudy floral displays. The flowers were sold to the local funeral parlors, but in the back room sat my great-uncle Fong with a stack of money and a telephone, busily taking bets on horseraces across the country. My grandfather was always meticulous about doling out handsome presents of cash at Christmastime to his best customers, which meant his biggest losers. "Never gamble!" he would tell my father. "You never

win!” Maybe that’s why Father became a chemical engineer.

When Hock Shop died, in 1973, his funeral was handled by one of the funeral homes around the corner on Mulberry Street to which he had sold flowers for so many years. It seemed as though all Chinatown turned out—old tong soldiers, poker buddies, little old ladies who liked to bet on the ponies—to bow three times before his coffin, light a stick of incense, and suck on a piece of candy provided to “wash away the bitterness.” Our family demurred at having the traditional brass band and professional mourners accompany the funeral procession, but it was grand enough anyway, with some thirty cars snaking their way around all the spots in Chinatown that had been important to the departed man’s life. His birthplace, his school, the place where his children were born on the kitchen table: At each location the procession would halt and the chief mourners climb out of their limousines to bow three times before the open hearse as the funeral director clapped her hands to alert my grandfather’s drowsy spirit that he should look around one more time. It was exactly one century after my great-grandfather had arrived on the Gold Mountain, looking for his share. “Old” Chinatown had seemed to come and go during those hundred years.

Of course, Chinatown is still Chinatown, but, like anywhere else, it is changing. The new immigrants swelling its ranks—its population is now estimated at 250,000, compared with 30,000 in 1960—are mostly from Fujian Province, just up the coast from Cantonese Toishan, but they have their own dialect and customs. East Broadway, on the other side of Chatham Square, is now called Little Fuzhou, and it is the Fujianese power brokers who are courted by New York’s politicians while the Toi-shan old guard from the CCBA goes largely ignored. The tongs still battle, only now they use teenage gangs with names like the Flying Dragons and Ghost Shadows as their proxy warriors. Banquets still happen, only now they are in garish restaurants so huge that the hostesses use walkie-talkies to seat you. Even the New Year’s celebration has been watered down, for while the lion dancers still prance through the streets collecting money and good luck, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani has banned firecrackers for the last two years, leaving the normally raucous holiday bloodless and lame. He just doesn’t realize that lion dancers alone won’t frighten away all those evil spirits hovering in the air.

Chinatown is yielding to modern realities, which I suppose is inevitable. But when I go there now, all I can do is try to remember the sound of fireworks, the smell of gunpowder, the brilliant dazzle of the buildings, which now look just a little too much as if they could be anywhere. Still, I suppose there is some other gawky teenager in bellbottoms (they’re back in style, remember?) being dragged in from the suburbs. His family pauses at some personal landmark, shops in some favorite shop, and then goes on to a twelve-course banquet in a shiny new restaurant complete with a gold plastic dragon with electric light-up eyes, which seems pretty splendid to someone who doesn’t know anything else. So to him, I suppose, this Chinatown is as eternal as any that I ever knew. I just hope he knows where to find a window to the past, so he can see some of the splendor that once was.

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