



The Chinatown Files

A compelling consciousness-raiser of trenchant artistry, Amy Chen's 'The Chinatown Files' is a superb documentary, a triumph of organization, research and clarity that reveals the horrific impact of the McCarthy era upon the Chinese American community.

- Kevin Thomas, LA Times

Directed by Amy Chen

2001, 57 minutes, United States, in English and Chinese

Original Shooting Formats: Video, SD

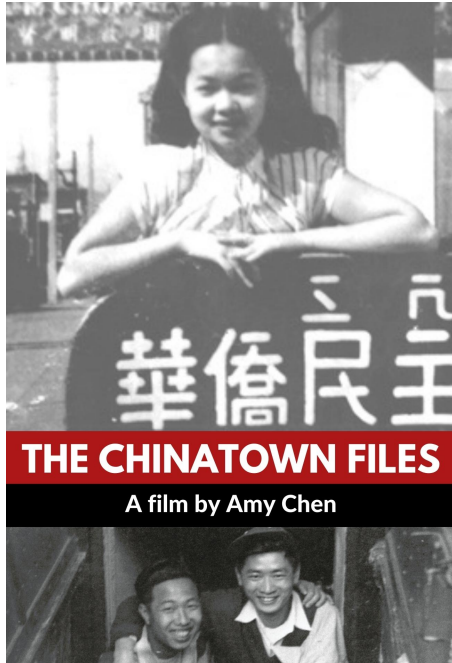
Screening Formats Available: HD

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The Chinatown Files



SYNOPSIS

This documentary brings to the public, for the first time, a story that was classified as secret by the US government for over four decades. Exploring the roots and legacy of the Cold War on the Chinese American community during the 1950s and the 1960s, it presents first hand accounts of seven men and women's experiences of being hunted down, jailed and targeted for deportation in America. During McCarthy era witch-hunts, the loyalties of over ten thousand American citizens of Chinese descent were questioned based on their ethnicity and alleged risk to national security. While China remains an enigma to most Americans, the prejudice and jingoism that has negatively affected the lives of Chinese Americans has rarely been

examined. THE CHINATOWN FILES is a cautionary tale of paranoia and hysteria that serves as a dramatic and enduring reminder of the fragility of constitutional protections today.

REVIEWS

"The 1950s and 1960s were an ugly time for thousands of Chinese Americans, clustered in Chinatowns across the country, who became the target of anti- communist fervor ignited by Sen. Joseph McCarthy and aimed at the Soviet Union and China. New York documentary filmmaker Amy Chen brings this era to life in "The Chinatown Files."

Ryan Kim, San Francisco Chronicle

"The Chinatown Files... shows yellow-baiting is far from fresh. From animated cartoons to newspaper headlines, popular messages dubbed anyone who looked or sounded Chinese an oddity at best, at worst a threat. With testimony from the FBI, historians, and victims, the film recounts how thousands of Chinese Americans across the country—many of them U.S. citizens—were systematically spied on, interrogated, jailed, and often deported by government agencies, all in the name of national security and democracy."

Chisun Lee, The Village Voice

"In Amy Chen's revelatory documentary, "The Chinatown Files," some Chinese Americans tell of enduring endless harassment at the hands of government officials during the McCarthy-Cold War period. It's a part of both American and Chinese-American history that would have remained forgotten had Chen not felt spurred to tell this story, one that has been treated with 50 years of Silence."

Honolulu Star-Bulletin

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"Truth may be the first casualty of war, but justice and perspective were additional casualties of the cold war, as evidenced by The Chinatown Files (56 min.), Amy Chen's riveting film about the hysteria surrounding Chinese-Americans during and just after the McCarthy era."

Chicago Reader

"Highly Recommended... It provides an appropriate background to the McCarthy era attacks on Chinese Americans, and examines the context for racism against the Chinese at the time."

Terry Plum, Educational Media Reviews Online

"Amy Chen's documentary is the first to explore Chinese-American experience during the "climate of fear" that McCarthyism produced, reminding viewers of the tenuous nature of civil rights."

VRT Notable Videos Committee, American Library Association

"Amy Chen's documentary, The Chinatown Files, helped to illustrate the lingering bitterness, guilt, and sadness that resulted from the Confession Program."

Lisa See, Shanghai Girls

SCREENINGS, FESTIVALS & AWARDS

- San Francisco Asian American International Film Festival
- Asian American International Film Festival
- Hawaii International Film Festival
- Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Chicago Asian American Film Festival
- Rockridge Library, Oakland
- Notable Videos for Adults, American Library Association
- Henry Hampton Award, Council on Foundations

BIOGRAPHY

Amy Chen, producer/director of *The Chinatown Files* (2001), the then-untold story of how McCarthyism impacted the Chinese American community during the 1950s. Chen previously worked in film production, distribution, and exhibition and was formerly the executive director of *Women Make Movies*. She is currently CIO of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum and research and educational complex. She received her BA in government at Oberlin College, an MBA from Cornell University and is a graduate of the Third World Newsreel Production Workshop.

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LIVING

Fun With China

by CHISUN LEE

April 24, 2001



Since a U.S. spy plane and Chinese fighter jet collided on April 1, Americans have had more to laugh about. Members of the media have been cracking all kinds of good ones about the funny little yellow people.

Some recent yuks, compiled by Asian American civil rights organizations:

"I don't pretend to know who these Chinese people are. I know they're small, maybe one or two feet high. I know they sound funny when they talk. I know the womenfolk have sideways vaginas. But underneath their scales, they're just like you and me." —Saturday Night Live host Alec Baldwin during an April 7 sketch in which he played a deranged marine trying to incite the 24 U.S. crew members being held on Hainan Island to attempt a takeover of the entire nation.

"I will be in favor of apologizing [to the Chinese] the moment they apologize for all those menus they keep leaving outside my front door. . . . I've got considerable sympathy for the Red Chinese—despite the fact that if my dog were a member of the American crew, Jiang Zemin would have eaten him by now." —National Review Online editor Jonah Goldberg in his April 4 column.

"Ching ching chong chong."—comedy troupe Capitol Steps in a skit at the April 3 opening reception of the American Society of Newspaper Editors convention. Hundreds of editors laughed as a white man, dressed in a black wig and thick glasses, conversed in a made-up version of Chinese.

"If I were president of the United States, I would declare war on the Chinese, but not just because they held 24 of our folks on Hainan Island for 11 days. . . . We should unload the big ham on China because of all the annoying artsy-craftsy crapola they manufacture and send over here. . . . Real men wouldn't have to waste their afternoons slogging through craft emporiums looking at faux leopard-skin hat boxes if it weren't for the Chinese slapping together all of this garbage and unloading it over here." —*Austin American-Statesman* staff writer John Kelso in his April 15 column.

"The Chinese now say they are taking a hard stance. Now they say they are going to double the amount of MSG they put in our food." —NBC *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno on the April 4 show.

"So now the Chinese have the spy plane and George Bush is playing hardball with them. He said not only does he want the spy plane returned, he also wants it dry-cleaned." —David Letterman on CBS's April 4 *Late Show*.

A "fry over" was how talk radio host Don Bleu of the San Francisco area's 101.3-FM described the plane situation during an April 6 bit. Playing music from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in the background, he made prank calls, seemingly to strangers in China.

Morning host Ray Lytle of WQLZ in Springfield, Illinois, declared he would not patronize Chinese restaurants or play Chinese checkers until the U.S. crew returned home. In one gag, he told listeners he was dialing numbers at random for residents of New York's Chinatown. He mocked one woman, who briefly stayed on the line, for her limited English proficiency.

"Asian Americans are becoming the sacrificial lamb to secure the U.S.'s position as the superpower of the world."—Sin Yen Ling of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

"Get a sense of humor!" objectors to this brand of merriment are likely to hear. Cracks about racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and fat or stupid people are, after all, just good, clean, all-American fun. By no means should we suspect that the jocular dick-swinging—it's not incidental that most if not all the jokesters are white men—disguises a morass of social anxiety that in the face of a perceived threat can easily transform to hostility.

But the experience of Asian Americans has proved that for minorities, mockery can work just that way. A new documentary about the McCarthy-era persecution of suspected Chinese American communist sympathizers—the *Chinatown Files*, whose New York debut this week at the Museum of Modern Art is eerily relevant—shows



From animated cartoons to newspaper headlines, popular messages dubbed anyone who looked or sounded Chinese an oddity at best, at worst a threat. With testimony from the FBI, historians, and victims, the film recounts how thousands of Chinese Americans across the country—many of them U.S. citizens—were systematically spied on, interrogated, jailed, and often deported by government agencies, all in the name of national security and democracy.

Racial humor is “used a lot of times just to demonize certain people,” says documentary director Amy Chen. “They’re rendered despicable, and it’s possible to persecute them.”

The butt of the joke gets isolated, shoved under a spotlight, and ridiculed for being different. A vulnerable place to be, especially at times of heightened international tensions when the U.S.’s very virility hangs in the balance. (Much, incidentally, has been made in the news of China’s need to save face. There’s less heard about the scramble in this, the land of cowboys, football, and *Rocky*, to preserve another anatomical part.)

Those who dismiss the notion that a silly spy plane standoff could set off a xenophobic explosion don’t realize there’s much more at stake than aeronautics secrets.

“Asian Americans are becoming the sacrificial lamb to secure the U.S.’s position as the superpower of the world,” declares Sin Yen Ling of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. “They are positioned as the domestic threat—foreign, unassimilable, loyal to the motherland.” Fanning the flames of anti-Asian suspicion, she suggests, is a way not only to boost patriotism among the masses but also to divert attention from such gaping chinks in the nation’s ideological armor as booming prison numbers and racial profiling in law enforcement. “It goes back to the U.S.’s being the greatest, the place where everyone should be happy to be living,” Ling says.

Shock jocks didn’t know they could be so deep. Well, their profundity remaining up for debate, it’s safe to say their shenanigans do contribute to a general atmosphere where it becomes acceptable to mock or do worse to people who look and sound a certain way. What sets members of the media apart from some yahoo holding court in the local bar is the power to reach millions of eyes and ears and “give the sense that this stuff is OK out there in popular culture,” according to Asian American Journalists Association national president Victor Panichkul. He argues that commentators should therefore take care to “express an opinion intelligently, without resorting to pejorative racial stereotypes.”

“I’m a
third-generation American, and there’s talk of us being sent
back to our own country. This is our country!”
—George Ong, Organization of Chinese
Americans national president.

For every prank executed by the media, civil rights groups suspect, there are dozens that Asian Americans experience on a more intimate level in workplaces, on buses, in the streets. Not even Capitol Hill is immune, according to Diane Chin, executive director of Chinese for Affirmative Action.

Recalling a recent gathering of civil rights organizations where Senator Dianne Feinstein spoke, Chin paraphrases the senator’s words: “The mood in Washington is increasingly anti-Chinese. You need to do something about that.” Chin says, “I think of her as one of the most conservative Democrats. That that’s what preoccupied her, as a civil rights issue, was fascinating to me.”

Even before the current diplomatic crisis, recent controversies involving Asians, such as the Wen Ho Lee case and campaign financing scandals, helped fuel a “media hysteria” that documentarian Chen says carries distinct overtones of 1950s alarmism. Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA) national president George Ong is frustrated that even decades later the “forever foreigner” suspicions about Asians haven’t lost their potency. “I’m a third-generation American, and there’s talk of us being sent back to our own country. This is our country!” he exclaims. “How dare they say we should be sent elsewhere.”

During times like this, advocates counsel, Asian Americans should be on the alert. According to the most recent audit of anti-Asian violence, which covers 41 states, 486 incidents occurred in 1999, up 57 from the previous year. “A lot of the research around hate violence indicates that the beginning is the dehumanization of whatever group it is. There can be a correlation drawn between when a group is cast as “other,” or demonized with whatever stereotypes work against that group, and hate crimes against that group,” says Chin.

The current climate reminds more than one observer of the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin. Two unemployed white auto workers beat the Chinese American man to death with a baseball bat, allegedly having mistaken him for being Japanese during a time of strong popular frustration over what was perceived as an encroaching Japanese economy. As memorable in some circles as the Rodney King or Amadou Diallo incidents, the killing is famous for having galvanized a nationwide Asian American rights movement.

The less obvious costs of anti-Asian sentiment can be even greater. A history of popular intolerance and government scrutiny effectively stunted Asian American political organizing for decades, activists say, rendering the community even more vulnerable to attacks. Persecution is no less possible today, they argue.

“I would certainly not be surprised” if government agencies were “looking at people’s allegiances” as a result of the tensions with China, says First Amendment activist Kit Gage, who coordinates the National Coalition to Protect Political Freedom. “It’s so easy to justify,” she says, in light of the 1996 anti-terrorism act that granted the



According to Gage, “word will spread” of the government’s probes, “and it has a nice chilling effect.” She points out that it is perfectly legal for anyone—visitor, resident, or citizen—in the U.S. to express pro-China sentiments.

But the true space for such free expression, according to the OCA’s Ong, is narrow, given that even contributing to the Democratic and Republican parties is tougher for Asian Americans. In the wake of the China-related campaign finance commotion of the 1990s, he says, “The whole Asian American community suffered.” Asian Americans “were singled out because of what happened,” and “you had to furnish proof that you were an American citizen” to make a donation to the major parties.

Comedians and columnists will continue to insist they mean no harm, that their yellow humor is all in good fun. They can’t imagine what kung pao cocker spaniel has to do with political persecution and racist violence. Would that these jesters existed in a vacuum, where racy speech never had racist consequences.

Research assistance: James Wong

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Friday, November 9, 2001



HIFF

Amy Chen had a difficult time finding governmental archival material for "The Chinatown Files," and relied on photos and home movies from her interviewee's collections to make the documentary she says is her first and last.

Chinese Americans faced Cold War bias

Amy Chen's "The Chinatown Files" bares another ugly side of the McCarthy period

By Gary C. W. Chun
gchun@starbulletin.com

In Amy Chen's revelatory documentary, "The Chinatown Files," some Chinese Americans tell of enduring endless harassment at the hands of government officials during the McCarthy-Cold War period. It's a part of both American and Chinese-American history that would have remained forgotten had Chen not felt spurred to tell this story, one that has been treated with 50 years of silence.

"During that time, my family wasn't allowed to send money back home," she said by phone from her Waikiki hotel room Wednesday morning. "So my family tried to circumvent regular channels by finding different ways to get the money back home to their relatives. And when I learned about the trial of three laundry workers who were arrested because of this 'trading with the enemy act,' I was appalled. I wondered how basic American civil rights could not help these men.

"The Chinatown Files"

7:30 p.m. today, with "Made in China," at the
Hawai'i Convention Center

"Once I had the idea in mind to make this documentary, it took a long time to make it. The difficulty was that many of the people I wanted to interview for the film were afraid to tell their story. They still felt that saying what they went through would threaten and maybe injure their lives.

"They still had this sense of vulnerability immigrants feel in a new country. These people still don't feel fully American. Even my family was initially against my making this documentary, that it would adversely affect my own life," she said.

But her family came around after seeing her work and appreciated what she had done. "I just showed a Chinese-language version at a Queens library that was standing-room-only. It just shows how hungry we are for this history."

In assembling material for "The Chinatown Files," Chen found it hard to find any official United States archival material. "There was nothing I could find relating to Chinese Americans; I guess it was generally thought they had no social and cultural importance to the history of our country."

Instead, Chen makes good use of photos and home movies from her interviewees' collections. And what documentation she could get, using the Freedom of Information Act, was heavily censored.

"My requests for Treasury, FBI and Immigration records, while I got what felt like tons of documents, the majority of information was still considered classified, and filled with blacked-out sections marked 'Confidential.'"

During the height of the Cold War and the "Red Scare," any Chinese American even slightly suspected of sympathizing with Mao Zedong's communist revolution and against the exiled Kuomintang government of Chiang Kai-Shek in Taiwan -- not only sending money back to families back in mainland China, but being associated with a newspaper or youth organization that didn't show outright support for the Kuomintang -- was a target of suspicion and even imprisonment and deportation.

"I feel it's tragic that so many people's lives were ruined by this harassment," Chen said. "What kept me going on to complete this project was to have their stories finally told, an urgency I felt that this

needed to be done.

"Even with articulate, well-spoken pillars of the community, they didn't want to speak at first. When I showed a rough cut to them and their families, even their children said they didn't realize what their parents went through.

"There's still a sense of real shame within the Chinese-American community and a stigma attached to being investigated by the FBI," she said.

Their sense of paranoia even touched the Wen Ho Lee case, in which a Chinese-American scientist was arrested in 1999 for being an alleged spy. "So few people spoke up in his defense," Chen said, "and here we think we've made so much progress. But, as we've learned with how some Arab Americans have suffered the curtailment of their basic American rights, we should all have the ability to protect one's rights and to be vigilant in safeguarding them.

"The documentary, if nothing else, shows that it's so easy to scapegoat any minority group of color. And with the xenophobia surrounding the back-and-forth relations between the U.S. and China, it's also a cautionary tale."

While "The Chinatown Files" has had well-received screenings at festivals and universities since its completion in March (along with the National Asian-American Television Association's help in getting a possible future PBS airing), this may be Chen's first and last documentary.

"It's hard enough to raise money for independent films, and when it comes to documentaries, forget it!" she said. "It's tough to find funding for films about social justice. I was lucky to find what little government agency and foundation support to finish it. In fact, someone from the National Endowment for the Humanities told me that one of their panelists said that he was tired of seeing anti-McCarthy documentaries, and why don't they fund something pro-McCarthy!

"Another potential funder said there weren't enough Chinese Americans killed; it's like, if it isn't anything of holocaust proportions, it's not a big enough tragedy to consider. You're either considered a 'model minority' or not important enough to even bother with."



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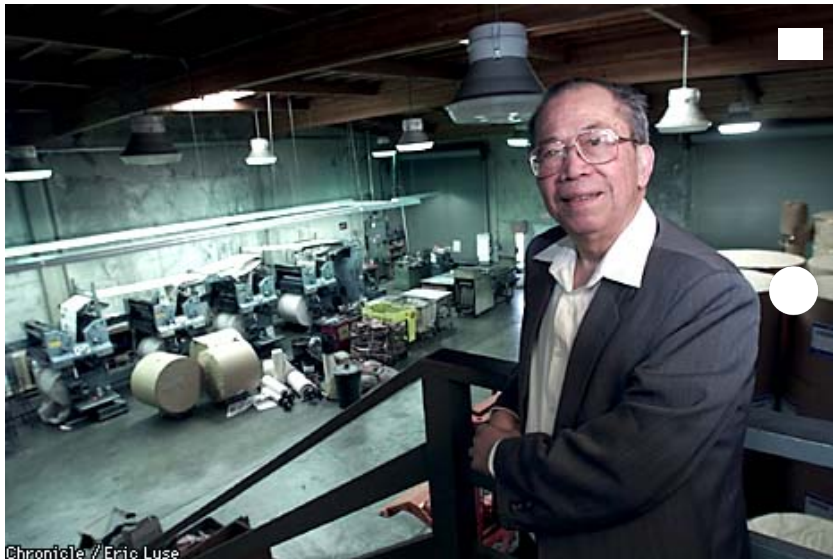
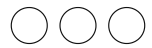


News

Keeping Tabs On Chinatown / Premiering documentary shows how Red Scare cast pall of suspicion on an entire community

Ryan Kim, Chronicle Staff Writer

March 10, 2001



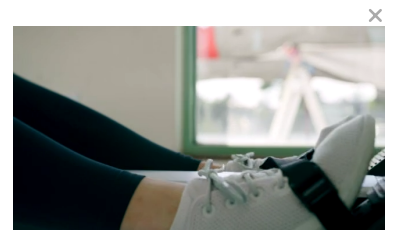
Chronicle / Eric Luse

1 of 3

Publisher and longtime San Franciscan Maurice Chuck, 68, still works in the city where he was once scrutinized by the FBI. Chronicle photo by Eric Luse

The communist scare of the McCarthy era brought persecution and upheaval for union workers, Hollywood script writers and left-leaning political activists -- but it also ravaged a forgotten community.

The 1950s and 1960s were an ugly time for thousands of Chinese Americans, clustered in Chinatowns across the country, who became the target of anti-communist fervor ignited by Sen. Joseph McCarthy and aimed at the Soviet Union and China.



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New York documentary filmmaker [Amy Chen](#) brings this era to life in "The Chinatown Files," a documentary premiering Monday at the Asian American Film Festival in San Francisco. The film, which took 10 years to produce, focuses on the lives of seven people, five of whom lived in San Francisco.

For Chinese Americans, the Red Scare meant they couldn't send money to relatives in China, speak positively of their homeland or reaffirm their ethnic identity. Families were divided, jobs were lost and people were jailed.

And perhaps more significantly, an entire community withdrew from society in hopes that anonymity and submission might assuage government suspicion.

"It forced Chinese not to take a stand on anything," Chen said. "It forced them to be silent and unwilling to speak out."

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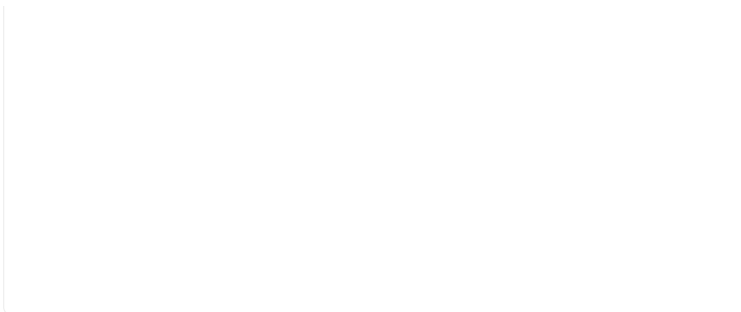
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Chen said the story has never been told in part because the paranoia of that era has continued to muzzle many older Chinese Americans. But the ordeal was very vivid for Chinatown residents.

"It was very scary during that time," said Maurice Chuck, 68, a magazine publisher who still lives in San Francisco. "The FBI would ask my parents about my activities, they would ask my friends. It seemed like a threat to me."

The recent investigation of nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee brought back unwelcome memories of that time. Many saw the investigation of Lee, which failed to establish him as a spy for China, as another case of persecution based on ethnicity. It was a reminder that times have not changed enough, said Chuck.

"When I heard about Wen Ho Lee, my first impression was it's very familiar," he said. "It's happening again."

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For Chinese Americans like Chuck, scrutiny came when the newly formed People's Republic of China entered the Korean War in November 1950. In a decade, China had gone from being a World War II ally to part of the communist regime, a turnabout immediately felt by Chinatown residents.

Chuck was a member of the Chinese American Democratic Youth League, comprising largely high school and college-age immigrants who studied together and learned about their culture. The group became a target of the FBI, which suspected members of being communist sympathizers or possible Chinese agents.

He said many members were repeatedly stopped by FBI agents who inquired about the organization's activities. They also were asked about other

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According to Chuck, the members were not communists but were simply interested in the affairs of China, perhaps too subtle a distinction for that period.

"My feelings about old China was that it was always under attack. It was a mess," said Chuck. "But when the People's Republic of China was founded in

1949, I, like a lot of overseas Chinese, was happy because it would finally be a strong country and the people there would have enough to eat."

A budding journalist, Chuck began writing commentaries in the World China Daily, a New York-based newspaper started by laundry workers. Chuck advocated establishing formal relations between China and the United States.

He continued to write after being drafted into the U.S. Army in 1953. In 1955, he was abruptly arrested by military police and given an undesirable discharge because of his commentaries and involvement in the Chinese American Youth Democratic League. It would take another year and a lawsuit by the ACLU before Chuck received his honorable discharge.

The situation was also difficult for Chinese Americans who had been sending money home. The Trading with the Enemy Act was widened to include China after its entry into the Korean War.

Citing the act, the FBI shut down the China Daily News and arrested the paper's president, Henry Chin, after he published an ad for a Chinese bank. Three laundry workers also were arrested and eventually convicted for sending money home to their families in China. The group spent six months in jail.

According to documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, Chen said, the government briefly considered interning Chinese Americans in the same way Japanese Americans on the West Coast were sent to camps during World War II. Chen said the proposal went to President Harry Truman, who vetoed the idea.

Him Mark Lai, a 75-year-old retired engineer, said the mood in Chinatown was incredibly tense. People were afraid of speaking out and being ratted out by other Chinese Americans. It deepened divisions between pro-Taiwan residents,

who favored the former Chinese government under Chiang Kai Shek, and others with ties to the mainland.

"It wasn't a pleasant situation to live under," said Lai, of San Francisco. "You had to be so careful when you said anything or did anything. (The FBI) could take my words and actions and make the worst possible case out of it."

Getting a job was not easy for those who ventured out of Chinatown. Connie Hwang, a former computer programmer, said she and others knew to avoid



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any projects that required security clearance. She said it was understood that they, as Chinese Americans, wouldn't qualify.

"I knew that when I looked for a job, there were some places I couldn't look at, like the Lawrence Laboratory or Lockheed, because you knew there were these certain restrictions," said Hwang, of Berkeley. "Discrimination was already a problem, but this was an additional problem."

Even in Chinatown, employers didn't want to be associated with people who were under FBI surveillance. Sometimes family members shunned each other for fear of being investigated.

What made this brand of McCarthyism different was the status of many Chinese Americans, said Ellen Schrecker, a history professor at New York's Yeshiva University who has studied the McCarthy era.

"These people were vulnerable in a legalistic sense because many of them were illegal immigrants," said Schrecker. "It's like illegal immigrants today, who clearly have few rights. These people were caught up in the main political furor of the time."

Orinda resident Cathy Lowe's citizenship status was put in limbo for almost 20 years because of her involvement with the youth league. After she was singled out, her father testified to immigration officials that he had brought his daughter to America using false papers.

The fear in Chinatown finally subsided in 1972 when President Richard Nixon visited China and paved the way for open relations between the two countries. But Chen said the wounds festered for many years, and have not fully healed for some.

"To this day, people are still very afraid," said Chen. "It's not like anything can happen to them but there is the fear of the unknown. Once you've been targeted, you're always very suspicious."

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