

Harry Chuck, the Legend

“HEY, HARRY CHUCK!”

They call out his name when he walks the streets of San Francisco. White folks, Chinese folks—“Hey, Harry!”--they call his name because his exploits are famous.. In San Francisco’s Chinatown, he’s a legend. Harry led two decades of protests and demonstrations to convince the City it needed to notice the Chinese population that had lived among them for one hundred years with their heads down. Still, he may best be remembered for *Chinatown Rising*, the film he produced with his son Joshua when he was eighty, using dramatic footage of the Years of Protest that he’d stored away and neglected in his garage.

Nineteen Sixty-eight was a thrilling year to be Chinese in San Francisco, Harry says. On August 17, 1968, college students, young activists and local residents gathered in Portsmouth Square in the heart of Chinatown to march in a protest of Chinatown’s horrific housing conditions and racial prejudice against Chinese. It was a first—for a hundred years, the residents of Chinatown had bitten their tongues--never publicly protesting their terrible circumstances. Harry was there this time, toting a 16mm camera he had borrowed from his professor at San Francisco State, where he was enrolled in film classes.

“The excitement!” Harry says. “I wanted to record it!! Show my professor and fellow students who we were. In Chinatown, where I’d lived my entire life, you have 25,000 people crammed into twenty-four square blocks, the densest in America outside of downtown Manhattan and there were no white folks in the neighborhood I grew up in, although we lived in the middle of the City. We were all Chinese. Chinatown is a neighborhood created by racism

because Caucasian America in the Nineteenth Century believed Chinese immigrants could never assimilate, so the Law denied citizenship to us. We were perpetual foreigners.”

The Old Country

“My dad was an immigrant from Canton in southern China. He was a paper son.”

From 1875 to 1943 American immigration law barred any Chinese person from entering the country, unless they were diplomats, business people or travelers.. American Gold Rush miners resented the competition in California's goldfields and responded to the flood of enthusiastic Chinese gold-seekers with lynch mobs. In 1875, President Chester Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act to prevent Chinese immigrants already inside the country from bringing over their wives and children or ever owning property outside of the chinatowns in America's largest cities. For the next sixty-eight years, Chinatown was a ship-in-a bottle, very tricky to get into, impossible to escape.

Harry holds a black-and-white photo of himself with his dad, circa 1939. Dad looks like a Chinese version of a J. Edgar Hoover G-Man, outfitted in a natty charcoal double-breasted three-piece suit with a tilted fedora and a necktie, as he strides behind Harry, who is dressed similarly, except his three-piece and tilted fedora are black and a white breast pocket square accents his chest. His wide innocent eyes and chubby cheeks identify him as a four-year-old as Dad's hand on his shoulder gently steers him along the city street.

“He named me Wong Gong Han. Wong is the family name. Not Chuck, because dad was a paper son.” Harry Chuck, Senior was originally Harry Wong but his Uncle Chuck provided a false identity and created documents to introduce him to the port authorities as Harry Chuck, associated with the business that Uncle Chuck was already running in San Francisco.

The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire had destroyed most city census records, which created a window for many new Chinese immigrants to successfully claim a relationship to someone already established in the U.S. in one of the protected categories. No early immigration records existed to challenge such a claim.. Prior to World War II, Chinatown was full of paper sons.

“He always talked about going home someday. You know, strike it rich in Gam Saan (Gold Mountain--the Cantonese name for California) and then go back and celebrate with the home community in Canton. Maybe build a new house. There was nothing to do in Chinatown besides gambling and Dad got lucky. He found a mentor who ran a gaming parlor and when he died, my father took over his business. The plainclothes police would raid—gambling was illegal and the police were all Caucasians and knew Dad by his first name. Have you seen Robert Redford in *the Sting*? How in five minutes the gamblers transform the gambling hall into a lounge with guys reading newspapers and smoking? That’s how Dad operated. It was a charade. That’s how Dad operated.

“My memory takes me back to the Late Thirties. There were just a lot of single Chinese males and very few Chinese women. Probably a thousand men for every dozen women so my dad was lucky to find mom—she was bilingual and that was an asset.

“She was an All-American Girl, my mom. Every morning before I went to school, she would turn the radio dial to the Bing Crosby Hour. I grew up listening to Bing Crosby and Al Jolson. And of course, movies. We had Chinese movie theaters and on the edge of Chinatown, in North Beach, we could watch Hopalong Cassidy, Batman and Superman. At home, we spoke English and Chinese. Mom spoke English; he spoke Chinese. And every afternoon after public school all us kids went to Chinese School, like it or not..

“Mom divorced her first husband, who kept their four kids and they lived across the bay in Oakland. My stepbrothers and sisters would visit us from time to time. All of us were looking for jobs . . . for lunch money, bus money. No matter what the job—shining shoes, selling newspapers. Fifty cents an hour. Seventy-five cents an hour. Mom was always looking and she finally found her best job. She became a riveter during the War. Building Liberty Ships. She dressed for work in a leather jacket, steel-toed boots, and overalls. And weekends when she wasn't working she was a lady with a social life, playing mahjong with her friends!

The War Changed Everything

“The War really changed everything,.” Harry says. “First of all, the residents of Chinatown had to wear a little badge that declared: ‘I am Chinese’, because the white majority couldn't tell the difference between the Japanese, who had attacked America at Pearl Harbor and were now the Enemy, and Chinese, who were far more abundant. Secondly, Congress repealed the Exclusion Act in 1943 because China was now our friend. Third, my dad gave up his dream and decided to settle down in Chinatown. Remember the photo of him in the double-breasted suit and fedora? He became prominent in the community, part of the Six Companies. My buddy asked me if he was a ‘godfather’—you know, like DeNiro in the second *Godfather* movie. He cultivated relationships with the white cops because he paid them off so he could run his gambling establishment. The fourth thing that happened to me was Cameron House. My friends told me about the youth programs there and I decided to check it out. I was twelve.”

Cameron House, the three-story constructed with partially melted bricks from the '06 Earthquake and Fire, stood right around the corner from Brooklyn Place, the Chucks' apartment. By 1900, when Donaldina Cameron took over the ministry, the Presbyterians had already been in

Chinatown for more than twenty years, rescuing 'paper daughters' at the City ports, many of them kidnapped from the Canton region of China for life as 'slave wives' in the U.S.

"Do you know who you are?" One of the Cameron House workers asked young Harry. He was startled. Of course he knew who he was, didn't he? He was the son of Harry and Edna Chuck.

"'There's more,' the Counselor said 'You're the grandson of so-and-so. Her name means *the person found by God.*' When I got home, I asked Mom and she told me the story. Her family had sold my grandmother into slavery, to marry a San Francisco Chinese man, and when she landed, Miss Cameron intercepted and took her to the mission house." Like all the rescues, *the person found by God* was protected inside the mission house and expected to convert to the Christian faith.

Cameron House was life-changing for Young Harry. From 1947 onward, he would work in the Youth Ministry, first as a student, then as a leader, after college as Youth Director and from 1977 onward, as the Director of Cameron House for twenty-four years. He credits Cameron House with introducing opportunities for him in the White World beyond Chinatown—visiting Bay Area white churches in the summer and teaching Vacation Bible schools, leading day camps, and eventually recruiting and training groups of youth for mission trips to Alaska. The Presbyterians placed high value on education and Harry finished high school and together with a band of twenty-five Chinese-American youth, headed to one of the Presbyterian colleges in Salt Lake City and then on to the Seminary in Marin County, just north of San Francisco.

"My father was not at all happy with me. His experience with Christians in China was quite negative. He said church people only took care of themselves. They lived better than the

people they served. Everybody knew everything about everybody in Chinatown. People would say: 'Harry's kid's gonna be a minister.' Eventually, he accepted it, but he never showed up for my ordination or any school events. But Mom did.”

Harry graduated from Seminary in 1962, just in time for the dawn of America's Golden Age—or so it appeared. The charismatic young president with the mop of hair and Boston twang, John F. Kennedy, was declaring: 'My Fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.' JFK launched Peace Corps, committed to putting a man on the moon by 1970 and challenged Nikita Khrushchev over Soviet missiles in Cuba. And then, with one bullet shot to his head, his presidency was finished in November, 1963. Lyndon Johnson took over the presidency and launched the War on Poverty, signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and of greatest importance to Harry Chuck and Chinatown, signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which opened the floodgates to previously-barred immigrants from many non-European countries,

LBJ also expanded the war in Vietnam. The resulting anti-war movement, the rise of Black Power, Feminism and the Summer of Love shook the nation.

The Sixties

“I was not prepared for the Sixties,” Harry says.

Among other aftershocks of Johnson's presidential acts, young immigrants began pouring in from Hong Kong, China and Taiwan. Many had grown up hearing tales of a glorious life in America but when they arrived, the promises didn't materialize. Newcomers crowded into the already-overcrowded Chinatown in San Francisco. Non-English speaking youth were sent to public schools where they struggled, soon dropped out and then formed gangs for support and

survival. But the new paradigm was not to grin and bear it. Black Power, Feminist and anti-war movements were taking their grievances to the street in the Nineteen Sixties..."We learned a lot from the Black Panthers," Harry says.

The San Francisco State College Strike of late 1968 sent an electric shock through many of San Francisco's ethnic groups. Latin Americans, black students, Chinese-Americans, Filipinos and Native Americans formed a broad coalition. Coalition protestors moved together, running from classroom to classroom to declare a strike and send students home. They had two major demands:

- An overturn of admission policies that excluded non-whites from enrolling at SFSC
- A change in what they saw as white-centric curriculum

In *Chinatown Rising*, Philip Choy expresses the consensus that emerged from the protest movements of the Sixties generation: 'To be an American, it no longer means you have to be white.'

Harry was there, his eye behind the viewfinder of the 16mm camera on loan from the Film Department when the San Francisco police, in response to SFSC President Hayakawa's request, flooded the campus with more than 7,000 baton-swinging police, including policemen on horseback and supported by 'paddy wagons' to fulfil Hayakawa's vow to arrest all protestors.

Harry wrote up a proposal for a film, which his professor accepted as his Master's degree thesis. However, work on the film stalled amidst all the campus turmoil and demands at Cameron House. His professor relented and granted Harry the diploma without the film. 'But promise me you'll complete it someday,' he said.

It wasn't just 1968. The SFTS Strike was the harbinger of a whole season of protests and changes. The Strike deepened the sense of ethnic identity that many Chinese-Americans now felt. Harry learned of plans to tear out the Chinese Playground a few blocks from Cameron House and replace it with a high rise garage. Same old story—Chinatown was a narrow piece of pumpkin pie wedged between the Financial District skyscrapers just beyond Portsmouth Square and their Nob Hill neighbors on the cliff that rose sharply just west of Cameron House. The land was just too valuable. Everyone wanted more of the pie. Harry led a petition drive that gathered four thousand angry signatures and killed the playground conversion. After that, there was the I-Hotel, a large hotel in ManilaTown, a ten-block community bordering Chinatown to the east. The hotel housed low-income, single room occupancy residents, primarily Filipinos. New owners had purchased the hotel and they planned to demolish the hotel and move out its elderly tenants. Harry's opinion was important now. The I-Hotel defenders asked him to stand with them and he agreed. The struggle continued until 1977, when police broke the blockade and seized the building. But there were also victories--the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1974 *Lau vs Nichols* that school districts needed to provide non-English-speaking students with instruction in their native language..

Unfortunately, the change in education law came too late for many of the immigrant youth in Chinatown. Gang violence was ramping steadily in Chinatown and Harry, as a minister at the Presbyterian Church of Chinatown on Stockton Street, was performing funerals for teenage Chinese-Americans who were dying in gang wars.

"I realized I had to do something. I also realized I wasn't all that Chinese. My Chinese wasn't very good. I couldn't communicate with these immigrant kids. They were getting violent. There were Friday nights when I had to order all the kids off our playground and into

the building because we were hearing gunshots on the street, And here I was with two small kids of my own, raising a family. What to do? There were some well-educated immigrants, mostly from Hong Kong, who spoke Chinese and they saw the value of a place like Cameron House, so I gathered these guys together to start bilingual clubs and that's when San Francisco newspapers took notice. The *Chronicle* and the *Examiner* were saying: 'Something's going on in Chinatown,'

“Right then, in 1977, the Cameron House Board tapped me to be the new director.. Dick Wichman had resigned after thirty years and they chose me. I was never interested in directing a huge extravaganza with six to seven hundred youth every weekend, like Cameron House was running. I was a program guy. I felt good getting up on a Sunday morning and driving across the bridge to some white church to tell them what we're about at Cameron House. Anyway, I started a board and three new college groups. And two months into my new position, Golden Dragon happened.”

Perhaps it was inevitable that the hostilities in Chinatown would boil over. Police records show that fifty-five persons were killed in the twenty-four blocks of Chinatown in the eight years between 1968 and 1977. Most were members of rival gangs. Yet the City chose to turn a blind eye, letting Chinatown handle its own problems, just as they had done for decades. On September 4, 1977, a few months into his new term as Director of Cameron House, Harry was leading a staff retreat and volunteer training at a campground when the horrific news came through. Three Jo Boy Gang members had entered the popular restaurant on Washington Street (five blocks from Cameron House), nylon stocking masks pulled down across their faces, looking for leaders of rival gang Wah Ching. Golden Dragon Restaurant was crowded, with fifty to one hundred diners. The Wah Ching leaders were all together at a back table. The Jo Boys

opened fire with a submachine gun, several shotguns and revolvers. Five diners were killed, eleven others wounded. None of the killed or injured were members of the Wah Ching.

San Francisco newspapers headlined it as 'a massacre'. The 'Golden Dragon Massacre' moved the San Francisco Police Department to create a Gang Task Force. For Harry and his staff at Cameron House, it was a reminder of the risks but also that the City's benign neglect of Chinatown's problems wasn't working. Chinatown needed outside help.

Mei Lun Yuen

Harry's father died in 1968. "After he died, I began to wonder how life would play out for Mom. I hadn't really thought about the elderly in Chinatown before. We had a lot of them. Behind the neon lights and shops that tourists see, much of Chinatown is a squalid ghetto. One hundred years of bachelor societies, restrictive real estate laws and overcrowding resulted in rundown buildings. My own childhood wasn't so bad—we at least had our own apartment. But my cousins lived in tenement houses where you might have fifteen families sharing a community kitchen. Or fifteen families sharing one community shower. Was my mother going to end up in a tenement house like that? I wanted to help but I lacked expertise."

The City Planning Department conducted a study in 1970 and decided Chinatown did badly need new housing and open space. The Mayor recruited Harry to serve as co-chair of the Chinatown Coalition for Better Housing. Developers came up with a project that they named Mei Lun Yuen, which they proposed for the large empty lot directly across the street from Cameron House. Who could oppose such a good thing? It turned out that the Nob Hill neighbors did because the five-story building was going to block their view of the scenic San Francisco Bay to the east. However, all generations and factions of the Chinatown community

endorsed the project. Hearings were initially held at the HUD (Housing and Urban Development) offices in the Embarcadero Building high-rises, which, ironically, peered directly down into Chinatown's streets and backyards.

As a preaching pastor at the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown, Harry worked with leaders in the church to make Chinatown housing an important justice issue. The Church decided to sponsor the Mei Lun Yuen Project. When the project looked like it might stall, church leaders encouraged two hundred elderly Chinese, primarily women, to march from Chinatown to the HUD regional offices, carrying signs like 'Chinatown Needs Housing', 'HUD, Are You Listening?' and 'Mei Lun Yuen Now!'

Harry was feeling desperate. At one point he walked into the HUD Office bathrooms and discovered U.S. Congressman Maillard at the urinal next to him. This was no time for formalities. Harry introduced himself: 'I'm Harry Chuck of the Housing Commission and I want to talk to you about Mei Lun Yuen.' "In the end, Maillard was the one who moved the legislation forward and we got approval."

But in the three years following approval of developing a plan, nothing had happened. The Nob Hill neighbors were firing off lawsuits to stop Mei Lun Yuen and the City Supervisors were stalemated.. This led to one of the most dramatic moments of Harry's career. Hearings had been relocated to the elegant wood-paneled gallery under the dome of San Francisco's City Hall.. Harry and his Chinatown Coalition colleagues hired buses. They filled the buses with Chinatown residents, many of them elderly, wearing Chinese style caps and vests and many unable to speak English, who now packed every available seat and standing space in the Hearing Room.

Harry had lugged his projector along on this date, looking for an opportunity.. Wearing his clerical collar and aviator glasses, his hair in bangs across his forehead, he looked the part of the Activist! The Commissioners' vote was due but the moderator was considering another delay in the vote. "We only have five minutes or so, anyway, so . . . "

At that moment, Harry made his outrageous suggestion. "Mister Chairman! Could I use that five minutes to show a film clip that will give the Commissioners an idea of what we're dealing with? Since you can't come down to Chinatown and meander through our housing, we thought we'd bring our housing situation to you."

The moderator looked around. Not seeing any objections, he gave his go-ahead. It took Harry a few minutes to set up a slide projector screen in front of the hall, positioned so both the Commissioners and the audience could see it.

The projector began flickering. Pictures of a shabby 8X8 room with six children crowded together appeared, while Harry narrated. "This family all live between these four walls. There is no heat in this room; the tap water is cold running water only. Over here is the community kitchen, which they share with fifteen families." A decrepit kitchen with a row of hotplates appeared. "And the community shower." A single overhead faucet in a small enclosure appeared and Harry explained: "For fifteen families, each with multiple children. And did I mention we have mice and cockroaches in many units?" A mouse crossed the dark room onscreen. "This is not the exception," Harry said. "This is typical for families living in Chinatown."

When the short film stopped, the assembled elderly Chinese exploded in applause. The Commissioners looked shocked. When the vote came a few minutes later,, all of the

Commissioners voted to move Mei Lun Yuen forward.. It had taken ten years from conception to the groundbreaking ceremony, with Mayor Diane Feinstein digging the first shovelful of ground in the long vacant lot across from Cameron House.

However, time passed and as Harry retired from Cameron House, the proof of Chinatown's big changes lay in undisturbed, unrecognized film canisters in his basement. Meanwhile Harry's activist leadership received wide recognition and changes were happening in San Francisco: the first Chinese-American police chief, the first Chinese-American Commissioner on San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, and finally, the first Chinese-American mayor of the City in 2011.

Harry Finds Gold

Harry was approaching his 80th birthday. Should he do anything with those canisters, which held 20,000 feet of film footage? He took his son Joshua down to look at them. Joshua held the raw footage up to the light bulb while Harry explained what he was seeing.

“Dad! This is unique! This is high quality stuff! What are you going to do with all this?”

Together, Harry and Josh decided to make the film Harry had envisioned when he was working on his Master's thesis. The film would start with photographs of Old Chinatown: young men with long plaits of hair to their waists, wearing the quilted jackets, floor length robes and turban hats of China's Qing Dynasty, pictures of working men in the California goldfields, photos of bodies after the Los Angeles mob lynchings of 1871. These pictures would juxtapose with footage shot by Harry of the years of protest—the SF State Strike, the I-Hotel demonstrations, the City Hall chambers crowded with demonstrators.

It would take the Chucks five years to digitize the 16mm film, raise \$250,000, storyboard the film and finalize it into an 85 minute documentary they called *Chinatown Rising*. The documentary was chosen by CAAM (Center for Asian-American Media) to open the 2010 filmfest at the historic Castro Theater in San Francisco. Over 85 minutes, the story of the community emerged. In the coming months it would be broadcast nationally on World Channel's award-winning series: 'America Reframed'. To date, the film has been screened by 350 groups and won several awards. The U.S. State Department chose the documentary as one of 2024's Select Films to release to U.S. embassies around the world. In the follow-up, the Embassy in Beijing hosted a screening packed with curious Beijingers, with attendees asking dozens of questions about activism in the U.S.

Harry gets the last word here. Reflecting on his time as an activist, he says: "I don't look at it as political. I see my work with Mei Lun Yuen as a response to injustice. We were fighting a war in Vietnam, spending money overseas killing Asians, and here we were denying local Asians badly needed housing. This was a justice issue that had to be focused on."