

# First Chinese New Year celebrations in North America

by Victor K Wong, February 2023, <vwk@umich.edu>

The first celebrations of Chinese New Year in North America undoubtedly occurred in San Francisco, where a sizable Chinese population gathered after 1849. Like other Forty-niners, the Chinese were drawn to San Francisco because it was the port closest to the gold found in the Sierra foothills – what the Chinese Forty-niners called Gold Mountain (金山).

The Chinese pioneers hailed from the Pearl River Delta on the west side of the open port of Canton (Guangzhou). They were deeply rooted villagers,<sup>1</sup> speaking village variants of Cantonese, some mutually unintelligible – all seeking better opportunities. With the prevailing westerly winds, it took less time to sail from Canton to San Francisco than from New York to San Francisco. With no transcontinental railroad, the California shores were closer to Canton than to the East coast. By 1850, San Francisco had attracted hundreds of Chinese villagers, with Chinese stores huddled along Sacramento St. between Kearny and Dupont.



Chinese stores along the northside of Sacramento Street between Kearny and Dupont streets in San Francisco, circa 1866.

*Photo: right half crop by author of stereograph from the Robert N. Dennis collection, courtesy of the New York public library.*

<sup>1</sup> Many villagers (along with their ancestors) lived and toiled in one single village over many generations, upwards to one score, often documented in some detail in their village ancestral hall.

The initial reports of the first Chinese New Year celebrations in America were confusing, as the press strained to understand. In the Monday, February 3, 1851 issue of the *Daily Alta California*, the noted San Francisco newspaper, they reported that middle-aged English-speaking restaurant owner Norman Asing (sometimes spelled Assing or Ah-Sing<sup>2,3</sup>) “the well known chief of the China boys, gave a grand feast on Saturday night, at his private house, in celebration of the **birth** [emphasis added] of the Chinese new year. A number of the policemen of our city, and many ladies and “China boys” were present on the occasion.”<sup>4</sup> Note that the grand feast was private, as the city was not ready for a new alien tradition, much less a public display of it.

I don't know why they used the dismissive name “China boys”; perhaps it was the youthfulness of the Chinese Forty-niners. It was first used by the *Alta* in December 1849 when purportedly hundreds of Chinese pioneers met in the Canton restaurant on Jackson St. to ratify a resolution to obtain their first consul, S. E. Woodworth, Esq.<sup>5</sup> and in August 1850 when San Francisco Mayor John Geary hosted a “Chinese Meeting” for hundreds of Chinese young men in a ceremony, interpreted by Asing, held at Portsmouth Square.<sup>6</sup> Two months later, Asing led a Chinese contingent in a San Francisco procession celebrating the statehood of California.<sup>7</sup> The point is that the Chinese Forty-niners, under the articulate leadership of Asing, were initially welcome on these strange shores, albeit dismissively.

On March 26, 1851, the *Alta* ran a dispatch from Canton, dated the Monday, January 27, which was before Chinese New Year on Saturday, February 1: “The Chinese new year **causes** [emphasis added] a temporary suspension of all kinds of business.”<sup>8</sup> The *Alta* publishers seemed to realize, almost two months after Chinese New Year in 1851, that Chinese New Year might be something quite significant and socially powerful in Chinese culture, akin to a holiday.

The next year, a correspondent of the New York *Commercial Advertiser*, writing from Shanghai on February 17, 1852, provided some education: “We are just on the eve of the Chinese New Year. It begins with the first day of the first moon after the sun enters Aquarius; which occurs this year on the 20th of February. It is a general holiday of the Chinese people, so far as a general

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<sup>2</sup> Ah-Sing, born Yuan Sheng (4 October 1808) in Zhongshan (中山) in the Pearl River Delta, immigrated to New York City around 1820, established a business and gained his U.S. citizenship in Charleston, South Carolina. After returning to China, he arrived in San Francisco in July 1849. See, e.g., Mae M. Ngai, “The Chinese question: the gold rushes and global politics,” W. W. Norton (2021) page 20-21

<sup>3</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 1, Number 248, 6 October 1850. “Ah-Sing, the well known Chinese resident of this city, celebrated the forty-second anniversary of his birthday on the night of Friday the 4th inst., at his restaurant, on the corner of Kearny and Commercial streets.”

<sup>4</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 2, Number 55, 3 February 1851. “CHINESE NEW YEARS: 1 February 1851.”

<sup>5</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 1, Number 1, 10 December 1849. “Meeting of the Chinese Residents of San Francisco: 19 November 1849, Canton restaurant on Jackson St.”

<sup>6</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 1, Number 210, 29 August 1850. “The Chinese Meeting: 28 August 1850 at Portsmouth Square.”

<sup>7</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 1, Number 272, 31 October 1850. “THE CELEBRATION [of the statehood of California]: 29 October 1850”

<sup>8</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 2, Number 107, 26 March 1851. “CANTON, Jan. 27, [1851].”

cessation from labor is concerned, it may be called their annual sabbath, for it is the only day in the whole year in which the shops are closed and business of all kinds is universally suspended.” Before the new year, all Chinese were expected to square up every debt. If the new year came and one was not debt free, one was effectively branded bankrupt with no credit.<sup>9</sup> Herein lies a contrast: in Chinese culture, one is socially obligated to be debt free **before** the new year; whereas, in western culture, one could resolve to be debt free **after** the new year.

By 1852, the California Chinese grew rapidly and approached ten percent of the California population, and the Chinese found themselves targets of nativist rhetoric, especially among the miners, to oust them. In his final message to the legislature, California Governor McDougal pushed back and characterized the Chinese as “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens”.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, California Governor John Bigler, eager to secure political gains in mining districts, intensified the anti-Chinese rhetoric, claiming outrageously (and falsely) that Chinese immigrants were “collies” and like Black slaves could never become American.<sup>11</sup> In May 1852, Asing, who was an American, wrote an open letter to Governor Bigler, rebutting his arguments to end Chinese immigration to California.<sup>12</sup> Asing’s letter is one of the few recorded Chinese voices raised in protest to those who sought to exclude Chinese from entry into the United States and into American society. The dismissive welcome of the Chinese had turned in less than two years to open hostilities against them.

It was in the midst of anti-Chinese rhetoric that on February 8, 1853, the *Alta* recorded the first public Chinese New Year celebration in San Francisco: “Today is the Chinese New Year, and the [Chinese] are making a grand holiday of the occasion. Firecrackers of all sorts are being exploded. Sacramento and Duponts streets (Grant Avenue) are lively with the moving multitude...”<sup>13</sup> To show that they finally understood it, the *Alta* smugly reported that “Trade generally was very dull, as always is the case on the approach of the Chinese New Year.”<sup>14</sup>

The first Chinese New Year celebrations were therefore much more than festive occasions. As perceptively noted in 1855 by William Speer in San Francisco, they helped “the heart of the old empire to give another grand beat and heave the tide of life for another year.”<sup>15</sup> More broadly, the California Chinese celebrated Chinese New Years, displaying their cultural identity with persistence and tenacity in the face of racial hostilities. These Chinese New Year celebrations were like annual rejuvenations, needful in the midst of increasingly hostile California, of their cultural identity forged by their deeply rooted village spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> Reprinted in the Placer Herald, Volume 1, Number 7, 23 October 1852. “Correspondent to the N.Y, Commercial Advertiser: 17 February 1852, from Shanghai.”

<sup>10</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 3, Number 7, 8 January 1852 “Governor McDougal’s Message”

<sup>11</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *The Chinese question: the gold rushes and global politics*, W. Norton (2021) “Ch 4: Bigler’s Gambit”

<sup>12</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 3, Number 125, 5 May 1852. “To his excellency Gov. Bigler [from Norman Asing]”

<sup>13</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 4, Number 38, 8 February 1853. “The Chinese New Year [first recorded public celebration]”

<sup>14</sup> Daily Alta California, Volume 4, Number 97, 8 April 1853. “The *Mail*, dates from 8th of January”

<sup>15</sup> William Speer, editor, *The Oriental*, English section, 15 February 1855. Quoted in Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943*, Stanford University Press (2000), page 138.



## Photo Gallery



Earliest photo of 唐人街, a.k.a. Sacramento St. between Kearny and Dupont, S.F., circa 1857.  
Photo: [Sam Kee Co] Online Archive of California, courtesy of the California Historical Society



## Photo Gallery



Dupont St., looking north, parade proceeding south past Commercial St. (Sun Kam Wah & Co.) towards Sacramento St., circa 1880, probably Chinese New Year.

This was the block of Dupont St. where the first recorded public celebration of Chinese New Year occurred in San Francisco on February 8, 1853.

In the intervening decades (1850s-1880s), anti-Chinese rhetoric and violence intensified in California as well as the United States.

*Photo: [In Chinatown, S.F., Cal] California State Library, published by I. W. Taber.*

## Photo Gallery



Dupont and Washington Streets, looking north: San Francisco, circa 1881, probably Chinese New Year.

The dragon was not introduced into the San Francisco celebrations of Chinese New Year until around 1860.

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Photo: <http://www.pandanet.co.jp/English/art/sfchinatown/4chinatown.html>  
accessed January 23, 2023.