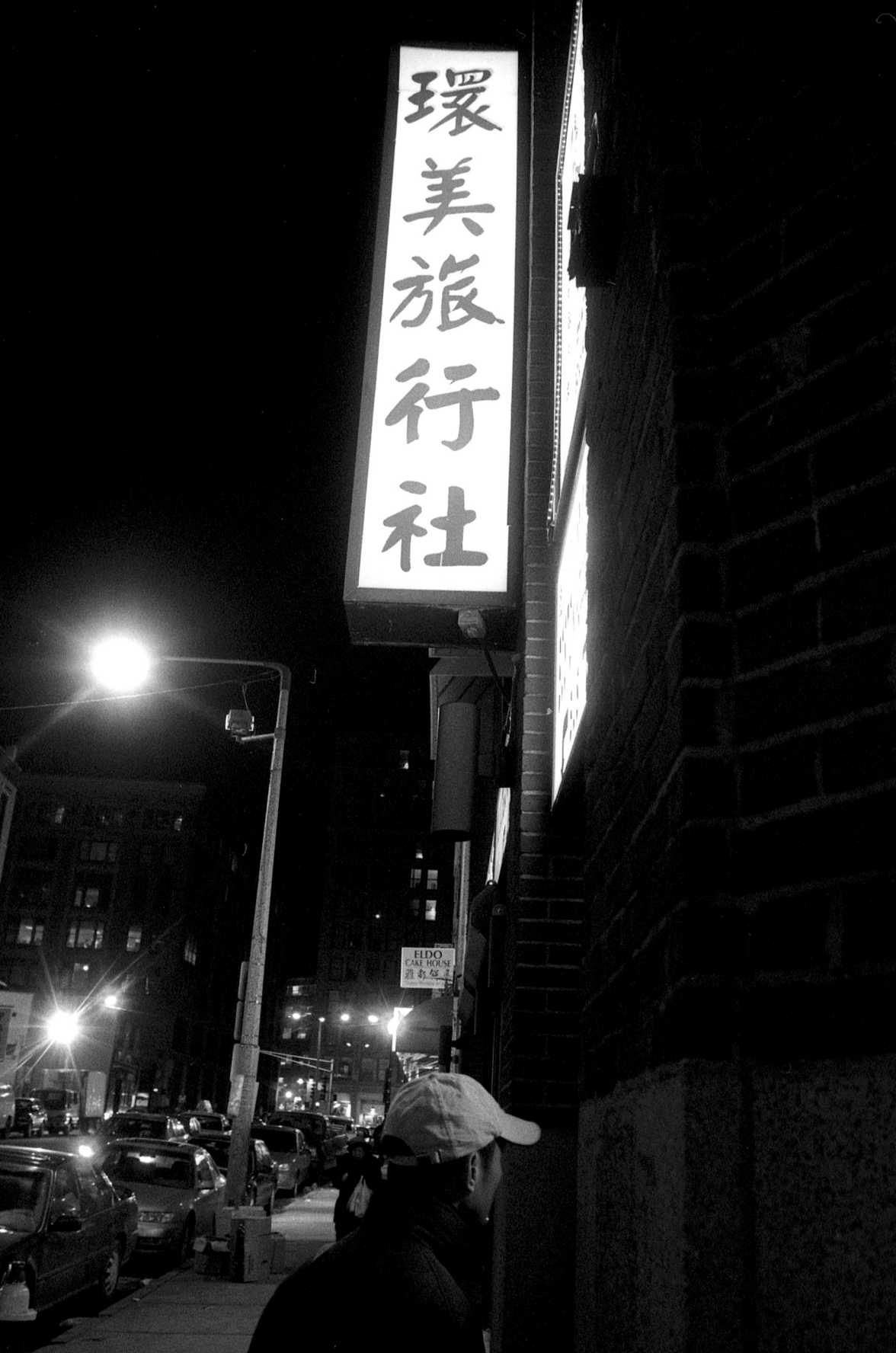
# NEIGHBORHOOD

Stories from Boston's Chinatown

1988 to 2001


環美旅行社
ELDO
CAKE HOUSE

THE STREETS


天下為公
PARK

CHINATOWN IS THE STARTING POINT — a neighborhood where Chinese immigrants live and work surrounded by people who share the same language and culture.

For decades, Boston's Chinatown has helped Chinese immigrants ease the transition to an American life that often feels distant and impenetrable.

In the 1870s Chinese immigrants migrated to Boston from the western United States to escape discrimination and limited opportunities.

Chinatown's original settlement was just a few blocks from the Chinatown gate — a proud reminder of the distinctive traditions and beliefs Chinese immigrants carry with them to Boston.

An elaborately designed gate or paifang marks the entrance to a Chinese city's most important precinct — to a city within a city.

Stretching from Washington Street to Hudson Street, from Marginal Road to Boylston Street near downtown Boston, Chinatown today is a mix of businesses and residences, of 19th century row houses and high-rise apartment buildings.

On most days the neighborhood's streets are bustling. Workers push dollies loaded with flapping fish along restaurant row.

Graffiti-covered trucks from New York City haul restaurant and market supplies to shops and restaurants. Workers wait for vans to carry them to restaurant jobs in the suburbs.

Restaurants, bakeries, and shops line the ground floor of ageing brick buildings. Fish swim in giant storefront aquariums, roast duck hang from racks in shop windows, moon cakes glow in glass cases.

The heart of the neighborhood's commercial district is Harrison Avenue, Beach Street, Hudson Street, and Kneeland Street.

The sidewalks are often blackened and slippery with discarded grease from restaurant fryers. The city installed new sidewalks in the 1990s but in no time they were once again caked with grease.

In a small park next to the Chinatown gate, street people gather to drink and carouse as Chinese residents watch from nearby benches.

The residents seldom complain about the homeless people from outside the neighborhood who take over the park, or ask the city to take action against them.

Locked inside their private worlds, talking quietly in Chinese to their companions, they seem unfazed by the commotion that surrounds them.


QUALITY

Nineteenth century row houses line sections of Tyler Street and other nearby streets.

Some residents live in these older buildings but most residents live in high-rise apartment buildings south of Kneeland Street.

In the early part of the 20th century Chinatown's southern district was a thriving Syrian neighborhood, but by the turn of the century only a handful of Syrians still lived and owned property there.

Chinatown residents share the neighborhood with the New England Medical Center and Tufts University's medical schools.

Chinatown has often been in conflict with the institutions — while the Chinatown community seeks available neighborhood land to expand housing, open space, and community services, the institutions want the same land to expand their facilities.

In the 1990s a truce is called between the competing factions. Both develop master plans for the neighborhood and reach agreements on how the remaining land will be used.

The city, which controlls much of the available land, is usually the broker in these discussions.

Along Washington Street, Chinatown meets the remnants of the Combat Zone, the city's adult entertainment zone.

When urban renewal in the 1960s led to the razing of Scollay Square and the West End, the adult entertainment district was relocated to the edge of Chinatown.

On weekend nights, streetwalkers lure customers at the corner of Beach Street and Harrison Avenue.

Car engines rev, women lean into the windows of idling cars, the street has the air of a carnival but with sinister undertones.

The edge of Chinatown is a haven for low-level street crime. Drug dealers prowl nearby Essex Street.

Women on their way to Chinatown often complain about being taunted by men in front of the Naked i lounge.

The corner of Washington and Essex streets has a gritty, threatening tone.

The police initiate weekend sting operations to arrest Johns and prostitutes, while the Chinese community organizes demonstrations against adult businesses.

Neighborhood activists ask property owners to refuse to rent or sell buildings

to X-rated businesses.

At least one Chinese property owner sells a building to a porn entrepreneur despite community opposition.

Rising real estate values and development pressures gradually force adult entertainment out of the district.

In the late 1990s, construction begins on the mixed-use Millennium Place high-rise complex on Washington Street.

Buildings housing the x-rated Naked i and PilgrimTheater are razed as a first step toward redevelopment.

# Morning on Beach Street

THE CORNER OF BEACH STREET and Harrison Avenue is the busiest intersection in Chinatown.

On summer mornings, restaurant workers stand on the sidewalk clutching coffee cups, smoking cigarettes, talking quietly.

On winter mornings they crowd inside the steamy Maxum Café, solemnly peering through the storefront windows at passersby moving along Beach Street.

The workers are originally from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Most are men but women are also among them now.

They speak Toisanese or Fujianese, Cantonese or Mandarin. Many have come from Chinese villages and have little education. Some were teachers and engineers in China but lack the language skills to do the same work here.

The Chinatown economy offers the opportunity to take home a decent wage each week, but there's a price to be paid for it.

The Double Rich Café is bustling this morning. Restaurant workers converge on the counter to order coffee, tea, and Chinese pastries — crispy buns, roast pork buns, ham and egg buns.

The workers shout out their orders at the same time. Customers impatiently push to the front of the line to be waited on, waving dollar bills to get the counter woman's attention. They seldom patiently wait in line.

In Chinatown it doesn't matter if you wait in line or not because everyone is pushing just like you to get to the front.

In Chinatown, no one pays much attention to the pushing. No one seems to mind.


GARAGE

The workers make their purchases and squeeze into booths to wait for company vans to take them to their jobs in suburban Chinese restaurants.

When the morning rush is over, Wai Li, a cashier at the cafe, settles into a booth to take a break.

She says she came to the United States from Guangzhou, China, in 1989, marrying a man who had been living in the U.S. since 1968.

Like many immigrant Chinese men, her husband is a cook in a Chinese restaurant.

A friend introduced her to her husband and they were married in China in the 1980s.

"My husband's brother and sister and mother are in Boston," she says, "my mother and father are here too. They live with me in our house [in Charlestown]. Six people live in the house now.

My husband's father lives with my husband's sister. I have an older brother in Guangzhou and a brother in Hong Kong who are waiting in line to come here.

Why did I come here — I came here because you have freedom here.

I have two children — a boy and a girl. My daughter was born here, but my son was born in China.

When I first came to the U.S. I didn't work because I didn't have anybody to help me take care of the children.

Working here is not very hard, not very easy. I work eight hours a day, but I only work hard for three hours.

My life in America is good — freedom! freedom! — there's no freedom in China...here there's freedom.

All American citizens can register to vote but in China you can't register to vote.

No...I don't vote (she smiles...hides her face in shame).

I'm a citizen, but I don't vote...I don't know enough English....there are a lot of words I don't know.

I want to learn more English so I can find an American job, a job with a good vacation.

In Chinatown you get no vacation...just Christmas...July 4th...no other days off... no holidays.

I want to work in the Post Office. I'd like a government job. There are no layoffs in a government job.

But I need to study English and computers to get a job in the post office.

It's hard to get to the class in Chinatown. Quincy School has an English class at night but the bus is gone by 7:35. If you miss the bus you have to wait an hour for the next one.

Last year I went to a training program downtown. My English was not very good but the teacher helped me and showed me how to use the computer.

I studied one year in the training program. Some students study only six months, but I needed one year. A long time!

My children are 12 and 10 now — trouble, trouble!

Sometimes when I go home from the job, I don't want to watch TV, I don't want listen to the tape or read a newspaper or an English book, I'm very tired, I'm very lazy.

I'm happy with my daughter at school, but I'm not happy with my son.

My daughter likes to study, but my son doesn't like school, he likes to play with computers and games.

I can't help him study because my English grammar is not very good.

At home we speak Chinese but my son and daughter speak English with each other.

They speak very fast. Sometimes I don't know what they are saying — lulalulala!

In Chinatown, I only speak Chinese. Some American people come in here, so I have the chance to speak English a little bit.

I don't have American friends because my English is not very good. Only the English teacher is my friend.

But my children have different friends — not just Chinese friends.

I go back to China to visit but I don't ever want to go back there to live. I just go there to play now."


Lucky Baboo
Sale !!


ONLY

THIS WORKING LIFE

# 'I Just Followed the Routine'

HE HAS THE SCULPTED, deeply lined face of a longtime restaurant worker. For about 25 years he worked as a cook in Chinatown restaurants.

He's retired now and spends much of his time volunteering at the Chinese Progressive Association — a short walk from the Chinatown senior housing complex where he lives.

"I was born in China and came to the U.S. in 1972. I was 40 years old and had been living in Hong Kong. I had gone to Hong Kong in 1949 and was working as a machinist on a ship.

I was married in Guangzhou in 1951, but my wife died from throat cancer in 1962.

I have a daughter who lives in China and another who lives in Hong Kong, but they didn't want to come here. They were married and were already settled into their lives.

I worked on the boat for 15 years. I traveled around the world. But working on the ship was really hard. The waves made me feel uncomfortable all the time. The boat was not stable.

And if we had a bad captain, life could be even more difficult. Because of this I didn't really like working on the boat.

In 1972, six of us — three sailors and three machinists — jumped ship in San Francisco. We were tired of moving around and decided to settle down.

When I arrived in San Francisco, the government wasn't so strict about immigration. I applied for a social security card and I got it in one week. In 1986, I applied for amnesty and became documented.

When I came to Boston, I found work in a restaurant. I worked in Chinese restaurants for almost 25 years. I don't remember which restaurants because I worked for so many. I retired in 1991 when I was 65 years old. I had a kidney stone operation and stopped working after that.

I lived on Harvard Street in Chinatown. I usually went home at 1 o'clock in the morning and went to work the next afternoon at 2 o'clock. I had to wash the dishes, peel the shrimp, cut the pork. After that I would cook. I spent the whole day in the kitchen.

It was a hard life working in a restaurant because we didn't have a break. We had to keep working all the way through. If I finished cooking one order I would have to cook another.

The kitchen is hot and sticky. We work with knives, so it's also very

dangerous.

After work I would just go home and sleep. When I woke up I would go to the restaurant and do the same thing again.

The work was hard but the pay was not that good. When I came to Boston in 1972, the salary was about $500 a month, and when I left the job in 1991 it was like $1,300 a month.

If I had been able to speak English I could have been a waiter. Being a waiter is better than working in the kitchen.

I didn't think I could get a better job in this country because I couldn't speak English. There were times when I thought about going to learn English, but I didn't have the time because I was spending all of my time working and sleeping.

Working in Chinese restaurants I didn't really need to speak English. I only stayed in Chinatown.

My only entertainment was seeing Chinese movies but I can't even do that now because there's no longer a Chinese movie theater.

I didn't go shopping outside of Chinatown because Chinatown had everything I needed.

I didn't drive but sometimes I would take the T to go outside of Chinatown to buy something. I'd only go with my friends. I would never go by myself.

I didn't really have any interest in finding out what Americans were like. I really didn't care.

But I think America is better than other countries. It's richer and easier to get a job here.

The best thing about America is the way the government treats elderly people. They treat them very well. I live in the elderly apartment now.

Before I came here I thought it would be really easy to find a job. I thought I could quickly make a lot of money. Until I got here I didn't know that working in the restaurant could be so hard.

When I first came here I thought about returning, but I decided I was too old to ever go home again.

I think if I had spent my life in China or Hong Kong, I would in some way have had more freedom. If I didn't want to work in the restaurant, I could have tried to do something else. I could have gone wherever I wanted to go because I would have known the language.

In China I could have been more involved in the life around me. I would

have been able to speak up and argue with people. I could have let people know what I thought and what I wanted. But here nobody listens.

I feel the government treats people well here, but maybe I would have been happier if I had stayed in China.

But I really didn't think much about it. I just followed the routine. I went to bed. I went to work. That was it. I didn't want to think. I knew that thinking about it would be useless. Thinking about it wasn't going to change anything.

I work to eat and I eat to work — that's the meaning of my life.

These days I wake up in the morning. I either eat breakfast at home or go out to Chinatown to get something. After I eat my breakfast, I walk over to Boston Common to talk with my friends. At noontime I go back to my apartment to eat because they serve lunch there.

In the afternoon I come to CPA (the Chinese Progressive Association) to read newspapers or see if I can do something. Sometimes I help CPA send out mail.

When I was sick in 1991 I came to CPA for help. I knew the services here were free.

After I went to the hospital for treatment, I received many documents I didn't understand and CPA translated them for me.

Later in the day I return to the park. In the afternoon there will be older ladies there who can talk. We get together to talk about our past about nothing very real. We talk about our history. What else can we talk about?

I don't have any girlfriends. If I had wanted to remarry I could have done that a long time ago. I didn't have to wait until now to do it.

After I leave the Common I go home to cook dinner and then go to bed.

I am old now. I cannot do anything. I live on a retirement plan and SSI (Supplemental Security Income). The retirement money comes on the third of the month and SSI comes on the first.

I don't know what will happen tomorrow. I don't even know what will happen after I go to bed. I am old, and that's just the way it is."

# 'So Many Troubles'

SHE WORKS IN A SUBURBAN Chinese restaurant. Five days a week she makes a trip into Chinatown from her home in East Boston to catch the restaurant van that will take her to her job outside the city.

When she isn't working, she is a student in an office-skills training workshop in Chinatown.

She arrived in the U.S. a year ago (in the late 1990s) and is still struggling to adapt to her new country.

"In China I studied economics and worked as an accountant for 12 years. I am 49 years old and came here with my husband.

He was an automotive engineer in China but he works part-time in an auto repair company here.

My son is 20 and a university student in China. Every week I call him. He lives at the school during the week, but every weekend he stays at my mother's home.

We came here so our son could come to America. After my son takes his TOEFL test, we will help him look for a university here.

I started working last November. I work five days a week from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. I am off on Wednesdays and Sundays.

I board the company van near Tai Tung Village. The workers on the bus often talk to me about how they don't like America or how they have so much trouble with their jobs and families — so many troubles.

Sometimes the workers are sick but they hide their illness. The workers who come from Fujian have no hope. They feel as though they haven't a future, haven't anything.

But some of the workers are happy. There are two waiters in my restaurant who are very happy. They always talk with the American customers.

At the restaurant I make salads for the salad bar. I receive $1,200 a month and am paid in both checks and cash — half and half. I don't care if I am paid by check or in cash. I don't get tips.

Working in a restaurant is hard. There's not much lifting, but we work too many hours. I'm always standing. If I were making $1,500 a month, I would be happy, but I'm paid only $1,200 because I have two days off. Other people have only one day off and get paid between $1,400 and $1,500.

The customers are mostly Americans, but a few Chinese people come in too. The restaurant makes Chinese food but it's not like the food in China. Some of the cooks here don't know the correct method, so the food is not very good.

We say the food looks dirty, as if it had been sitting there for a few days. In Chinese, we say it looks like gan dou, like dried beans in water.

I think the restaurant owner is a good person because he loves my country and helps other people. He gives some people free food and helps some students learn English and study hard.

He came from Taiwan, but he doesn't like Taiwan's government. He hopes Taiwan and Beijing will someday be united.

I think most of the restaurant workers are happy to be here because America is a more developed country than China. They like the medical care and the insurance and the technology. They can make more money here than they could in China.

I think Americans are friendly and willing to help other people, but American culture and Chinese culture are different.

Before I left China my idea of America was different from what it is now.

I thought America would be a very clean country, but when I got off the plane I saw many dirty streets. I thought, 'Oh my God, America is dirty.'

Before I left Beijing I didn't know there were so many foreigners living here. I don't think I like having so many kinds of people living together.

Many people living here have customs that are different from those of the Americans.

I have been here already about a year and three months. I think I will need to live here longer — maybe three or four years — to get used to it.

I very much miss my country because my mother, my younger sister, and my brother live in China.

In China, I had a very good job in a hotel accounting department, and it wasn't hard work.

If I get a green card or become a U.S. citizen I can look for a good job. A student visa allows me to stay here for three years, though I can get two more years if I study computer science.

My husband doesn't want to get a green card. Many times he says, 'Let's go back to China!' He doesn't like it here. He designed cars in China, but here he fixes cars.

After my son comes here maybe we will go back to China. I want him to come here to study science at a higher level. After that, he can maybe go back to China."

# Long Shifts, Sweltering Kitchens, Steady Pay

WHEN CHINESE IMMIGRANTS ARRIVE in Boston, many have no choice but to find jobs in the area's booming Chinese restaurant industry.

The immigrant economy is both a savior and a bane to Chinese immigrants — a savior because it offers them jobs in America, a bane because working conditions in some of the restaurants are less than ideal.

Working in a Chinese restaurant provides a safe haven for non-English speaking immigrants who often find the mainstream world complex and threatening.

Even if they want to, most immigrants find it impossible to get good-paying jobs in the mainstream economy if they don't speak English.

The most vulnerable workers are those who are illegal and can't go to the authorities to seek redress when they're dissatisfied with their bosses.

They have no standing in American life and must take what they can get here.

The illegal workers also put added pressures on the legal workers, who could easily be replaced by undocumented workers if they demand too much from their bosses.

Guided by its own rules, the Chinese restaurant industry developed an array of financial practices designed to squeeze the maximum amount of profit out of its businesses.

Like many small business owners in America, the Chinese entrepreneur isn't eager to pay taxes if he can finagle his way around them.

He's also in no hurry to provide workers with benefits such as health insurance or workers' compensation.

A worker in a Chinese restaurant almost never receives health insurance, relying instead on free health care or health insurance through a wife's mainstream job.

The workers themselves are also in no hurry to pay taxes. Those who came from China aren't accustomed to having the government take such a large chunk of money out of their paychecks.

Many immigrants also find it more difficult to put their finances on a more stable footing if they are forced to pay additional taxes and report their full income when applying for affordable housing and other income-eligible benefits.

In the past the mainstream world turned a blind eye to many of these practices, in part because it was difficult to penetrate Chinatown and its business practices.

Mainstream officials only bother to venture into Chinatown if they think activities there are affecting the non-Chinese population; otherwise they simply ignore the Chinese community.

It isn't easy for the Chinese Progressive Association to take a public stand and pressure the Chinese business community to uphold basic labor standards in the late 1990s.

Subtle pressure is exerted in Chinatown to keep community secrets within the community.

In fact, a few years after the Progressive Association takes a public stand on the issue, it reverts to a less aggressive approach after members of the business community cautioned that it was unwise to air the community's "dirty laundry" in public.

At the time, though, the Progressive Association launches an effort to focus on working conditions in Chinese restaurants and other businesses where Chinese are employed.

Besides restaurants, many new immigrants find work in garment shops, hotels, institutional food services, and factories.

Immigrants sometimes complain about racial discrimination and unfair treatment in some non-Chinese businesses, but they often must contend with an array of illegal practices in some Chinese-owned businesses.

Workers in many Chinese-run businesses, for example, are not paid overtime rates for hours worked in excess of 40 hours, says Lydia Lowe, director of the Progressive Association's Workers Center.

Many Chinese restaurant workers also end up working six 10-hour days per week. "I think there are a lot of standard practices in the restaurants that are illegal," says Lowe.

While state law exempts restaurants from overtime regulations, federal law requires compliance, she says.

The CPA has investigated instances in which restaurant owners have failed to pay workers on time or withheld wages when their businesses ran into financial troubles.

Restaurants are required by law to pay workers within five days of the end of the work period, she says.

"There are a lot of times when the owner will say, 'I'm short of money. I

can't pay you this month,'" says Lowe. "We've seen cases where this has dragged on for months."

In the late 1990s, a group of unpaid Chinatown workers sought back wages from the Grand China Restaurant, which ran into financial troubles and closed.

When the Grand China began to falter, several partners bailed out of the business, leaving David Wong to struggle alone to keep the restaurant afloat.

Wong, who owns the Washington Street building in which the restaurant was located, was forced to close the restaurant, which was rumored to be the largest in the city.

While Wong said his financial troubles made it impossible for him to pay his workers and suppliers, the payments were also apparently delayed because the three partners couldn't agree on who was responsible for the wages.

Even though Wong's partners withdraw from the business, their names remain on the company's legal documents, according to the Progressive Association.

Wong eventually brings in a new partner and reopens the restaurant as the Emperor's Garden. Although the Grand China workers agree to work for the Emperor's Garden, they continue to seek their back wages.

About 20 Grand China workers eventually file a complaint with the state Attorney General's office over the unpaid wages.

Immigrant workers are also affected by the practice of paying wages under the table. Most Chinese restaurants pay workers a portion of their pay by check and the rest in cash. The owners follow this practice to reduce their declared income and taxes.

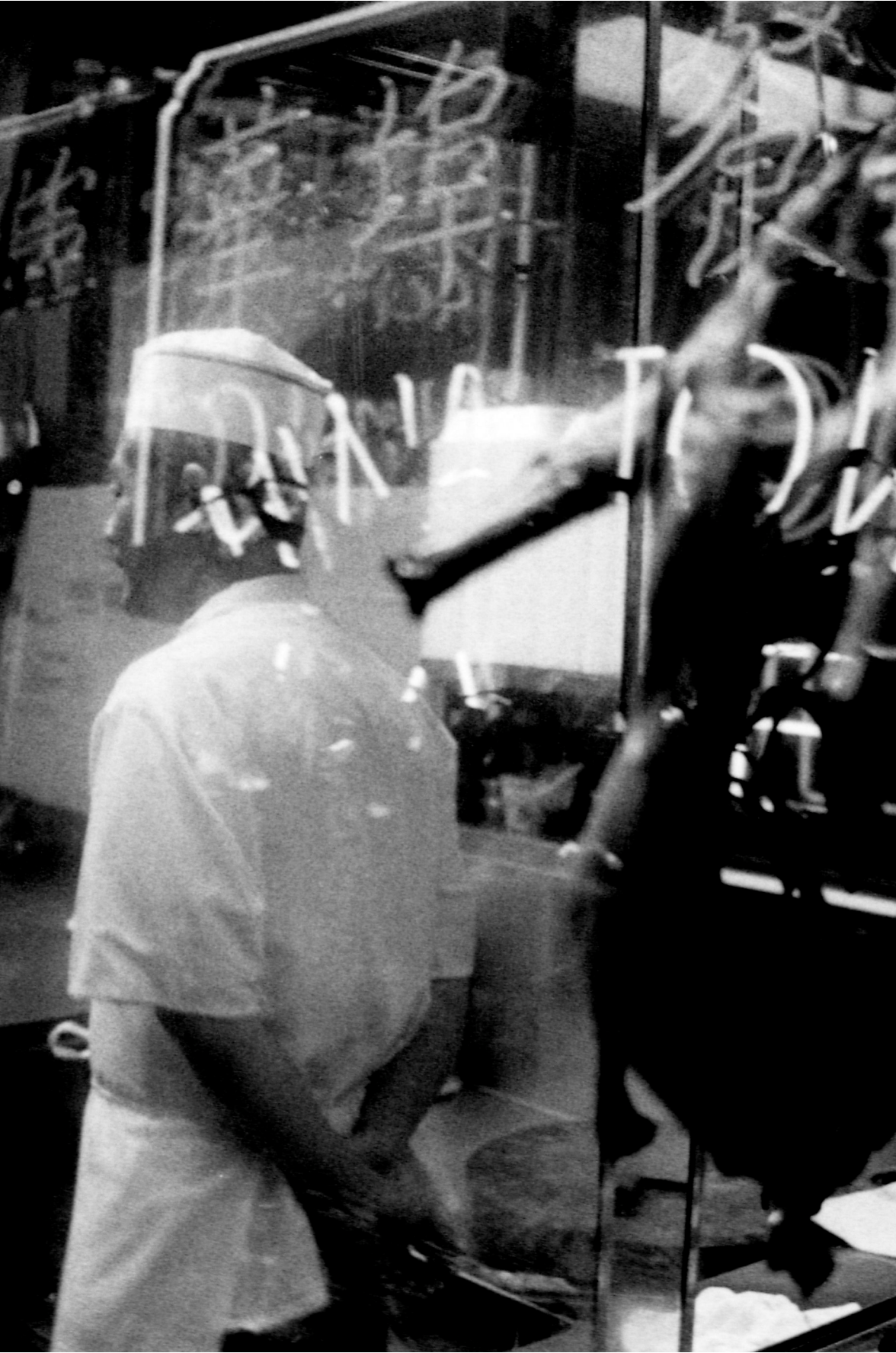
In the past, many workers preferred to be paid in cash so they wouldn't have to pay taxes.

But an increasing number of workers now are seeing the benefits of being paid by check.

Workers paid under the table may not receive full Social Security benefits when they retire and may also fail to qualify for full unemployment and health insurance if they are laid off, says Lowe.

They may also lack proof of income if they need to apply for Workers' Compensation.

Under-the-table workers may also find it difficult to sponsor a family member who wants to immigrate to the U.S.



In the 1990s, the government increased the income requirement of citizens sponsoring relatives to immigrate to the U.S.

Lack of work documentation and failure to pay taxes may also make it more difficult to qualify for citizenship and business or education loans.

Other social benefits are also at stake. Non-citizen legal immigrants can only receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Food Stamps if they have worked a minimum of 40 quarters, or 10 years, in the U.S.

Workers can't get full credit for their time worked if they have been working under the table.

Many older Chinese who have immigrated to the U.S. late in life rely on SSI for survival.

In addition to these practical reasons for being paid by check, there are also moral arguments, says Lowe.

Paying taxes represents a willingness to contribute to the larger social good, not just one's personal welfare.

Those who avoid paying taxes often take advantage of government services purchased with tax dollars, including education, affordable housing, trash removal, and police and fire protection.

Those who refuse to pay end up placing a heavier tax burden on those who have taxes deducted from their paychecks.

Not paying taxes may also reinforce "American stereotypes that Chinatown is a dangerous den of illegal activity and that Chinese people are sneaky and not to be trusted," wrote Lowe in an article on the under-the-table issue.

"I don't think that [paying taxes] is high in the Chinese people's consciousness," she says. For some Americans, paying taxes is considered a civic duty, but "for some reason that doesn't seem to be a big thing to Chinese."

Lowe and others say that many Chinese immigrants have a poor understanding of the law and were not accustomed to paying taxes in China.

Many come to the U.S. with the idea that America is a place to make money, not pay taxes, says one immigrant from Mainland China.

"These are the issues we want the whole community to support," says Lowe. "We're not trying to cause a lot of trouble for Chinese restaurants but we think there has to be some kind of standards."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