

The Great Wall of Chinatown

How the Chinese Mind Their Own Business Behind It

By WINIFRED RAUSHENBUSH

Sketches by Alexander Calder

NO easterner who has not seen them can have any adequate conception of what the great Chinatowns of the Pacific coast are like. Neither the small black rabbit warrens of Pell, Mott, and Doyle street in New York, nor the drab half-lighted blocks on Twenty-second street in Chicago, will have prepared him for the airiness, the pride and the repose of Vancouver's or San Francisco's Chinese quarter.

There are two blocks in Vancouver which are as gay as any streets on the North American continent. The best time to see them is not at night, when they are lined with lights like a regatta, but in the early morning before the Vancouver fog, touched with the smell of ocean salt and forest fires, has quite cleared away. Chinatown lies in what used to be a marsh down by the waterfront. Strolling away from Vancouver's shopping district, you find yourself on the crest of a hill with the street that plunges down before you leading straight into Chinatown. It is a very wide street, raspberry colored in the fog. From the crest of this hill it is almost possible to look down on top of Chinatown, and certainly you have the sensation that you could scoop it up and hold it in your hand, as though it were a toy put together of chips of alabaster, jade, and rose quartz. The streets are very wide, the alleys very narrow, the buildings are tinted, old men potter about the balconies with their gleaming laurel shrubs, and along the sidewalk edge Chinese merchants are engaged in setting out their goods long before the rest of Vancouver is awake.

San Francisco's streets differ from those of Vancouver principally in tempo. Vancouver's Chinatown is like Vancouver; no one hurries. Sometimes in the early afternoon the atmosphere gets so thick and sleepy that one could stir it with a spoon. In San Francisco's Chinatown, on the other hand, the sparkling prickling champagne air of the Golden Gate fills one's nostrils and the visitors from the Middle West, who begin pouring into Chinatown at nine o'clock in the morning, do not ebb away until ten or eleven o'clock at night when the Chinatown shops close. The Chinese types, especially the women, to be seen in San Francisco are also more varied than in Vancouver. In San Francisco the Chinese flapper and her sheik stroll down the hills of Chinatown in half-embrace, while old Chinese women in wigs, black trousers and high-heeled American shoes plod up the hill

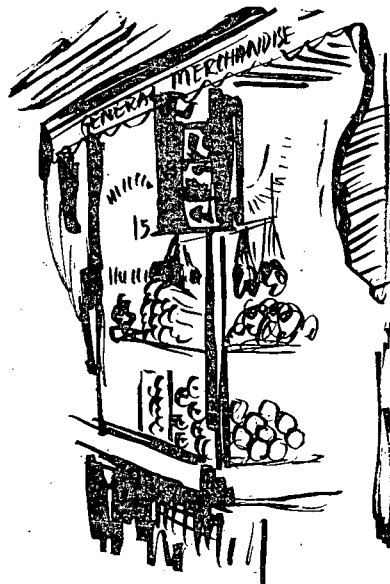
after a forage into the San Francisco department stores. In Vancouver, there are almost no women on the streets; occasionally a tall slender girl in trousers and pigtail, with a red fox fur around her shoulders and a man's cap pulled down Apache fashion over one eyebrow, tap-taps along the street with her escort.

These two Chinatowns are the capital cities for the Chinese in Canada and the United States. Nor is this merely a literary or sentimental description. The Chinese resident in both countries elect immigrant senators to represent them in China and officials of the Chinese Benevolent Association to act as their representatives and judges within the confines of Canada and the United States. Of this, more later.

The Chinatowns of the Pacific coast are as packed with clubs as a New England town, but these clubs belong to men rather than to women. If you were, quite literally, to rip the roofs off the two gay blocks of Vancouver's Chinatown which are its Main street, its Broadway, and its Fifth Avenue, you would find like rich frosting on a cake a multitudinous array of clubs—family clubs, county clubs, reading clubs, political clubs, decorated according to the wealth and taste of the members with red oil-cloth and priceless carvings, or with crystal candelabra, delicate Chinese embroideries and portraits of the ancestors. An examination of top-floor Chinatown would reveal not only that the Chinese have a political life, but that the Chinatown Chinese of the coast come of pioneer stock, that they are by tradition fundamentalists, and that they have family

trees which go back a little farther into the dim mythical spaces of time than do any other family trees except those of the Irish.

Chinatown's clubs are a shadowy counterpart of Chinatown's three quite separate generations. The older generation of Chinese, who still predominate in Chinatown, live in a very remote world where all the paradoxes are made taut; a world which is at once very stable and very frail, a world which is packed with pleasant sensations and worn smooth with loneliness. Less remote from the westerner is the generation which is Chinese-born but which has been affected by the Chinese revolution and the Chinese Youth Movement. These young men are aggressive and wildly discontented; they seethe with ideas, and are passionately devoted to the new China which is coming into being. The native-born, who



Three passions of the Chinatown bachelor: gambling, gossip and food

have Chinese Native Sons' Parlors up and down the coast; know little about either the old China or the new; England, and especially Victorian England, seems closer to them than the aphorisms of Confucius or the dreams of Sun Yat Sen. When a curious European visitor asked a Chinese boy on the coast whether he was American-born, the answer was quick and ardent. "Always," he replied, an exquisite Chinese smile lighting his face.

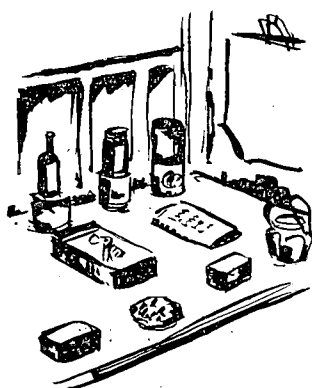
The organizations of the older generation are the family and county clubs. Most of the Chinese in our Chinatowns come from twelve families and from thirteen counties in Kwangtung province. The Lees, the Chens and the Wongs are among the prominent families, and San Wu county and Sun Ning county are both heavily represented. The importance of the family and county to the older generation is that the Chinese who belongs to pre-revolutionary China, as most of the older men do, never acts as an individual; he always lets an organization represent him.

The Chinese Benevolent Association, or as it is called in San Francisco the Chinese Six Companies, is a very venerable institution of the older generation which was established in the 'fifties, when six county clubs imported "Chinese gentlemen" to represent them in their dealings with the United States government. These "Chinese gentlemen" were formally recognized by the United States as the ambassadors of the American Chinese, and thus enjoyed a standing not conferred upon most immigrant institutions. Later the Chinese gentlemen came to be known in Chinatown as "rice-ladles," because they cost a lot and were of no use to anyone. The Chinese now elect their own officials, and do not bother to import Chinese scholars.

The Six Companies is a very important institution, because it combines within itself all the departments of Chinatown's government. It provides for any Chinese who has no family or county club to appeal to, and it formulates Chinatown's foreign policy in relation to the Americans. Most significant, however,



Chinatown cousins in the family store



The chop suey front

in its relation to the peace of Chinatown is its judicial capacity. When other arbitration fails, any organization in Chinatown can appeal to the Six Companies as though to the Supreme Court. In referring to the most difficult cases which the Six Companies has to handle—the disputes between different highbinder or fighting tongs—the Chinese say that the Six Companies is a League of Nations in miniature.

The third important organization of the older generation is the highbinder tong or fighting tong. These fighting tongs, which first appeared in the 'seventies, the decade of most violent anti-Chinese feeling on the coast, are not to be found in China, nor are they imitations of the American criminal gangs which they so much resemble; they are hybrids—out of the American city by



Red nights at San José: tong lieutenant orders \$1,500 banquet

the Chinese sense of face. Legislative restrictions passed against the Chinese by the Americans have given them their economic base, Chinese traditions have given them their membership, and the fact that Chinatown has no police force of its own has given them their almost unbreakable grip on the Chinese community.

This economic base derives from the fact that American restrictions have made bootlegging in familial relations, women, property and gambling so very profitable. Their membership they owe to three Chinese traditions, to Chinese pacificism, which allows itself to be harried by bullies, bandits and soldiers, to the fact that the oriental individual is no stronger than the group he belongs to, and to the Chinese conception of face or honor. The Chinese are a very disappointing people to the western idealist and a very delightful people to the western pagan. The idealist will find in them none of the philosophic aura of Hindu mysticism, none of the human and moving loyalty of the Japanese patriot. The Chinese are realists. Only about one thing are they a little mad, and that is the matter of having or not having face.

The American asks his opponent for a fight as a Frenchman asks his for a duel, by the use of one or two well-known words. The Chinese, being one of the older and more settled races, who have had a chance to study etiquette with some leisure, show much greater ingenuity in insulting each other. The mere size of an ideograph in a letter, its position a millimeter to the left or the right, is a delicate sneer. To the American the tong wars of the Pacific coast sound as otherworldly as jungle tales would sound if told by the author of *Guermites' Way*. What appears to be delicate burlesque turns at the funniest moment into tragedy, while the most romantic and desperate passions froth themselves out in farce.

A lover whose courtesan-sweetheart was insulted saved his face and precipitated a tong war by shooting three men. The Six Companies, in its role as the League of Nations, tried to settle the case, but was not successful. A tong war, which would further enhance the fame and boldness of the lover, was to begin at eight o'clock of a Tuesday night. At seven-forty-five, however, another tong war broke out, a much more important tong war, and the poor lover and his affairs were quite forgotten.

In another tong war, the treasurer of a fighting tong

gave the tong soldiers \$1,500 to kill an enemy. The tong soldiers reported to the tong president, who said that there were to be no killings. What then, the tong soldiers demanded, were they to do with the money that they had received? They could not very well give it back. The tong president shrugged his shoulders and suggested that they have a banquet. They accepted the suggestion. But when, after a few jovial red nights in San José, they returned to San Francisco headquarters it was to discover that in the president's absence they had been expelled from the tong. For a tong soldier this means almost certain death, for his victim's relatives know he is no longer protected.

There have been tong wars on the Pacific coast for over fifty years, and some of the reporters and the police are beginning to get the drift of them. But it is fair to say that except in a few instances the American papers never get the real version of what lies behind a tong war. This is partly because there are usually several dozen half-mythical versions floating around Chinatown, each of which would have to be complemented by some other version, but it is due even more to the fact that the Chinese keep their own counsel, realizing that the Americans do not attach the same values to certain kinds of conduct that they do, and that therefore the Americans might laugh at them and their affairs. To be laughed at by an American in an affair of honor would be to lose face just when one was trying to gain face.

How little the Occidentals know what lies behind Chinese quarrels, and how reluctant the Chinese are to use the white courts, is suggested by an incident which occurred in a mining town in British Columbia. Two Chinese families, the Quongs and the Lees, went to two Canadian lawyers in the city of Victoria, the capital of the province. They said that a man named Quong had attacked and robbed a man named Lee as the latter was coming out of a gambling place. The Lee family therefore wished to bring suit against the robber. The case was duly entered on the calendar, but at the last moment both the Lee family and the Quong family notified their lawyers that they wished to withdraw the case. As this was contrary to procedure, the two lawyers demanded an explanation. The Chinese then made a frank statement. The robbery, they said, was merely a frame-up. What had really happened was that a man named Lee, a good-for-nothing half wit who had drifted into town from God knows where, had made a slighting remark about a Quong woman. The Quongs had therefore tried to involve the half-wit by claiming that he had assaulted and robbed a Quong. Now, however, both families were so disturbed for fear the woman's name should be mentioned in court that they wished to withdraw the case. They told the lawyers that if the Lees would consent to burn firecrackers before the Quong club's door, the Quongs would consider the incident closed.

In general, the Chinese have little respect for and little confidence in American or Canadian courts. The lack of understanding with which Chinese cases are handled when they are dragged into an American court has convinced the Chinese that our courts offer them little in the way of justice. A slave girl case is in point.

As there are still six Chinese men to every Chinese woman in the United States, the Chinese

prostitute is a very important person. Most of the Chinese prostitutes are owned and managed by the fighting tongs, and even when a prostitute has bought herself free, she usually joins a tong in order to enjoy its protection. These girls, who are usually brought over from China when they are quite young, on the pretext of marriage, are bought for a sum of money from their parents by the men who pretend to marry them, just as any Chinese bride is bought, it being the man and not the woman in China who provides the dowry. In this country, where there is a shortage of women, the value of the girl is naturally much enhanced; it usually rises to \$3,000 or even \$5,000. A girl may be transferred from one owner to another, and this happens sometimes when the girl's heart "goes elsewhere." She is allowed to keep part of her earnings and can buy herself free, if she can save enough to cover not only her market price, but her heavier expenses in the way of jewelry and settings. Such in brief is the slave-girl system of Chinatown.

This particular slave girl case was being tried in San Francisco in the summer of 1924. The lawyer who was hired by the Chinese owners of the girl succeeded in proving to the satisfaction of the jury that the girl had never been a prostitute. If found guilty, she would have been handed over, if she wished, to Miss Cameron, the quiet Quakeress who presides over a rescue mission for Chinese slave girls. Being found innocent, she was supposedly free. Freedom actually meant, however, that she would return to her trade and that in case she ever succeeded in buying herself free she would have to pay to her owners not only her price and her expenses but the fee of the lawyer who defended her as well.

None of the American jury, half of whom were women, knew anything about the Chinese slave girl system and the prosecuting attorney did not introduce any description of it into the case. When the trial was over, a number of women on the jury, headed by a fat motherly creature with frizzed blond hair, headed for the slender betrousered girl whom they had acquitted.

"Are you the interpreter?" said the motherly female to the young man who stood beside the girl.

"Yes," he replied.

"Well, tell her, from all of us that we want her to go home—and remember this—to be a good girl."

Another reason for the Chinese lack of confidence in our courts is because they are accustomed to bribe the police and to pay some of the very shady lawyers they employ money which they imagine to be for the judge and the jury. In Vancouver, it is rumored, when the police have collected the annual contribution of \$50,000 to the city treasury, they cease their raids on the Chinese gambling houses. It was perhaps not a wholly naive remark that a Vancouver official made when he said: "The Chinese are the best friends the police have got." The older generation of Chinese, at least, have made themselves solid with the Americans they actually come in contact with by using the same methods that they used with officials at home—by presents and by bribes.

Under the roofs of Chinatown, then, are the family and county clubs, the Six Companies, and the fighting tongs: all institutions of the older



Slave girl's supper

Chinese. In San Francisco, which is the oldest American Chinatown, these organizations all dovetail into each other. The county clubs elect the officials of the Six Companies, and the Six Companies, many of whose officials are men influential in the highbinder tongs, settle the quarrels of the highbinder tongs. They conduct the conciliation proceedings that must take place before wars begin, and the debt settlements that always follow them. Incidentally, they do succeed in checking many tong wars. Considering how small a world Chinatown is, it is a very complicated one. But it is also extremely provincial. The Chinese do not have "get together parties," each man knows only his own family, county or club associates. But though the cliques in Chinatown are sharply separated, they gossip about each other. In Chinatown everyone knows what everyone else has done from the time he was born; no man can escape his reputation as we can in our great cities by moving from place to place, and scandal percolates through Chinatown like the wine flavor through chowmein.

The family clubs, the county clubs, the Six Companies and the highbinder tongs are all national organizations with national headquarters. The only difference between these institutions of the two Chinese capitals is that while San Francisco is the headquarters for eight of the nine fighting tongs in the United States, Vancouver and Canada generally have no fighting tongs at all. The Chinese of Vancouver explain this by saying that it is due to the greater severity of English law. There are other reasons, however, which help to explain the difference, one of which is that San Francisco's Chinatown is seventy-five years old, while Vancouver's has been in existence for about thirty.

More important still is the fact that the Vancouver Chinese have been strongly influenced by the ideas of post-revolutionary China. All of the Chinese realize that they belong to a country that not only has been great in the past, but that has potential greatness. But the older Chinese were also aware that China cared nothing about her emigrants, and that even if she did, she was powerless to help them. The post-revolutionary generation on the coast believe that the Chinese dragon is now awake and they yearn for the day when it will reach out its paw and smite down the people who have insulted them. Moreover, China is no longer indifferent to her emigrants. Sun Yat Sen, who has been one of the great figures in China during the last generation, was like the American Chinese a native of Kwangtung province and travelled much among the Chinese on the coast, finding there some of the most faithful supporters of his cause. The greatest of the three political societies of Chinatown, the Nationalist Society, is based on Sun Yat Sen's ideas.

The Chinese of Canada are passing through the same cycle of experiences as the Chinese of the United States. The American Chinese came in the 'fifties, were bitterly attacked in the 'seventies and 'eighties and after a residence of fifty years in the United States began to find themselves tolerated and even liked. The Canadian Chinese are living through what the American Chinese lived through in the 'seventies. But where-as the Chinese of America retreated to their

ghettos or left for China, the Canadian Chinese, with a fatherland in revolution for a backdrop, do not take kindly to the ghetto where they are asked to keep themselves nor to the discriminatory laws which have been passed defining their status.

An American woman who has been married to a Chinese for twenty years was trying to collect money for one of the Vancouver hospitals from a group of Chinese women shortly after the law had been passed which made it obligatory for the Chinese to register with the provincial government.

"Give them money?" said one Chinese woman, "I'd rather give them a brick in the head!"

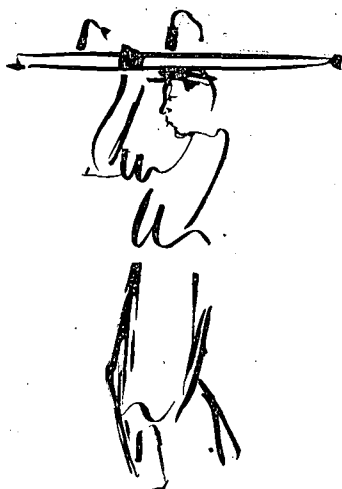
A young business man said: "Just let me tell you this: maybe you think we are going to be like those old servants who say 'Yes, sir, No, sir,' all polite and lovely; but we're not. We young Chinese have got pictures of Jack Dempsey on our walls and we're going to show you people."

For the most part the American Chinese, at least the older generation, have been curiously passive and indifferent about what the Americans thought about them. The more pugnacious Anglo Saxons and Irishmen of the coast have not understood this attitude; the fighting temper of the Japanese—even if irritating—seemed more comprehensible and also more admirable. In Canada, however, the Chinese are behaving much as the Japanese do in the United States; they are bitter and aggressive and they are even making some moves toward making these attitudes known. So far, it is true, they have not gotten as far as the Japanese either in understanding their hosts or in developing publicity methods. For the most part, Chinese anger is contained within the walls of Chinatown; the kettle simmers and roars, but it does not boil over. The fact that the Canadians in the surrounding city do not remotely know or care how they—the Chinese—feel makes their anger the more intense.

The Canadian Chinese found an opportunity to show their temper at the time of the Victoria school strike. Victoria, the capital of the province, has an old and very wealthy Chinatown. A few years ago an attempt was made to segregate the Chinese children in separate schools, because though most of them were Canadian-born, a few who were Chinese-born retarded the others. The oriental children in one of the public schools were asked to stand up. Then the Japanese children were told to sit down. One Chinese boy, sensing the insult, marched out of the room and the rest followed him. The Chinese community, led

by the Chinese Native Sons Association, which has a few very brilliant and active members, asked the school authorities to explain the incident. The Chinese school children then went on strike for a year. At the end of the year, the older boys were put in special classes, but the Canadian Chinese children went back to the public schools on their own terms, which were "no discrimination in regard to creed, class or color."

One reason that there are no fighting tongs and very few feuds and scandals in Vancouver and the other Chinatowns of British Columbia is because the Chinese are proud. Sentiment against them is at present strong; in fact British Columbia is the only



Tea served: 1 A. M.

place on the coast where the Chinese are disliked. Tong wars and feuds would be so much tinder in the hands of the Vancouver Anti-Asiatic Society and the Canadian politician, so these things are not allowed to occur. The Benevolent Association and the Native Sons Association combine to keep the peace within Chinatown's walls. This is a mark not only of pride, but of something rarer and more commendable; it is a mark of intelligence.

It is just because anti-Chinese feeling is strong in Vancouver that the Chinese are turning to their young men for leadership. The best that the older generation of Chinese can do, when Canadian restrictions seem to them too harsh, is to ask their countrymen in Kwangtung province to boycott English goods. The younger men, it is felt, not only have a better command of English, but are more en rapport with western ideas, whether they share those ideas or not. The typical organization of the revolutionary China-born generation is the Nationalist Society, a political organization interested in the future of China; the typical organization of the Canadian-born is the Native Sons Association, which is interested in Chinatown.

There are two courses open to the single man the world over; one is the round of women, gambling and drinking on which the Americans believe that the older Chinese spend themselves, the other is intellectual activity. Chinatown is more a man's community than any place in America except the lumber-camp and the prison, and here too life has a double edge. If bottom-floor Chinatown is lined with gambling places and tea-houses where little pigtailed waitresses, metallic as butterflies and moth-soft to the touch, skim about dispensing rice wine and back-talk, top-floor Chinatown is well stocked with Chinese newspapers and with men's talk. The Vancouver Chinese feel that Chinatown under the impetus of the revolution is experiencing a renaissance. "Everyone talks politics now," said an official of the conservative Reform the Emperor Association, "even the women and children. They talk about it too much. There is the same atmosphere here that there was after the French revolution."

The principal idea which the Chinatown renaissance has produced is a repudiation of nationalism. Nationalism is regarded as being one of the ideas which the western world has tried and found wanting and which China in her societal experiments will not need to bother with. This belief, generally held in Vancouver, is expressed with brevity or interpretations according to the individual's temperament.

"We Chinese don't believe in nationality," said a man of the older generation. "After awhile, Chinese and Canadians will be all mixed up."

A man who left China after the revolution said: "I think the time is coming when the Chinese and the whites will be all mixed together. Not in your and my lifetime, you understand, but in a few centuries. Until then, for the next half-century say, I think it is better that immigration should stop. And I do not think it will happen on this continent. This continent is like an island, and the people have a very strong idea that they must have people of their own kind. But in Asia or Europe. Europe is after all a peninsula of Asia. And there is another European war coming. After that the people of Europe may be as poor as the blacks of Africa. Well. . . ." He shrugged his eyebrows.

"I remember reading Scott's *Ivanhoe* when I was still in China. One of his friends asked him why he didn't have Rebecca marry *Ivanhoe*. But he said he couldn't do that. That was only a hundred years ago. And look at the difference in the position of the Jews in England now—the Rothschild family and the whole change there has been.

"The Chinese here are in the same situation as the Jews. Or as the Jews were once in Germany—in England too, I guess. I am a Christian and I have read the old testament which is a record of the Hebraic peoples. I find many points of similarity between them and the Chinese. They are also an old race and so conservative. Being an old race it was very hard for them to assimilate with all these new races, and the new races demanded it. They fear the old races. So, it is hard too for the Chinese to be assimilated."

This repudiation of nationalism, however, does not always work both ways. The real desire of the Chinatown Chinese is that China become a strong power, even though that means militarism or an alliance with Russia, neither of which ideas pleases them, so that she will be able to succor them and nourish their pride. In consciously repudiating nationalism the Chinese are in reality only striking out blindly against their inferior status and their isolation.

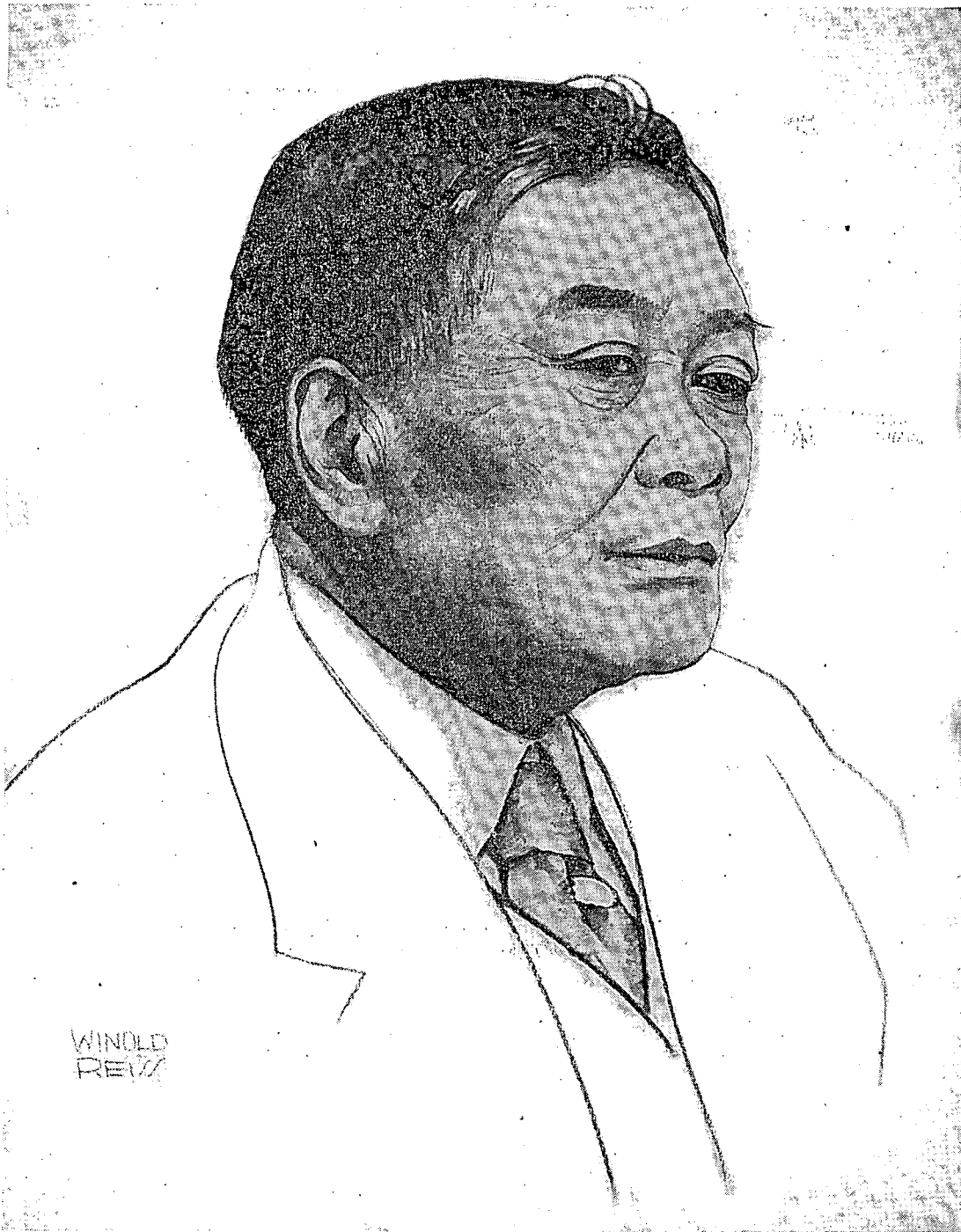
The most significant fact about the Chinatowns of the United States and Canada is that they are ghettos—Chinese villages encysted in a foreign city. A Chinese in Canada who was being educated for the ministry suddenly became discontented after the arrival of his wife from China. "My wife doesn't like this country," he told a missionary friend. "Why not?" asked the missionary, "Don't you have hot and cold water here, pavements, street cars and autos?"

"She says," the husband replied, "She'd rather go to the village well, where she can talk to the other women, that the pavements make you tired, that the rickshaws are nicer than street cars because it takes you longer to get somewhere, and that as we'll never be able to own an auto, autos are nothing to us." And then he added, "What is going to become of our children in this country? They will never belong on Grant avenue, where the Canadians are; they will always belong on Pender street."

The more sophisticated members of Vancouver's Chinatown feel this isolation quite as keenly as did the candidate for the ministry. A Canadian-born Chinese of good family who had been educated in one of the great eastern universities of the United States returned to the Pacific coast with about the same feeling that the educated northern negro would have if in order to be with his family he were forced to take up his residence in the South. He found himself suddenly cut off from anyone except his own people. The experience did not discourage him or make him bitter; but it left him a little lonely. "Vancouver is very beautiful, isn't it?" he remarked. "I love it here. But it is rather dull. So few new people come to town, or one does not see them, and one cannot visit one's few friends every day, can one? I think if I had the ability, I could be the premier of Canada. Look at Louis Brandeis in the United States and Lloyd George in England. However, if I cannot be very famous, I prefer to be very obscure."

The reason the Chinese ghetto is the most uncomfortable place in America is because it is usually so small. While New York city has more Jews than all of Europe except Russia, and Harlem is the

(Continued on page 221)



Mark Ten Sui, a Chinese business man who came to America in 1872, arriving at San Francisco on the first iron steamboat to cross the Pacific

Five Portraits of Orientals in America

By WINOLD REISS