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Notorious Site Gets New Name —And Mission

BY ANDREW HERRMANN STAFF WRITER

The Rev. Joseph Yim is scaling the stairs of a Chinatown landmark when he pauses to catch his which means "prosperity peaceful breath—and lets a visitor in on a conduct," is returning to its roots. secret.

building," says Yim. That may be center. true, but give federal agents an assist.

This weekend, the long-shuttered and notorious gambling den. the On Leong Merchants Association Building, reopens with a new name—Pui Tak Center—and a new mission—helping Chinese immigrants assimilate into America.

It has been shut since the evening of April 20, 1988, when the FBI flattened the front door of 2216 S. Wentworth to bust up a they wait for vans to shuttle them gambling operation reportedly in- to restaurant jobs throughout the volving thousands of dollars a day. city and suburbs. They won't re-A hundred men were swarmed as turn for a dozen hours or more, so, agents made arrests and confiscat- for many, school must start as the ed the evidence of gambling games sun rises.

such as Pai Gow, Fan Tan and Mah-Jongg.

After the bust, the three-story structure with Chinese inspired architecture of terra-cotta towers and pagodas, fell into disrepair.

Yim's Chinese Christian Union Church bought the building for \$1.4 million in 1993 from the federal government. Another \$1 million was spent by the church to restore it.

In many ways, the On Leong, Opened in 1928, it originally "We believe God gave us this served as an immigrant assistance

> It wasn't until the mid-1960s claimed was a national headquarters for a multimillion-dollar operation involved in racketeering.

> One immediate focus of the new Pui Tak: English classes for immigrants, held early in the morning.

> Look around Chinatown around 10:30 a.m. and one can see hundreds of young Chinese men huddled together on street corners as



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The Rev. Joseph Yim (left) of the Chinese Christian Union Church and David Wu, executive director of that it became what prosecutors the Pui Tak Center, stand in front of the onetime gambling den that had fallen into disrepair.

Many are anxious to learn the language, said David Wu, executive director of the Pui Tak Cen-

"They know if they don't, ple. they'll be stuck busing tables or working in the kitchens," Wu said.

There will also be tutoring programs for kids, community workshops on topics such as health and parenting skills, and a free translation service in which volunteers will translate English correspondence into Chinese.

Wu hopes the center will play a

secondary role in the Chinatown community: giving successful Chinese Americans a place to return to their roots and help their peo-

"A lot of ethnic communities have a hard time attracting back people who come to the United States. They become educated-become engineers or doctors then move to the suburbs," Wu

"This will allow people who still have the immigrant experience fresh in their minds to give [immi-

grants] some insight on how to make it" in the United States.

For the neighborhood, the freshly spruced Pui Tak is a welcome change. A hulking structure that serves as a kind of front gate for Chinatown, it has in recent years been an embarrassing trash magnet.

The new start is reflected in the building's name. Pui Tak, says Wu, means "developing moral character and virtue."

Tours will be given Saturday from 2 to 5 p.m.