Chinese-American associations in Canada and the United States dominated the life of Chinatowns during the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. For the predominantly male population the associations, which were based on district, dialect, kinship and other bonds, provided social settings, connections to economic opportunities, and sometimes quasi-governmental functions to its membership.

The associations occupied multi-storey buildings (often two to five or more storeys in height) within the boundaries of Chinatown, buying space if possible, leasing at first if necessary. Fires and fire codes of the 19th century had led to the replacement of wooden structures by brick ones in these neighbourhoods by the early-20th century.

An association’s spaces rarely occupied more than one floor of a building. Commonly, basements and backrooms might contain small factories or fulfil other business uses. The ground-floor streets frontages were used for commerce. The middle floors were devoted to a residential hotel. The association commonly occupied the symbolically prestigious space on the top floor. A main hall with an altar to a deity or the principal ancestors created a focal point and main axis to this important gathering space. Offices and a few other rooms were clustered around the main hall. In this way a multi-storey association building could be a replication in microcosm of the land uses of the Chinatown in which it stood.

The primary street facade offered the best opportunity to present the public image of the institution within. Whether the facade appeared more Euro-American or more Sinicized in design depended upon the way that the organization viewed itself. The more decorative and Sinicized association facades helped to give Chinatowns their special visual character. Shop fronts were created by the business occupying the pavement frontage. The central section was often left undecorated or in some cases was given a balcony on each floor level as was common in the Chinatowns of Victoria and Vancouver, Canada. Usually, the heaviest and most distinctive segment of the facade was the top floor where the association rooms were located. There might be a balcony, lights, and a central doorway surrounded by Chinese characters with symmetrically flanking windows. Bright red, green and gold intensified the effect of the decoration. Curving eaves over the balcony and a picturesquely shaped parapet wall were also employed regularly. A symmetrical composition was the norm.

Chinese-American association building with decorative top floor, San Francisco, California, United States.