

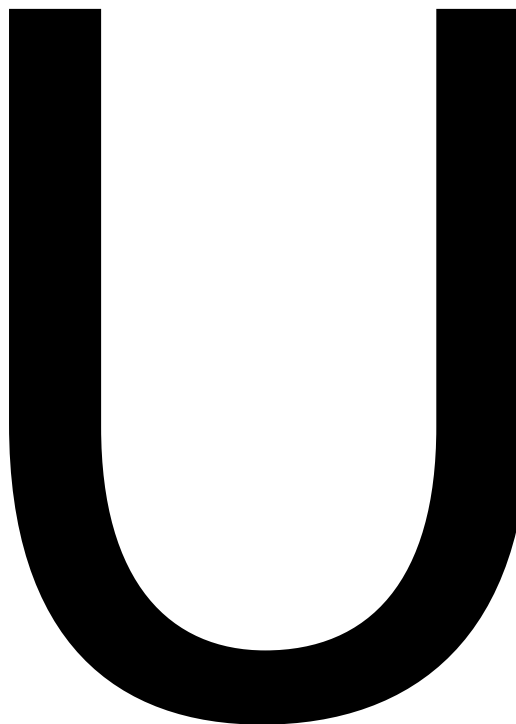
HOMEBASE

PART I OF IV

“IT’S EASY TO
BE CHINESE IN
SAN FRANCISCO”

THE TIES—CULTURAL, SOCIAL,
PERSONAL, ECONOMIC—THAT
BIND A CITY AND A PEOPLE.

by **Bonnie Tsui**



UP NEAR THE geographically confused intersection of Russia Avenue and Dublin Street, you can see the view—Daly City and its surrounds, slopes dotted with colorful houses—that inspired Malvina Reynolds to write “Little Boxes” in 1962. The song was hailed as a wry critique of suburban tract housing and American middle-class conformity. But, of course, it’s all a matter of perspective. When you come from humble immigrant origins, achieving a little box of your own is a mighty thing.

Here in the Excelsior, 31-year-old Rosa Wong-Chie hasn’t quite given up on owning a home in San Francisco. As a child, she lived with her parents and younger sister in a cramped, 64-square-foot SRO apartment on Chinatown’s Grant Avenue. Because her family had arrived in 1991 in a later wave of Chinese immigrants, moving up and out of Chinatown meant relocating not to the more desirable Sunset or Richmond districts but to the relative wilds of Visitacion Valley, which abuts the Excelsior. Today, Wong-

Chie hopes for something quieter for her two-year-old daughter, Roxi. “My husband likes to look at Redfin: ‘Look at this three-bedroom, it’s so fancy!’” she says. “But for me, I don’t want to look at houses we can’t afford.” Much better to focus on the attainable: a little box on a hillside.

The trouble for Wong-Chie and her husband, Ted Truong, and for thousands of first- and second-generation Asian Americans like them, is that even the most modest of domiciles are increasingly out of reach. Reynolds’s “ticky tacky” homes now sell for \$700,000 apiece from the Excelsior to Daly City, and the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the city has surpassed \$3,000 a month. In spite of this, the flow of immigrants into the city remains robust. According to a 2012 report by the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration at the University of Southern California, 22 percent of the roughly 283,000 immigrants living in San Francisco between 2008 and 2010 had arrived in the previous decade, and 28 percent hailed from one nation: China. The Migration Policy Institute reports that the greater San Francisco metropolitan area (which includes Oakland and Fremont) now has the nation’s highest concentration of immigrants born in China: 5.2 percent of the area population.

While the city’s real estate market has been on a tech-boom tear for the last several years, it is being further fueled by a wave of rich urban Chinese buyers—families and speculators from Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Shenzhen—who are parachuting into the city every weekend in search of investment properties and homes for their school-bound kids. Chinese-born buyers comprise about half of all foreign buyers across the Bay Area—and account for a sizable chunk of the \$22 billion spent by Chinese nationals on homes across the United States from March 2013 to March 2014. As David Lee, a lecturer in political science at San Francisco State, wrote in the journal *Boom*, the irony of this surge is that working- and middle-class Chinese-American renters are bearing the brunt of it, forced to shutter their longtime businesses in characteristically Chinese neighborhoods like the Richmond and flee in search of more affordable living elsewhere. “What we are just learning is how economics trumps race or ethnicity,” Lee writes. “The capital city of Asian America is becoming too expensive for many Asians.”

Right now, Wong-Chie and Truong live in a tidy, bougainvillea-covered stucco building owned by his parents and contribute to the mortgage every month. It’s the house that Truong, who is Vietnamese-American, grew up in; his aunt and uncle still live downstairs. As was their parents’ hope, the couple aren’t tied down by language (both are bilingual) or geography (both have good jobs in downtown San Francisco). They could easily afford a home in a cheaper

precinct of the Bay Area. But something tethers them to this city, and it’s more than just family. Wong-Chie puts it simply: “It’s easy to be Chinese in San Francisco.” What makes the city special in her eyes is the same thing that’s drawn her people here for more than a century and a half: the chance to seize opportunity without sacrificing identity.

TWELVE YEARS AGO, when I first moved to San Francisco from New York, what struck me most about the Chinese Americans I met was how *American* they were. Many families here are longtime Californians. While a Chinese granny on the subway in New York was likely to ask me for directions in Cantonese, a Chinese granny on the N-Judah in San Francisco is just as likely to speak less of the language than I do.

A few years ago, I wrote a book about the development and culture of America’s Chinatowns. By nature, Chinatowns serve as central cultural hubs, and as way stations for dispensing support and services to newly arrived immigrants. But each Chinatown is different, and I was curious about how Chinese enclaves in other cities were shaped by the specifics of the environment in which they arose. New York’s 20th-century Chinatown was dominated by the garment and restaurant trades; Honolulu’s was uniquely multicultural from very early on. What makes San Francisco different from other cities with large Chinese-American populations is that

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its Chinatown isn’t the only, or even the most important, locus for Chinese language, food, and traditions. In fact, many Chinese Americans in San Francisco will argue that Chinatown is an artifact—some even call it a museum—that no longer represents their community’s cultural center of gravity. This state of affairs might be described as assimilation in the best sense of the word—not that Chineseness has been erased, but that Chineseness is everywhere.

There are other American cities that are arguably more Chinese—like Monterey Park in Southern California, which in 1990 became the first

city with an Asian majority in the continental United States. But that city essentially sprang fully formed from the head of a developer named Frederic Hsieh, who wanted to build a “Chinese Beverly Hills.” By contrast, San Francisco has the weight of history and the honor, dubious or not, of having taken the long, slow road to becoming the Chinese capital of the United States. The Chinese came with the first word of the 1848 gold rush, chipping away at Gold Mountain along with dozens of other foreign tribes. The city, the railroad that served it, the farms that fed it—all of it was built by generations of Chinese labor. And while the Chinese faced despicable racism, segregation, and exploitation of all kinds, they stuck it out—to the point that their longevity has its own kind of currency now. There are no people more San Franciscan than the Chinese.

That exceptionalism has led to accusations, over the years, that the city’s Chinese are culturally insular. For Wong-Chie, however, the city’s appeal is something like the opposite: a feeling of commonality, of knowing that you are part of the norm. Sometimes, this can lead Chinese San Franciscans to take their multicultural heritage for granted. “One of my friends who grew up in Chinatown and North Beach just moved with her family to Portland, because it’s more affordable,” Wong-Chie tells me. “But she has culture shock—everyone there is white! She just didn’t realize it until she got there.”

“For me,” she continues, “if I walk out to Chinatown, or to Leland Avenue in Visitacion, I’m exposed to the language right away, and the food that I’m comfortable with. You see people who look like you. That’s a huge deal. We all want to fit in. In San Francisco, it’s easy to fit in.”

WHAT IS CULTURE? It is what we choose to eat three times a day, which language we speak to our grandparents and to our children, and, critically, what everyone else around us is doing—and for how long. For better or worse, San Franciscans have always placed a premium on who came first. The Chinese community is significant for a two-pronged robustness: Its people have been here forever, and their numbers grow by the hundreds—if not thousands—every year.

These two populations, of course, have been shaped by different circumstances. As John Wong puts it, “You can’t just lump all the Chinese into the same group.” Born in Shanghai, Wong grew up in 1960s Chinatown and has lived all over the Bay Area, observing the spread of the diaspora over the decades. “You’ve got the people who’ve been here for generations, and you’ve got recent arrivals,” he says. “They all have their own ways of fitting in. The Taiwanese will hang out together, the mainlanders will hang out together.” Recent waves of immigration have brought thousands of educated, professional Chinese who have not had to suffer the humili-



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ations and hardships of previous generations (at least not in this country). Taiwanese and mainland money has established malls and restaurants all over the Bay—in San Jose, Palo Alto, Cupertino, and beyond—all of which serve as hubs and gathering places.

For the newest working-class immigrants, though, the draw of San Francisco is much more basic: the availability, and density, of services. When Wong-Chie and her parents first arrived in San Francisco, by way of Colombia, the safety net of Chinatown caught them. The community offered help with jobs, with housing, with immigration status and other legal issues, with arrangements for schools, day care, language instruction, and so on. It understood them and treated them like family. Today, organizations like the Chinatown Community Development Center, Chinese for Affirmative Action, Cameron House, and NICOS Chinese Health Coalition continue to support monolingual immigrants.

The school forms that Wong-Chie brought home when she was younger were trilingual,

in Chinese, Spanish, and English; in that, her family benefited from the work of groups like Chinese for Affirmative Action, which for years has advocated for the adequate translation of written communications in city schools. It helped that she didn’t have to be a constant intermediary between her parents and the world—though she served in that capacity often enough, at least some of the time she got to play the role of the child she was. At the other end of the spectrum, San Francisco is also a place where second, third, and fourth generations can find their way back to the language and culture. These days, when Wong-Chie wants to read Chinese, she’ll practice by perusing the Chinese section of an official document—a somewhat absurd reversal of her childhood experiences as translator.

For 63-year-old Steven Owyang, whose family history in San Francisco goes back to the 1870s, part of his allegiance to this place is rooted in changes that have come in his own lifetime: from the practical exclusion of Asian Americans from city institutions to the election of a mayor, Ed Lee, who’s the son of working-class immigrants from southern China’s Guangdong Province. Owyang, who became a lawyer and an administrative law judge for the state of California, began his career in Chinatown, working for Chinese for Affirmative Action. He lives in the Diamond Heights home that his parents bought in 1965. Nowadays, he says, “it’s unremarkable to be Chinese in San Francisco—which is remarkable. There are other parts of the country where you definitely feel like a minority. Not that you’re necessarily being discriminated against, but you’re still different.”

Though Owyang grew up hearing the southern

Chinese dialects of Cantonese and Taishanese, he is not a native speaker (his parents, who were born and raised in the United States, were fully bilingual). "I decided that I wanted to speak the language passably," he says. "It was important to me—it's part of living what I consider to be a Chinese-American life." He took Mandarin and Cantonese classes at UC Berkeley as an undergrad; later, he found Mandarin tutors, took classes at City College, and hung out with Cantonese speakers.

These days, Chinese-language schools are having an outsize impact on mainstream culture as well, attracting non-Chinese parents who have global ambitions for their children (see "So You Want Your Kid to Speak Mandarin," on page TK). There are Mandarin immersion preschools, charter schools, and public schools, and endless iterations of Chinese classes and camps. There are cultural centers, like the Chinese Culture Foundation and the Chinese Historical Society of America. And there are popular programs like Friends of Roots, which connects Chinese Americans of all ages with their ancestral villages.

As part of Friends of Roots, Owyang chaperones small groups back to China for two weeks every summer. He also directs a spring lecture series that leads up to the organization's annual trip, covering Chinese geography and history with a focus on Guangdong Province, a region from which many Chinese Americans have historically migrated. "We talk about the Chinese-American community," he says, "Chinese politics, overseas Chinese involvement in China." His students tour Chinatown and visit Angel Island, where, at the height of anti-Chinese sentiment, between 1910 and 1940, Chinese immigrants were interrogated and held in barracks at the detention station, sometimes for years. At the end of every year's program, Owyang says, someone always gets the bug and ends up going back to China to study language, or becomes more deeply involved in community organizations in San Francisco. This connection to one's roots is more than learning about your personal history, he says. "It's about how we fit into the bigger picture."

THE CHALLENGE OF FINDING AN AFFORDABLE family home in San Francisco today is not a uniquely Chinese one. But for Wong-Chie, buying a home here is connected to lessons she gleaned in her youth: Being able to work and buy a house in San Francisco was a great mark of success for her parents—it's what allowed them to feel truly American. "It's important to us, too," Wong-Chie says. She and her husband are saving to purchase a three-bedroom house for up to \$800,000. Their plan is to cohabit with Truong's parents, but even then, the mortgage will be an uncomfortable stretch. As it is, the pie of their earnings each month is eaten up by their current mortgage contribution, insurance, utilities, food, transportation, and day care for Roxi; soon enough, preschool costs will figure in. "A jigsaw puzzle" is how Wong-Chie describes it.

The family's desire to stay in overpriced San Francisco is inseparable from Wong-Chie's love of, and ties to, her Chinese identity. With all of Roxi's grandparents nearby—Wong-Chie's mother still lives around the corner, in Visitacion Valley—the little girl hears a constant stream of Cantonese, Taishanese, and English, not to mention the Vietnamese spoken by her father's family. Next year, Roxi may attend a Spanish-speaking preschool in the neighborhood, with Mandarin Chinese immersion school to follow somewhere down the line. "I'm realistic—the world is going toward Mandarin; there's nothing we can change about that," Wong-Chie laughs. "But I'll try to make sure she knows her Cantonese, one way or another."

In the house that the family lives in now, the upstairs rooms overflow with the cartoon-themed stuff of childhood. In the den, the stately black leather massage chair that once occupied a place of honor in front of the television has been relegated to a corner, supplanted by a food-spattered high chair and an explosion of toys. Roxi climbs up nimbly and settles onto the couch for a viewing of *Kung Fu Panda*; seeking comfort, her left hand drifts up and takes hold of her mother's ear. Wong-Chie smiles and teasingly asks her, in Cantonese, if she's content. "Being exposed to language, and family," Wong-Chie says, as she takes her daughter's hand. "That's why I want to stay."