

Phil Choy: A Perfect Day in San Francisco's Chinatown: An American Story of a Gilded Ghetto and Its Native Son

By Jonah Raskin

According to the 2010 census, 3,347,229 citizens of Chinese ancestry live in the United States, 1,253,102 in California, and 589,584 in the San Francisco Bay Area. Philip Choy is one of them, but he's not just any one of them. At 85, he belongs to a generation that's all but gone forever and in danger of being forgotten. For much of his life, he has loved Chinatown, which he calls a "gilded ghetto at best." He has also disliked it strongly enough to leave it behind. Ironically, he returns to it almost daily to pay homage to it and to honor the arc of his own experience that took him from the ghetto and led to another world.

I think of Choy as a ghost of Chinatown past who haunts Chinatown today, urging the Chinese by his own example to hold on to their heritage. A gentle ghost, he hears everything and notices everything, as I learned when I wandered around Chinatown with him recently on foot and by car. Nothing escapes Choy's gaze. He's a sharp observer and a feisty historian fighting to save the history of the Chinese in America and especially in San Francisco's Chinatown, one of the few vibrant Chinatowns in America and not an ersatz tourist destination. Of course, he's also an historian who writes about the past in the hope that humanity won't make the same mistakes. Unfortunately, when he looks at America he sees the repetition of history, especially in the hostility and violence directed toward immigrants, whether Mexicans or Sikhs.

To preserve the history that's eroding before his eyes, and to deconstruct myths about the Chinese, Choy has written a new book published by City Lights entitled *San Francisco Chinatown: A Guide to Its History & Architecture* that draws on a lifetime of research. Publication of the book itself is a testimonial to Choy's efforts to make Chinatown more visible and more widely appreciated. City Lights, his publisher, sits on the edge of Chinatown. In fact, these days, as Chinatown has expanded, City Lights is nearly surrounded by Chinatown. Choy's editor, Garret Caples, says that for years he watched tourists wander aimlessly through Chinatown's narrow streets and that he wanted to lend them a helping hand. "Now, they can buy the book at City Lights, walk through Kerouac Alley, and they're right there ready to explore," Caples told me.

Choy is not the only person who could have written a guidebook to Chinatown, but he's probably the best candidate for the job. Aside from his professional credentials, including his degree in architecture from the University of California at Berkeley, there's also his personal history and the history of his family.

Over the course of an afternoon that began at his house on Polk Street, where he lives with his wife of 60 years, he told me about the Choys in China and in America. Some of the time, I had to dig for the information I wanted; I felt like a detective. Choy isn't in hiding, but there's a mountain of history to tell and it takes time to emerge.

Born in San Francisco in 1926, he grew up with three other families totaling 22 individuals, all of whom, he remembers, shared the same bathtub. Choy's mother was born in the United States, but after the 1906 earthquake she returned to China with her father and her mother - her father's second wife. They all lived together, he says, with her father's first wife.

"Polygamy was common in those days," Choy told me. "Men often had more than one wife." (As he related the narrative of his family, I wanted a picture of the family tree; I settled for the pictures I drew in my own head.) His father, he went on, was born in China and entered the United States using papers purchased from a young man named Choy who was about his own age and whose father already lived in San Francisco.

"So your last name isn't really Choy?" I asked.

"Yes. You've got it," he said. "It's Wu. I had a 'paper father'; I'm a 'paper son.' Many of my classmates at school were in the same boat."

Choy explained that after the Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 only Chinese men and women with relatives in the United States could hope to enter the country legally. Philip Choy's father persuaded immigration officials that he was the son of an American citizen. He rehearsed the story that he told and he arranged, ahead of time, for his newfound father, Mr. Choy senior, to tell the authorities the same story.

"I've seen the notes from the interrogation," Choy told me. "Sometimes the two stories diverged, but somehow my father persuaded immigration to let him into the country. Soon after that, he married my mother - they had an arranged marriage brokered by my grandfather. Arranged marriages were also common in those days." I knew that much from my own family. My maternal grandparents - from Russia and Romanian - had an arranged marriage that lasted for four decades and led to seven children, including my mother.

Immigrant Chinese and immigrant Jewish families seemed to have much in common, as Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (and the movie inspired by it) suggests. At home, Jewish and Chinese immigrants spoke the respective languages of their ancestors. They both learned English – some better than others - and they both were Americanized – some more thoroughly than others.

Philip Choy grew up speaking Chinese with his parents and English with teachers at school. His own parents, he said, didn't encourage him to study, or excel, and they didn't urge him to go to college. "It's a myth that all Chinese parents pressure their sons and daughters to get A's," he said. "My father taught me to be a butcher, and as a young man I worked in his butcher shop, but I didn't want to spend my whole life cutting up meat. I didn't want to live the rest of my life in Chinatown, either. I got the hell out of there as fast as I could."

Choy served in the U.S. Army and fought in Germany during World War II. After the war, like a great many young men in his generation, he took advantage of the G.I. Bill and went to college. Many of his classmates were also Chinese. As an architect in San Francisco, he designed hundreds of buildings, both residential and commercial, including Chinese restaurants and chains such as Sizzler, though he never worked on a huge skyscraper, he told me, and he always lived "from job to job." He also never stopped researching, writing, and teaching the history of the Chinese in America. From the wealth of facts that he unearthed, he wove together little-by-little a rich tapestry that linked San Francisco to Canton, the city that sent more people to America for decades than any other Chinese city.

Divided into seven sections, *San Francisco Chinatown* provides a detailed history with names and dates, beginning in the 1840s. It ends in the 21st-century with Ed Lee as the first Chinese mayor in San Francisco history. Choy is proud of the mayor. He calls him a friend, but he also says that a Chinese American mayor was long overdue, and that it took decades to overcome discrimination and prejudice. He doesn't overlook the deliberate policy of segregating the Chinese in a ghetto and he doesn't neglect the distorted images of the Chinese that have appeared in popular American culture. At the same time, he told me that the Chinese ought not to play the victim card. "We have to be proactive," he said. "We have to step up and take the initiative."

Choy's *San Francisco Chinatown* presents several walking tours for tourists; following them can be a real adventure on foot. Still,

there's nothing like a walking tour of Chinatown with Choy himself as the tour guide, for the simple fact that he knows the history of every block and every building. "The buildings tell us the history," he explained as we ambled along Clay Street. Choy stopped, pointed toward the sky, and invited me to look at the two flags fluttering in the breeze, one of them for the Peoples Republic of China, the other for the Republic of China, or "KMT," as Choy calls it. The letters, "KMT," stand for the Chinese Nationalist Party that governs Taiwan.

"Of course, for a long time, and especially during the days of McCarthyism, you didn't see the flag of Communist China here," he told me. "Americans heard the words 'Communist China' and they saw red and acted crazy. Then Nixon went to China, talked to Mao, and almost everything changed." Choy also pointed to the colorful laundry drying on a balcony. "That's a tell-tail sign," he explained. "As long as you see laundry like that it means that there are new immigrants coming here and that the neighborhood will remain alive and vital."

We entered the building that houses the Chinese Historical Society of America and looked at the exhibit while Choy kept up a running commentary about the opium wars of the nineteenth century, America's drive to open China as a market for U.S. goods, and also to bring Chinese men to America to work as "coolies" and provide cheap labor building railroads. If he could have, Choy would have brought everyone in San Francisco to the Historical Society, and showed them that the story of the Chinese in America is as much an American story as the story of any other immigrant group.

"The Chinese who have moved to the suburbs and who have assimilated also come to Chinatown," he said. "They're curious, too, but most of them don't come to the Historical Society. It's not only white people who don't know Chinese history. It's also the Chinese." There was yet another American story – the loss of history, the loss of the past.

It was lunchtime and we had to have lunch. Choy wanted to eat in a small restaurant on Commercial Street that wasn't crowded; most of the diners were Chinese. I had my heart set on dim sum so we went across the street to City View. We had to get on line and wait for a table. Most of the customers looked like tourists. I hoped that Choy might have pull and that the hostess would seat us immediately. Instead, she took everyone in order and didn't play favorites.

When the trays with dim sum arrived Choy picked out half-a-dozen dishes. To the waitress, he spoke in both English and in

Chinese. He knew exactly what he wanted. "It's best to come here in a large party," he said. "Then you can order lots of different things, but with just two people there's a limit to how much you can eat." Still, we ate and ate and ate, and drank cup after cup of tea and when we were done and couldn't eat another thing, the place was nearly empty. It was tasty dim sum and it wasn't expensive. When we walked up hill the sun was shining brightly. It was a perfect day in Chinatown, and the flags of the two Chinas still fluttered in the breeze.

Then, we cruised through Chinatown in Choy's Celica one last time. He knew all the back streets, alleys, and short cuts. Choy pointed out the address at 714 Pacific Avenue where he grew up, and another address near-by where his father worked as a butcher. The house and the shop no longer exist, nor the other thriving butcher's shops that once crowded the corner at Pacific and Grant.

"There aren't many native sons of San Francisco like me around anymore," Choy told me when we arrived back at his home on Polk Street. "As long as I'm alive I'm going to talk about Chinatown history and I'm not going to sanitize it. I could have written a history of Chinatown and mentioned the names of businessmen and they would have bought my book to see themselves in print. I didn't want to do that. It wouldn't have been true to my nature nor to the Chinese immigrants who have come here, contributed to this place, and who have as much right as anyone to call themselves Americans."

Jonah Raskin's new book is *James McGrath: In a Class by Himself*. He is a contributing editor of RCR.