

Chinese Theater in San Francisco

The Chinese were among the earliest settlers in San Francisco after the discovery of gold. They came primarily from Canton and other provinces in South China where there was social unrest and economic turmoil. Only months after the discovery of gold, fifty-four Chinese men and one woman had emigrated to California. Two years later there were more than 25,000 Chinese, and by 1890, there were more than 100,00 in the Bay Area.

Many of these Asian newcomers headed straight for the gold camps, but others settled in San Francisco to work as restaurateurs, shopkeepers, and launderers. The vast majority were single young men with true grit but little cash who hoped to return to China with their pockets lined with gold. Strangers in a grange land, these men diverted themselves as the other Gold Rush bachelors did, with gambling and theatre. Like blacks, they weren't welcome at the white theaters and frequented their own gambling dens and took pleasure in their own theatrical traditions.

The first stage show by Chinese performers took place at San Francisco's American Theater in October 1852. A 20-member company of Chinese jugglers, "fresh from Hong Kong," performed for two evenings before a packed crowd. Days later, at the same theater, the City's first full-scale Chinese opera performance, by the imported Tung Hook Tong company, presented a traditional sampling of historical music-drama. Men portrayed both male and female characters, accompanied by a full orchestra of traditional Chinese instruments.

Many things about Chinese theater seemed strange to the average Caucasian. Chinese performances were very long and had no breaks. Audience members made themselves at home, smoking cigars, chatting, and munching candies purchased from strolling vendors. Onstage the costumes were colorful and elaborate. Virtuoso performers conjured up all the needed effects through their dexterous voices and agile bodies. The acrobatic and juggling feats integrated into most of the operas were greatly admired and reminiscent of Shakespeare.

However, the unfamiliar music sounded harsh and discordant to western ears. The epic symbolic nature of the action was very different from the realistic dramas popular at the time. There were also sociological differences. While Chinese delighted in scenes of childbirth, the notion of actors kissing each other on the mouth was repulsive. It was just the opposite for Caucasian audiences.

Despite the uninformed and often unkind press notices, Asian performing troupes visited San Francisco often, bringing much pleasure and amusement to the City's Chinese residents, also providing a link to a distant homeland. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, more and more visitors came to San Francisco and many of these made it a point to drop in on Chinatown and visit the exotic entertainment of Chinese theater.

The unfamiliar Chinese culture was often the subject of ridicule and prejudice. As later generations were assimilated into the general social fabric of San Francisco, the rich classical traditions of Chinese opera would yield to more contemporary Asian-American expressions. In the arts as in other spheres, the City's Asian population would be a major force in the life and character of San Francisco.

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