

FEATURE

1906 San Francisco Chinatown

Burning and Rebuilding

The 1906 Chinatown relocation was an important civil rights lesson

By Walter Ko

Wednesday, April 18 1906, at 5:13 am, a massive earthquake with a magnitude of 8.3 lasting sixty-five seconds hit San Francisco. The citizens were terrified by the devastation tremor.

Facing aftershocks, language barrier and discrimination, some of the 40,000 residents in Chinatown among fire sirens and collapsed buildings packed up and prepared for emergency evacuation. The earthquake damaged the utilities of electric, gas, water supply and telephone services. According to SFFD records, fifty fires started at once, one known as ham and egg fire started by a woman preparing breakfast. Among the first was the Chinese laundry blaze located in Howard Street near Hawthorne, across from Engine Co. 4 quarters, started after the quake damaged the heating elements. The wooden structure caught on quickly and burnt out of control as no water available hydrant after hydrant. The fires burnt so huge and so wide that the City decided to use explosives to clear a firebreak in the afternoon. However, the drunken expert, John Bermingham set off his 'quake' explosives and the blasts started another 60 more fires in Chinatown. Chinatown was engulfed fatally.

The next day, Chinatown was burnt down to ruins and ashes. The destructive Chinatown fire was seen as a great happy result of the catastrophe. Overland Monthly even expressed, "Fire has reclaimed to civilization and cleanliness the Chinese ghetto, and no Chinatown will be permitted in the borders of the city . . . it seems as though a divine wisdom directed the range of the seismic horror and the range of the fire god. Wisely, the worst was cleared away with the best". In gold mine, there was "Chinese must



Watching the fire from Chinatown

go", now in the Gold Rush City, there echoed "Chinatown must go".

Mayor Schmitz made a decisive but illegal order of killing any looters. Historian Erica Y.Z. Pan wrote: "The looting of Chinatown started as soon as the fires stopped burning and it went on with some official knowledge. The Chinese Consul-General in San Francisco, Chung Pao-his made a series of formal protests, including one to Governor Pardee as early as April 21, that the National Guard was stripping everything of value in Chinatown. The Guardsmen were there supposedly assisting the army to keep order and sanitation; instead, they found a treasure to ransack. The complaints were ignored, the fact of which shows that the city fathers were not truly concerned with the property rights of the Chinese. The looting continued for days, with about 150 militiamen taking part, according to the Chronicle." Shamefully, Chinatown treasure hunt from the charred smoking debris was so profitable that new business mushroomed for sale the souvenirs

and relics. Even a number of scavenged items ended up mysteriously in the collection of State First Lady Mrs. Pardee.

The next day after the quake, Mayor Schmitz set up The Committee of Fifty for Relief with two sub-committees for Chinese. The Permanent Location of Chinatown prepared a what appeared well intentioned relocation to Hunter's Hill for the benefits of Chinese with an agenda of confiscating the valuable Chinatown properties. The Relief of Chinese Committee was headed by Rev. Filben who on 22nd met with Chinatown leaders introducing the location near Van Ness Avenue at Fort Mason. This site of 400 camps would equip 25 Chinese kitchens and a large tent for Six Companies business. This surprised temporary facility was voted for unanimously. But another Committee member, James Phelan who insisted to locate them quickly to Hunter's Point fearing the difficulty to uproot once established, attacked it. Less than two days at Fort Mason, General Greely hustled hurriedly Chinese refugees to Presidio Golf Links. University of California Regent Wheeler complained that they could not stand the smell of the Chinese blowing toward their houses. On 27th, City Hall agreed to move them to Fort Point. Tired of being pushed around like a circus from tent to tent, only sixty followed according to San Francisco Chronicle. For the Chinese refugees relocated to Oakland, they were assigned near Lake Merritt. Businessman Lew Hing* settled some at the grounds of his Pacific Coast Canning Company with hot meals.

Some whites looked at Chinatown as the ugly goose that lay gold eggs. Oakland Enquirer on April 22 read, "The Chinatown Blot Must Not Be Permitted" and a few days later declared "Let us Have No More Chinatowns in Our Cities". The City Hall intention of relocating the new Chinatown to barren Hunter's Point worked against the interest and wishes of the Chinese and disregarded their property right. The English media made sensational illusion report that Chinese were cooperative in accepting the new Chinatown at Hunter's Point. However, the China

daily Chung Sai Yat Po countered in Chinese opinion with an editorial suggesting rebuilding Chinatown by hiring lawyers to protect Chinese interest, Chinese property owners starting to rebuild, Chinese renters signing new lease with white landlords.

The relocation Chinatown plan would impact white Chinatown landlords. On May 9, the 25 white property owners met to renew lease with displaced tenants. Their common interest created a rare alliance. This financial powerful group had strong influence with politicians. City Hall discouraged Chinatown rebuilding with new building ordinances.

Chinatown was located close to the financial district and the affluent residential area. The earthquake and fire cleared it up and would create a commercial opportunity for speculation and development. A press article read: "The military authorities, it is generally understood, have decided to deport all homeless Chinamen to a general rendezvous on Angle Island, then to remain until ways and means can be found by which they can find occupation and be housed. Many of the woman campers surrounding the Chinese camps at the Presidio and North Beach have requested their removal to some distant points".

Surrounded and protected by troops, however, Chinatown residents were prevented from returning to salvage despite repeated protests. A few ventured back to try their luck with soldiers and thugs. Lee, Yoke Suey, grandfather of Historian Connie Young Yu was bayoneted, suspicious of looting in his own store. In the afternoon of June 16, Chinatown resident Hung returning home between Sacramento and Stockton for his belongings was attacked violently by a white crowd and died next morning. The Chung Sai Yat Po editorial demanded justice for this murder and dispatched a telegram to Consulate General Leung Seng in Washington for help and protection. In an era of discrimination and prejudice, violence against

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Chinese people was ignored and casualties due to racism were dismissed.

The fire dispersed Chinese victims to East or South Bay area for shelters. Racial segregation sites prevailed even at disaster. April 23 San Francisco Examiner reported that white female refugees in Golden Gate Park requested Chinese campers out. The same day, President Roosevelt's telegram to General Funston requested that he "furnishes same shelter and camping facilities to Chinese as to others . . ."

Afraid and suspicious, one of the Chinese refugees said," Living precariously in canvas tents among hostile Barbarians on the fog-chilled slopes overlooking the Golden Gate, [we] wondered about the reception [we] might receive, or what unspeakable indignities might be visited upon [us] under the shadows of the fortress's might guns. Not even civic disaster with its common misery could wipe out the better memory of forty years of ugly persecution of the Chinese in California." Most Chinese hesitated to get in bread line even encouraged. In some cases, soldiers confiscated their ration food share. San Francisco Chronicle reported "I made a pass with my gun and he moved with a jump. We took away their board of supplies, put the whole bunch to work and when we thought they need food again, gave them plenty to eat. This pleased them very much and they were all right and appeared to be

satisfied." Were they really satisfied at the soldiers' gunpoint kindness and generosity of work to welfare? Actually, few took government relief, realizing that they could be trapped in a hand out dependency prison.

San Francisco City leaders and businessmen developed ways to confiscate the valuable property of Chinatown. Some proposed to prevent the Chinese refugees fled to Oakland from returning. Some suggested the alternative Chinatown in the nearby Telegraph Hill. On May 27, Telegraph Hill residents organized by Pastor of St Francis Church protested, "Settling of the Chinese on or about Telegraph Hill would be extremely injurious to the material and moral welfare of the district." San Francisco Examiner next day headlined, "Residents of Telegraph Hill Want No Chinese" with a quote by Rev. Father Carraher: "I fought years for the preservation of Telegraph Hill against the greed of contractors who would have leveled it. I'll fight again to preserve it against possession by the Chinese." The faithful of "love your neighbors as yourself" obviously did not prefer Celestial brethren next door.

The Chinese Imperial Court representatives in US were American educated elite group of graduates from Chinese Educational Mission to the United States. Fluent in English and familiar with American culture and politics, they were powerful and capable in par with officials. SF Consul-General Chung Pao-hsi* and Vice-Consul Ow Yang King* played important roles in the relief and protection of Chinese victims. Even they and staff joined to evacuate to East Bay as the Consul building in Stockton Street gone with Chinatown.

As soon as the fire died down three days later, Consul Chung made a press release expressing his sympathy to the victims, reporting back to Washington Ambassador Leung about the Chinatown plight, and appealing to overseas Chinese for donations. It was printed in the Chung Sai Yat Po, temporarily relocated in Oakland. His many subsequent communications

and actions were comforting and encouraging. He warned against price gauging by Chinese merchants. To coordinate government relief, he helped recruit volunteers to locate, register and settle refugees to shelter camps for meals. On April 26, he met with U S Commerce Secretary demanding equal protection and protested strongly against Chinatown relocation. The Secretary assured federal support because local officials had no right to confiscate Chinese properties.

Having received telegrams from Consulate General Leung about the disaster, Chinese Imperial Government sent 40,000 teals of silver to help the victim countrymen and 100,000 teals for Americans relief. Empress Dowager even offered a personal contribution of seventy-five thousand dollars. Chinese officials in Washington donated \$4,800. Chinese around the world poured in donations while Sacramento Chinatown supplied food to the Six Companies for relief distribution. According to record, Oakland Chinese donations for relief fund far exceeded all other groups.

As the situation became critical, Ambassador Leung Seng dispatched his First Secretary Chow Tsz Chi to Bay Area a week after the quake. After briefing by Chung and the leaders of the eight family organizations, Chow took a firm solidarity. He insisted strongly that Chinese either rebuild Chinatown on the site or move out San Francisco altogether. Mr. Chow's comment was reported in English media," I have heard the report that the authorities intend to remove Chinatown, but I cannot believe it. America is a free country, and everyone has a right to occupy land, which he owns provided that he makes no nuisance. The Chinese Government owns the lot on which the Chinese Consulate of San Francisco formerly stood and this site on Stockton will be used again. It is the intention of our Government to rebuild a new building on the property, paying strict attention to the new building regulations which may be frames." In addition, he provided advice to victims who were the proud ones to submit lists of salvage items to

the hard-pressed fire insurance companies. . On April 28, with Consul-General Chung and his deputy Ow Yang, he visited Governor Pardee reiterating that Chinese Imperial Government strongly supported rebuilding Chinatown on same site.

Worried about the refugees, Consulate General Leung Seng decided to make an official visit to Bay area a month after the quake. In a meeting with his SF staff, local Chinese businessmen and community leaders, he was confident and prepared to show his diplomacy at SF mayor luncheon the next day. Mayor Schmitz was anxious to get his blessing on Chinatown relocation. Leung affirmed the decision of businessmen and property owners and refused further discussion. After lunch, he lost no time in visiting the camps at Presidio and Oakland to encourage fellowmen to be self-reliant rather than a public charge. The aged and the weak desirous of returning China could do so at Imperial expenses. As a result, by May 8, not many Chinese stayed at the camp of Fort Point despite official assumption of 60,000. In support the Six Companies leadership, he prompted the reconstruction of the building quickly. The loan was completed by SF Consul-General Sun Shi Yi when Chung retired by mid June. Chung's Pacific trip chaperoned the 91 aged countrymen.

Relocating Chinatown to Hunter's Point created a dilemma for City Hall. Chinatown outside SF meant no poll tax and property tax from the Chinese and certainly Chinatown tourism income, a huge 30 million dollars in 1905, a significant number not to dismiss lightly. City Hall finally came to the logical conclusion: Hunter's Point was rejected by the Chinese, Chinatown was rejected by Telegraph Hill; to locate further to drive the Chinese and the business with Orient out of San Francisco and California would be a total loss to Californian and Chinese. Moreover, Empress Dowager protested to President Roosevelt with a fresh memory of 1905 boycott of American-made goods. This international embarrassment effectively aborted Chinatown swallow. The Chinese residents,

leaders and businessmen, Chinese Imperial Government officials and American landlords asserted legal, diplomatic and economic pressure to protect and defend Chinese interest and earned the dignity, respect and rights in rebuilding Chinatown. It was a triumphant fight!

The destruction by earthquake and fire on San Francisco City Hall and Hall of Records offered thousands of Chinese the opportunity to claim residency, birthright and citizenship and bring in their relatives despite the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Many came slowly by way of "Paper Son".

Reborn after the Earthquake and Fire of 1906 in progress and prosperity, San Francisco held a huge Centennial Commemoration with the highlight on April 18 2006 at exactly the same moment with a record of attendance to hear the survivors and their stories followed by parades, memorials and shows. The research death toll was recently revised to over 3,000 due to omission, undercount and error. The Chinese Historical Society in SF Chinatown hosted different presentations and an Exhibit titled Earthquake: The Chinatown Story, sharing the Chinese experiences and other unknown stories.

The 1906 SF Earthquake and Fire was a chapter of American history. It showed that in disaster, people mobilized relief support. It created a chance to evaluate how effective and efficient government responds to disaster. To some people, a disaster means "opportunity" to prey on the poor, the disadvantage and the unfortunate for their own greed and gain. This powerful interest group can manipulate public opinion in their favor to divide and conquer. Disaster contrasts economic disparity, political imbalance and social differences. It is always a struggle between the have and the have-not, majority and minority, and powerful and helpless.

A recent visit to SF Chinatown reminded me of the blood, sweats and tears of the forefathers' struggle in defending, protecting and rebuilding Chinatown against powerful special interest groups and politicians. What would

happen if SF Earthquake and Fire occurred in 2006? This time, we may have to face the challenge of the recent Supreme Court ruling on eminent domain. The 1906 Chinatown relocation was an important civil right lesson. Now more and more Chinese-Americans involve actively in politics and civil rights for social and economic equality and justice. Let us learn from history and get prepared. Let us all work together for peace and humanity.

This report is my commemoration, dedication and honor to the Chinese who perished at the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, and to the Chinese community and Chinese diplomats who survived the disaster and the racially motivated political assaults. Their sacrifice, challenge and success led to a new Chinatown where visitors leave their hearts in the heart of San Francisco. They are the hero warriors to admire and transpire for the coming generations.

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