

**Building a Home from Diaspora:
Making and Remaking of the First American Chinatown**

Yan Zhen Zhu
Senior Division
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*Originally, I had intended to come to America last year.
Lack of money delayed me until early autumn.
It was on the day that the Weaver Maiden met the Cowherd
That I took passage on the President Lincoln.
I ate wind and tasted waves for more than twenty days.
Fortunately, I arrived safely on the American continent.
I thought I could land in a few days.
How was I to know I would become a prisoner suffering in the wooden building?
The barbarians' abuse is really difficult to take.
When my family's circumstances stir my emotions, a double stream of tears flows.
I only wish I can land in San Francisco soon,
Thus sparing me this additional sorrow here.*

- Translation of a poem carved into the wooden barrack wall of the Angel Island Immigration Station¹

In 1830, the U.S. census recorded three Chinese people living in the United States.² Twenty years later, that number rose to 4000, largely consisting of young men who left their homes in rural Southern provinces in hopes of striking gold in California, or *gam saan*, for “gold mountain.”³ This number steadily increased, and by 1860, there were about 25,000 Chinese immigrants—constituting the single largest foreign-born ethnic group in California.⁴ These miners soon became victims of anti-Chinese discrimination as they competed against white miners, with local attempts to exclude Chinese miners made in California mining districts such as Horsetown, Oregon Gulch, Middletown, and Deer Creek.⁵

Facing brutal attacks and legislative disempowerment, many Chinese miners and (later) railroad workers were pushed out of small counties and relocated to a few streets near the ‘heart’

¹ Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. “Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940” *Seattle: University of Washington Press*, 2014 <https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295994079/island/>; Yogi, Stan. *MELUS* 17, no. 2 (1991): 77–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467002>.

² “Timeline of Chinese Immigration to the United States” *The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley*. <https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/chinese-immigration-to-the-united-states-1884-1944/timeline.html>

³ Ibid; “Searching for the Gold Mountain” Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/chinese/searching-for-the-gold-mountain/>

⁴ Kanazawa, Mark. “Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California.” *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (2005): 779–805. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875017>.

⁵ Ibid.

of San Francisco.⁶ Although the West was a frontier for white Americans, the Chinese were limited to these streets—its borders solidified through property owners refusing to rent to immigrants. Nevertheless, Chinatown, only occupying upper Sacramento Street, Dupont Street, and adjacent areas, became home to thousands of Chinese immigrants as they found work in Chinese restaurants, laundromats, and other businesses.⁷ Immigrants opened and expanded the frontier of the Chinese market to American consumers, while carving a home in America through the San Francisco Chinatown. These streets were transformed into a safe space for Chinese immigrants during initial waves of hostility, and continued to serve as both symbolic and physical home to Chinese in America. Through its invention from discrimination and diaspora and reinvention as a commercial space, Chinatown served as a cultural and physical frontier, stretching beyond the streets that it occupied.

The San Francisco Chinatown was a pioneer in creating a safe social space for Chinese settlers and establishing and asserting economic power as a business and tourist space, pivotal in the development of a distinct Chinese American identity.

Settlement and Relocation: Making Chinatown

The 1843 Treaty of Nanjing, which settled the First Opium War, opened Chinese ports to Western traders, and legalized the “coolie trade.”⁸ As settlers moved West and the country rapidly industrialized, there was a great demand for labor.⁹ And Chinese settlers, mostly coming

⁶ “Chinese Livelihood in Rural California, the Impact of Economic Change, 1860-1880” from Working People of California. University of California Press E-Books Collection, 1982-2004. <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft9x0nb6fg&chunk.id=d0e1786&toc.id=d0e1777&toc.depth=1&brand=ucpress&anchor.id=bkd0e1821#X>

⁷ DYL, JOANNA L. “REBUILDING AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE.” In *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco’s 1906 Earthquake*, 129–63. University of Washington Press, 2017. 145.; Okihiro, Gary Y. “SAN FRANCISCO.” In *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, 1st ed., 265–94. University of California Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqh8.14>.

⁸ Mei, June. “Socioeconomic Origins of Emigration: Guangdong to California, 1850-1882.” *Modern China* 5, no. 4 (1979): 463–501. 478. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/188841>.; “Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking), 1842” University of Southern California, US-China Institute. <https://china.usc.edu/treaty-nanjing-nanking-1842>

⁹ Mei, June; Okihiro, Gary Y. “CALIFORNIA.” In *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, 1st ed., 150–83. University of California Press, 2015. 154-155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqh8.11>.

from southeastern China, entered contacts with labor recruiters, shipping companies, and credit suppliers to fund their ship passage in return for their labor for set wages and a specified term.¹⁰

The initial wave of Chinese immigrants were met with benevolence from Californians as they provided cheap labor in railroads, factories, and ranches. John McDougal, governor of California from 1849 to 1851, commented on the Chinese as “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens,” as they proved to be efficient laborers.¹¹ However, it is this same quality that fueled antagonism, as their quality of work and willingness to accept less pay drove the price of labor down, thereby negatively affecting native workers who were unwilling to accept lower wages.¹² This antagonism led to the outbreak of violent crimes that continued into the latter half of the century, with tragedies such as the Chinese Massacre of 1871, stoking fear into the new settlers.¹³ Moreover, Chinese people lacked legal equity, with the 1854 California Supreme Court ruling that disbarred Chinese from testifying in court under the basis that the Chinese were “a race of people whom nature has marked inferior.”¹⁴

This same rationale would disallow Chinese from holding property, and as many white homeowners did not welcome Chinese tenants, Chinese immigrants were further pushed into the few areas that did rent to them.¹⁵ Thus, dozens of small Chinatowns formed in towns such as Locke and Marysville, California. However, these settlements garnered animosity as nativist sentiments rose, culminating in arson and other violent crimes. By the 1880s, around 200

¹⁰ Okihiro.

¹¹ McDougal, John. “State of the State Address” The Governor’s Gallery, January 7, 1852. https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_02-McDougall.html

¹² WELLBORN, MILDRED. “THE EVENTS LEADING TO THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACTS.” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 1/2 (1912): 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41168895>.

¹³ Zesch, Scott. “Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre.” *Southern California Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2008): 109–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172418>.

¹⁴ Murray, Ch. J. “People v. Hall, 4 Cal. 399 (1854)” Caselaw Access Project, Harvard Law School, 1854. 404. <https://cite.case.law/cal/4/399/>

¹⁵ “The Surprising Reason Behind Chinatown’s Aesthetic” Vox, May 10, 2021. 3:55 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiX3hTPGoCg>

Chinatowns were burned down or destroyed.¹⁶ These incidents further pushed Chinese immigrants into urban Chinatowns, namely the San Francisco Chinatown, as they offered strength in numbers.¹⁷

Work opportunities also drew settlers to Chinatown, as businesses concentrated in the port city. Some Chinese workers turned away from mining due to the foreign miners' tax, forcing all foreign-born miners to pay \$20 per month to obtain a gold mining license, and hostility from other miners.¹⁸ Settling into the San Francisco Chinatown, there were restaurants, laundromats, and cigar factories.¹⁹ By 1880, its population nearly doubled from the previous decade to over 20,000 residents (over 20 percent of all Chinese in the US).²⁰ Irrespective of persisting discrimination, the population steadily increased as more immigrants and settlers made a home out of Chinatown.

Protecting its Own: Chinese Six Companies

Without legal representation, the leaders of various Chinese groups (generally wealthier merchants), formed organizations to protect their civil and legal rights.²¹ These organizations called *hui kuan*, or *huiguan*, based on ethnic groups and Chinese provinces, were established.²² Merchants from Guangzhou formed the Sam Yup Association or Canton Company, merchants from the Tan River Valley formed the Siyi huiguan, and so forth.²³ The most powerful of the huiguan formed the Chinese Six Companies, or the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent

¹⁶ Yoshiko Kandil, Caitlin. "How 1800s racism birthed Chinatown, Japantown and other ethnic enclaves" NBC News, May 13, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/how-1800s-racism-birthed-chinatown-japantown-other-ethnic-enclaves-n997296>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kanazawa. 784.

¹⁹ Okihiro. 267-268 Note: the US census likely undercounted the number of Chinese (Okihiro)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hansen, Lawrence Douglas Taylor. "The Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco and the Smuggling of Chinese Immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1882-1930." *Journal of the Southwest* 48, no. 1 (2006): 37–61. 38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40170313>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

Association (CCBA) by 1854.²⁴ Representatives from the Six Companies would meet regularly to discuss issues affecting the Chinese population, such as discriminatory laws or the importation of Chinese prostitutes (see Appendix I).

Composed of the elite business class, the Six Companies would come to regulate life in the San Francisco Chinatown.²⁵ They secured contracts with Western employers, thereby supplying them with laborers and ensuring that the Chinese immigrants that do arrive have work.²⁶ The Six Companies served as an intermediate organization between the Chinese government and the US (alongside other countries), and represented Chinese interest.²⁷

Moreover, they shaped the cultural landscape of Chinatown, building schools, recreational facilities, and providing shelter and food to immigrants until they find work.²⁸ They also offered and provided loans to both Chinese hoping to emigrate and those wishing to return to China.²⁹

As anti-Chinese sentiments worsened in the 1870s and 1880s, manifesting in restrictive and discriminatory legislation such as the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Six Companies and Chinatown as a whole acted as a protector for Chinese immigrants. The Six Companies hired a dozen policemen to defend Chinese businesses and other properties, while simultaneously hiring lawyers to help them counteract anti-Chinese legislation at different levels.³⁰ They were also at the forefront of protest, instructing non-compliance with the Geary Act (which stipulated that Chinese laborers always carry a certificate of residence), and arguing

²⁴ Hoy, William. "The Chinese Six Companies; a short, general historical resumé of its origin, function, and importance in the life of the California Chinese." San Francisco, Calif.; The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, 1942. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015019233439&view=1up&seq=7>

²⁵ Hansen. 41-42.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hansen. 46.

the unconstitutionality of the act.³¹ Despite the legal onslaught that Chinese faced, there was still safety and solidarity in the San Francisco Chinatown.

Outsiders' Chinatown

While the Chinese faced legal discrimination, Chinatown gained the reputation as breeding ground of debauchery and filth, with opium dens at every storefront, and brothels at every street corner.

Contemporary accounts of Chinatown focused on its danger and exoticness, such as the *Daily Morning Chronicle*, a local newspaper that reported on San Francisco Bay Area affairs, noting how there was “the arrival of a cargo of Celestial live freight, consisting of several hundred female characters,” with Chinese immigrants who carried deadly weapons, which “meant business.”³² Other newspapers featured stories that sensationalized crime, such as the *San Francisco Chronicle's* Horrors of a Great City: A Night Among the Chinese. In the November 1869 edition, the reader is immersed into the ‘perilous’ Chinatown, where buildings were overcrowded, opium dens were accessible (see Appendix II), restaurants emitted odors “unbearable to the Christian nose,” and “dirt is in every corner” occupied by “creatures” whose general features “brings of vermin and disease.”³³ The December 1869 feature offered a new installation of the series which dove into how Chinese women were imported then “disposed of,” as though they were cargo.³⁴

³¹ Ibid.

³² "ANTICIPATED BATTLE AMONG THE CHINESE." *The Daily Morning Chronicle* (1868-1869), Feb 24, 1869. <http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/anticipated-battle-among-chinese/docview/571582031/se-2>.

³³ "HORRORS OF A GREAT CITY: A NIGHT AMONG THE CHINESE GRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF THE CHINESE PURLIEUS ITS CROWDED QUARTERS--OPIUM DENA--A RESTAURANT--CRIME--A GAMBLING HELL--HAW CELESTIALS GAMBLE--VICE CONCENTRATED HOW THE CHINESE CAME HERE CHINATOWN M'EOY BUILDING AN OPIUM DEN A RESTAURANT CRIME ABOVE STAIRS THE GAMBLING HELL HOW CELESTIALS GAMBLE VICE CONCENTRATED AND DISTILLED." *San Francisco Chronicle* (1869-1922), Nov 27, 1869. <http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/horrors-great-city/docview/575231225/se-2>.

³⁴ "HORRORS OF A GREAT CITY: CHINADOM BY DAY AND BY NIGHT THE IMPORTATION OF CHINESE WOMEN AND WHAT IS DONE WITH THEM THEY ALLEYS AND DENS WHERE THEY EXIST HOW THEY EAT AND HOW THEY LIVE A HAIRDRESSER AND A VENDOR OF SOUPS AND CAKES SCENES AFTER DARK--AROUND WITH A POLICE OFFICER--WINDOW--TAPPING--WHITE PATRONS--DREADFUL LIFE OF THE WOMEN AND THEIR

These accounts were partly based in truth as there was the formation of secret societies popularly known as *tongs*. These secret societies, offering an alternative to the established huiguan (where membership was based on ethnic clan ties and commercial success) rose to rival the Chinese Six Companies.³⁵ Initially, they provided individuals with the ability to protest against the huiguan, and acted as a balancing actor in the Chinatown political scene.³⁶ However, as immigration continued into the late 19th century, provision of illegal goods and services formed the economic base of these tongs.³⁷ Following 1882, tong leaders joined the business class as the elite of Chinatown, and their criminal activities flourished, especially as the San Francisco police were easily bribed and often cooperated with tongs.³⁸

It was the concoction of the crime issues—the real opium addiction that afflicted many immigrants and the sex trade that involved both trafficked victims and consenting workers—and existing stereotypes surrounding Chinese inhumanity and orientalist ideas of the East that created an aura of mystery around Chinatown.³⁹ This served as an extension of American fascination with the forbidden East, as many viewed Chinatown as an authentic window into China.

As mystery shrouded Chinatown, many locals saw the economic opportunity in highlighting the ‘authenticity’ of Chinatown.⁴⁰ Anti-Chinese hostility and interest in authentic Chinatown coincided as tourists sought to see Chinese life and vice (see Appendix III) in a contained space suitable for white consumption.⁴¹ The San Francisco Chinatown was then posed

FEARFUL END." *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-1922)*, Dec 05, 1869.

<http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/horrors-great-city/docview/365627003/se-2>.

³⁵ Lyman, Stanford M. "Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliation in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1850-1910." *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (1974): 473–99. 486-7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638429>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 488.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ RAST, RAYMOND W. "The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1882-1917." *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (2007): 29–60. <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2007.76.1.29>. ; Hirata, Lucie Cheng. "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs* 5, no. 1 (1979): 3–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173531>.

⁴⁰ Rast, 32.

⁴¹ Ibid, 33.

as a symbol of the backward East who stood at odds with a modernizing world.⁴² Some tourists entered Chinatown seeking to be shocked by depravity and crime, while others—namely Bohemian writers and artists—visited to envision “real life” outside of the rapidly industrializing country.

Regardless, Chinese residents clung onto Chinatown as a safe space—not for its profound ‘primitiveness’ or lawless liberties—but because it was the only space that they had. Twelve-blocks of San Francisco were the only streets where they were afforded relative protection from outside hostility; they were thus transformative even as those same outsiders labeled them filthy and crime-ridden, even as they gained a bizarre interest and exoticized Chinatown. Without the San Francisco Chinatown, many Chinese would be without a home in America.

Pagodas and Phoenixes: Remaking Chinatown

Physically, the San Francisco Chinatown looked no different from other streets, with Western housing built in classical style.⁴³ What differentiated Chinatown from neighboring streets were its decorations and signs in Chinese characters, and its people.

Those buildings would eventually succumb to flames.

On April 18, 1906, San Francisco suffered a 7.8 earthquake that ignited fires that burned for three days, effectively destroying most of San Francisco, including the city blocks that constituted Chinatown.⁴⁴

With the physical Chinatown destroyed, Chinese and Chinese American residents leaned on the human infrastructure of Chinatown, relying on one another for social and economic

⁴² Ibid, 33-4.

⁴³ Vox, 3:55.

⁴⁴ “San Francisco Earthquake” The Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives, last reviewed September 30, 2020. <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/sf>; Kiraly, Michael. *The Great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire: Compiled by Michael Kiraly*. Documents, 2006. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.33847462>.

support. As Andrea Henderson, associate professor at the University of South Carolina's sociology department writes, "Chinatown refugees did not turn to San Francisco officials for assistance but rather clustered in informal groups of family, friends, and neighbors."⁴⁵ The San Francisco Chinatown's success was in creating a community of immigrants who were otherwise alone in a country that viewed them as perpetual foreigners, and in turn, carving a space for Chinese and Chinese American identities.

Traveling in bands, the Chinese and Chinese Americans sought temporary refuge in neighboring cities such as Oakland, where they were met with usual hostility. As The Oakland Herald reported, the Chinese "have settled themselves in large colonies throughout the residence parts of the city, bringing with them their vices and their filth."⁴⁶

Simultaneous to local displeasure, *Organized Labor*, a paper representative of labor interests, further challenged Chinese and Asian presence as a whole, proclaiming that "as long as California is white man's country, it will remain one of the grandest and best states in the union, but the moment the Golden State is subjected to an unlimited Asiatic coolie invasion there will be no more California."⁴⁷

These sentiments, however, did not deter Chinese Americans from affirming their interests in the months following the Great Earthquake. Although the earthquake and fire devastated the Chinese community through the literal destruction of their wealth (as their wealth was concentrated in merchandise and goods), the Chinese still held economic power through what San Francisco's Chinatown was— the bridge between the US and China.⁴⁸ In the words of

⁴⁵ Henderson, Andrea. "The Human Geography of Catastrophe: Family Bonds, Community Ties, and Disaster Relief After the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire." *Southern California Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2006): 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172296>.

⁴⁶ "Chinese Crowding into Fashionable Districts." The Oakland Herald, April 27, 1906. <http://sfmuseum.org/chin/chioak.html>

⁴⁷ Organized Labor. "Asiatic Coolie Invasion" Official Organ of the State and Local Building Trades Councils of California San Francisco, April 21, 28, and May 5, 1906. <http://sfmuseum.org/1906.2/invasion.html>

⁴⁸ Dyl, 49.

environmental historian Joanna Dyl, “losing Chinatown would represent the loss of the capital of the entire Chinese American community.”⁴⁹ Chinatown was also a popular tourist attraction, and Chinese renters and merchants brought in regular revenue (30 million dollars in the preceding year).⁵⁰

These factors led to the rebuilding of Chinatown on the same streets despite opposing arguments for relocation by white settlers. But, white landowners and Chinese merchants sought to reimagine Chinatown, sketching buildings that would likely attract tourists.⁵¹ Architects drafted buildings with fringe-tile roofs, pagodas, and bright color schemes reminiscent of a China that did not exist.⁵² This granted Chinatown greater commercial success with tourists, and helped “clean” the image of Chinatown, no longer the crime-ridden neighborhood in the margins.⁵³ The new San Francisco Chinatown was a physical embodiment of what Westerners often imagine China to resemble, and was the literal manifestation of Chinese settlers’ desire to carve a home in a new country.

Rebuilt, Chinatown still served as a space of transformation and self-definition for Chinese in America. From dust, Chinatown rose again, like the phoenixes that adorned new infrastructure.

Chinatown as Home

Like its residents, Chinatown is not static; it is ever-changing, adapting to the social and legal circumstances of its time to best serve the changing needs of its residents. In the 1850s, that meant a few streets where Chinese workers settled and aided one another.⁵⁴ In the 1870s and

⁴⁹Ibid, 156.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 157.

⁵¹ Ibid, 159.

⁵² Ibid; Eli, Look Tin. “Our New Oriental City– Veritable Fairy Palaces Filled with the Choicest Treasures of the Orient” Western Press Association.

<https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscometr00wrig/page/n89/mode/1up?view=theater>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kanazawa.

1880s, that meant welcoming influxes of both Chinese already settled in the US, but driven out of their homes due to discrimination and violence, and new Chinese workers that arrived in San Francisco with hopes of sending remittances back to their families.⁵⁵ In the 1900s, that meant shaping the narrative of Chinatown itself– protecting Chinese interest and forming a distinct Chinese American identity through the creation of a new Chinatown.⁵⁶

Functions of the San Francisco Chinatown also overlapped throughout its history, with no singular sentence being able to encapsulate the significance of Chinatown to its residents and Chinese Americans as a whole.

While “Chinatown” was coined by Westerners and the existing literature surrounding Chinatown were produced and reproduced by the same Westerners that discriminated against, fetishized, and stole from Chinese people, it did not belong to them.⁵⁷

Chinatown belonged to and is the people who live in it, who call it home. The San Francisco Chinatown was not solely pivotal for being the first and largest American Chinatown, but for being a dynamic home that hundreds of thousands of Chinese and Chinese Americans relied on for social and economic support– one that shaped and continues to shape the Chinese American identity.

⁵⁵ “Chinese Livelihood in Rural California, the Impact of Economic Change, 1860-1880”

⁵⁶ Dyl, 159.

⁵⁷ Berglund, Barbara. “Chinatown’s Tourist Terrain: Representation and Racialization in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco.” *American Studies* 46, no. 2 (2005): 5–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643847>; Wong, K. Scott. “Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain.” *MELUS* 20, no. 1 (1995): 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467850>.

Appendix I



Representatives from the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association meet in their hall, a gongsuo, in 1943.

San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library, 1943.

https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Six_Companies

Appendix II



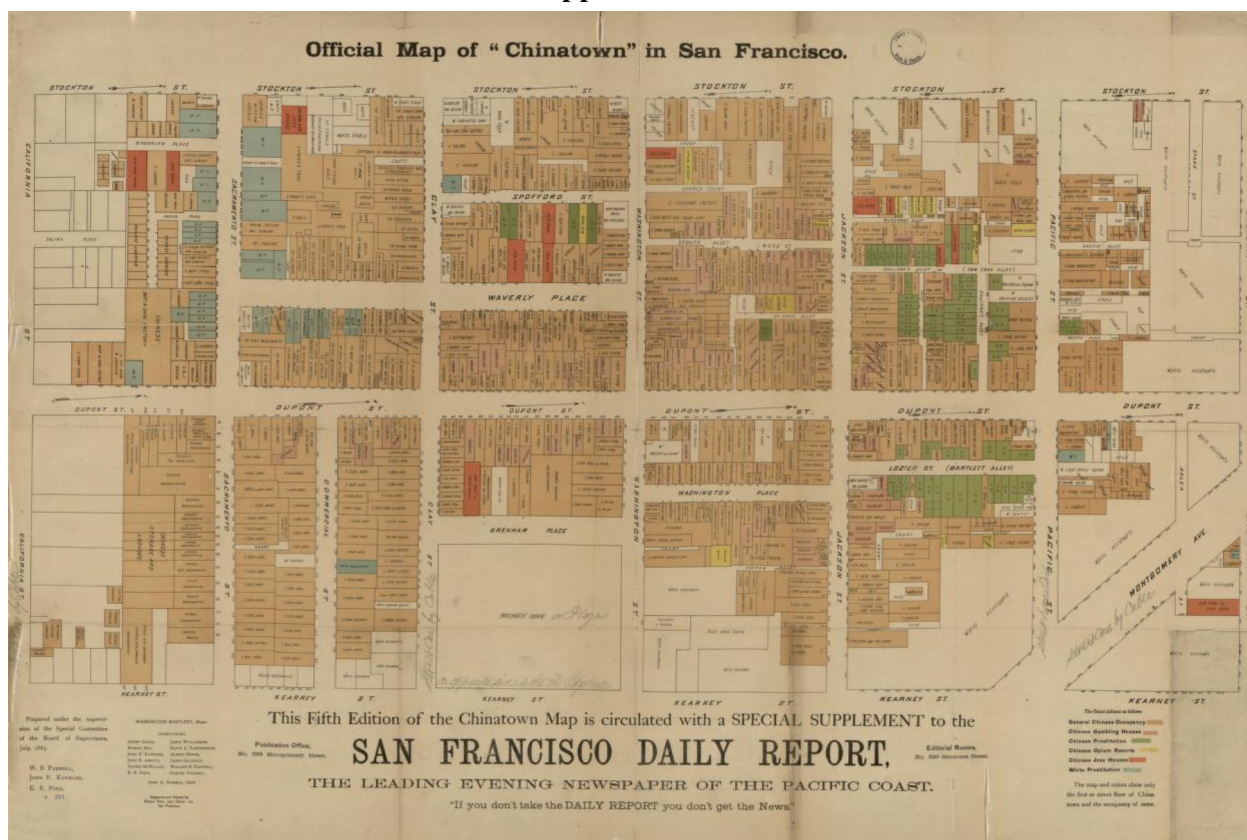
Two Chinese men in one of the around 300 opium dens in San Francisco.⁵⁸

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. "Chinese merchant and wife, San Francisco." New York Public Library Digital Collections.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-4277-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

⁵⁸ Weirde, Eldritch. "Chinatown's Opium Dens" Found San Francisco, 1994.
https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Chinatown%27s_Opium_Dens

Appendix III



The San Francisco Daily Report's 'map' of the San Francisco Chinatown, complete with a key denoting different stores and locations, such as "Chinese Gambling Houses," prostitution, "Chinese Opium Resorts."

Farwell, Willard B, John E Kunkler, E. B Pond, and Bosqui Eng. & Print. Co. Official map of "Chinatown" in San Francisco. San Francisco: Engraved & printed by Bosqui Eng. & Print Co, 1998. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2012593519/>.

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The Daily Morning Chronicle was a local San Francisco newspaper that reported daily events. In this feature, they highlighted the arrival of a new ship that transported Chinese women. The sensational headline focusing on the violence of the Chinese paired with the language that described the women as characters and almond-eyed creatures showcases Chinese people in the Western imagination.

"Chinese Crowding into Fashionable Districts." *The Oakland Herald*, April 27, 1906. <http://sfmuseum.org/chin/chioak.html>

The Oakland Herald was a local paper that reported on Oakland. Following the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, thousands of Chinese residents were made into refugees, crowding into surrounding cities such as Oakland. This newspaper clipping responded to this wave of refugees, and its content demonstrates the contemporary view of Chinese and Chinese Americans– that they are inherently filthy.

Evans, Albert S. "A Cruise on the Barbary Coast" *A La California, Sketch of Life in the Golden State*. A. L. Bancroft, 1873. <http://sfmuseum.org/hist6/evans.html>

This article offers another contemporary account of Chinatown (1873) in the eyes of an outsider. The writer focuses on the exoticness of Chinatown and the bizarreness of its residents, demonstrating how Chinatown was a contained spectacle to tourists.

Epstein, Terrie. "The Pride and Pain of Chinese Immigration: Folk Rhymes from San Francisco's Chinatown." *OAH Magazine of History* 5, no. 2 (1990): 51–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162737>.

The folk rhymes of Chinese immigrants described life in a foreign country, from being detained on Angel Island to longing for home, helped frame the understanding that Chinatown was about people. Legislation and discrimination were not happening to nameless statistics– real people are behind the numbers. These poems were important as they are in the voice of the people I am trying to represent themselves; Chinatown was and is its people.

GARRISON, WILLIAM LLOYD. "Chinese Exclusion." *The Advocate of Peace (1894-1920)* 64, no. 2 (1902): 35–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25751909>.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25751909.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Af45aa888abcc4e14898bae0d40d00797&ab_segments=&origin=&acceptTC=1

Abolitionist, social reformer, and journalist William Lloyd Garrison argued against Chinese Exclusion, naming politics as the reason behind Chinese exclusion (to capture the labor vote as organized labor viewed Chinese as competitors). This illustrates how debates surrounding Chinese exclusion and inclusion were prevalent in the early 20th century, and showcases how there was support for Chinese immigration even during peaks of anti-Chinese sentiments.

"HORRORS OF A GREAT CITY: A NIGHT AMONG THE CHINESE GRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF THE CHINESE PURLIEUS ITS CROWDED QUARTERS--OPIUM DENA--A RESTAURANT--CRIME--A GAMBLING HELL--HAW CELESTIALS GAMBLE--VICE CONCENTRATED HOW THE CHINESE CAME HERE CHINATOWN M'EVOY BUILDING AN OPIUM DEN A RESTAURANT CRIME ABOVE STAIRS THE GAMBLING HELL HOW CELESTIALS GAMBLE VICE CONCENTRATED AND DISTILLED." *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-1922)*, Nov 27, 1869.
<http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/horror-s-great-city/docview/575231225/se-2>.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s series, Horrors of a Great City, paint Chinatown as a vice-filled neighborhood that contained debauchery and crimes unbeknownst to gentle society and the general San Francisco population. This feature involved 'a night among the Chinese,' involving a journey through the apparently treacherous streets of Chinatown. Littered with charged racial language, this newspaper article demonstrates how the media on Chinatown focused on its danger.

"HORRORS OF A GREAT CITY: CHINADOM BY DAY AND BY NIGHT THE IMPORTATION OF CHINESE WOMEN AND WHAT IS DONE WITH THEM THEY ALLEYS AND DENS WHERE THEY EXIST HOW THEY EAT AND HOW THEY LIVE A HAIRDRESSER AND A VENDOR OF SOUPS AND CAKES SCENES AFTER DARK--AROUND WITH A POLICE OFFICER--WINDOW--TAPPING--WHITE PATRONS--DREADFUL LIFE OF THE WOMEN AND THEIR FEARFUL END." *San Francisco Chronicle (1869-1922)*, Dec 05, 1869.
<http://ezproxy.nypl.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/horror-s-great-city/docview/365627003/se-2>.

This installation of the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s Horrors of a Great City focuses a magnifying glass on the women of Chinatown. As the passage to the US was costly, Chinese immigrants were predominantly young males who left behind their families in China. Concurrently, the few women that did immigrate to the US had little prospects out of sex work and the domestic sphere (as more menial positions favored male employees). This then gave Chinese women the stereotype of being prostitutes. Western media obsessed over these women, reducing them to their sexuality and highlighting their victimhood (as some were trafficked into sex work). The article is an example of this, and its language aptly demonstrates this fetishization of Chinese women while simultaneously revealing their supposed moral superiority to the Chinese.

Hoy, William. "The Chinese Six Companies; a short, general historical resumé of its origin, function, and importance in the life of the California Chinese." San Francisco, Calif.; The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, 1942.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015019233439&view=1up&seq=7>

Published by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (Chinese Six Companies) themselves, this source offers a general history of the powerful organization that governed much of the San Francisco Chinatown in its own words. Led by wealthy merchants and based on clan and geographic affiliations, the Chinese Six Companies would challenge issues affecting the Chinese population (often through legal protest) and facilitate the flow of Chinese immigration.

Kiraly, Michael. *The Great San Francisco Earthquake and Fire: Compiled by Michael Kiraly*. Documents, 2006. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.33847462>.

This compilation of primary sources showcases the extent of damage that the Great San Francisco Earthquake and the subsequent fires caused. Filled with contemporary newspaper clippings of first hand accounts, these documents help frame how the destruction was catastrophic— affecting all of San Francisco.

Lai, Him Mark, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. "Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940" *Seattle: University of Washington Press*, 2014
<https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295994079/island/>; Yogi, Stan. *MELUS* 17, no. 2 (1991): 77–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467002>.

This book described the history of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, an immigration center that operated from 1910 to 1940 through remaining historic records and artifacts, such as the poems that many Chinese who were detained etched onto the detention center's walls. I begin the paper with one of these poems—translated from Chinese—which described the writer (likely a young male immigrant)'s passage and his hope to land in San Francisco soon, most likely referring to the San Francisco Chinatown.

McDougal, John. "State of the State Address" The Governor's Gallery, January 7, 1852.
https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/s_02-McDougall.html

Governor McDougal's State of the State Address showcased how the initial wave of Chinese immigrants were welcomed in the US as they provided the cheap and efficient labor necessary for the mines (and later railroads). He called for legislation that favored and encouraged Chinese immigration, describing how they are among the most worthy additions to the US. This helped deconstruct the popular narrative that Chinese immigrants were always unwanted (exacerbated by how legislation often excluded and discriminated against the Chinese), as the initial waves were welcomed— and it was only after, when Chinese workers were viewed as a threat to white labor, that they gained the status of vermin.

Murray, Ch. J. "People v. Hall, 4 Cal. 399 (1854)" Caselaw Access Project, Harvard Law School, 1854. 404. <https://cite.case.law/cal/4/399/>

People v. Hall is an appealed murder case in 1854, where the California Supreme Court ruled in favor of the murderer under the argument that the Chinese testimony was inadmissible. This established that Chinese and Chinese Americans were unable to testify against white defendants in court, and was one of the first historic precedents that solidified Chinese's legal 'inferiority' and invisibility.

Organized Labor. "Asiatic Coolie Invasion" Official Organ of the State and Local Building Trades Councils of California San Francisco, April 21, 28, and May 5, 1906.
<http://sfmuseum.org/1906.2/invasion.html>

Organized Labor was a paper that represented the interests of labor. In this piece, the writers rally against the continued immigration of Asian Americans, pushing for the expansion of the Chinese Exclusion Act to Korean and Japanese people. This further exemplifies the anti-Asian sentiments during the 18th and 19th centuries, and demonstrates the need for spaces such as the San Francisco Chinatown.

"Our New Oriental City— Veritable Fairy Palaces Filled with the Choicest Treasures of the Orient" Western Press Association.
<https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscometr00wrig/page/n89/mode/1up?view=theater>

This newspaper article showcases how the 'new' San Francisco Chinatown featured more "oriental" features such as pagodas and bright reds and greens. Featuring different buildings such as the Sing Chong Co. Inc. building and the Chinese Six Company's

building (adorned with oriental ornaments), this piece demonstrates how Chinatown was reconstructed to center tourism and was distinct from the 'old' Chinatown.

“Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking), 1842” University of Southern California, US-China Institute.
<https://china.usc.edu/treaty-nanjing-nanking-1842>

The Treaty of Nanjing was the historic document that settled the First Opium War (between the British Empire and China), and was the first of the unbalanced treaties between China and foreign powers. This treaty forcibly opened Chinese ports and facilitated trade of goods such as silk and tea, but also people. Thus, it was this treaty that legalized the “coolie trade.”

WELLBORN, MILDRED. “THE EVENTS LEADING TO THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACTS.” *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 1/2 (1912): 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41168895>.

From the early 20th century, this article provides the historic context for the Chinese Exclusion Acts, and helps fill in the gaps between the Chinese being wanted and necessary laborers to creatures that must be expelled from towns and cities. As it provides a historic perspective on Chinese immigrants during a time where views surrounding the Chinese were shifting (with greater tourist appeal and a more solidified, productive identity), this source helps frame the ‘why’ in general anti-Chinese sentiments.

Secondary Sources

Berglund, Barbara. “Chinatown’s Tourist Terrain: Representation and Racialization in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco.” *American Studies* 46, no. 2 (2005): 5–36.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643847>.

Framing Chinatown as a vehicle for which Westerners used to racialize the Chinese and further construct narratives of the Chinese as unscrupulous vermin, Berglund describes how the idea of the “Chinatown” exists in the Western imagination. This work was key in understanding of how ideas of Chinatown were produced largely by people who were outside of it, and thus helps frame the actions that Chinatown residents took to assert their autonomy and identities as character-defining, even when it takes the form of playing into Western ideas of the East, as those manifestations served to protect the residents.

Chen, Hsiang-shui. “Patterns of Chinese Settlement in the United States.” In *Chinatown No More: Taiwan Immigrants in Contemporary New York*, 3–26. Cornell University Press, 1992. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g616.5>.

This chapter provides information on the various waves of Chinese immigration and settlement in the US. While my paper primarily focuses on the first wave of Chinese immigrants, the article helped situate this wave in the greater patterns of migration (especially while looking at the formation of other Chinatowns such as the New York Chinatown).

“Chinese Livelihood in Rural California, the Impact of Economic Change, 1860-1880” from Working People of California. University of California Press E-Books Collection, 1982-2004.
<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft9x0nb6fg&chunk.id=d0e1786&toc.id=d0e1777&toc.depth=1&brand=ucpress&anchor.id=bkd0e1821#X>

Working People of California offers a dive into the history of Chinatown through the myriad references to existing works. This source was particularly influential in contextualizing many Chinese immigrants’ migration from rural mining towns to more urban Chinatowns—namely the San Francisco Chinatown—through the changing population of Chinese residents in San Francisco and Chinese immigrants more generally.

DYL, JOANNA L. “REBUILDING AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE.” In *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco’s 1906 Earthquake*, 129–63. University of Washington Press, 2017. 145.; Okihiro, Gary Y. “SAN FRANCISCO.” In *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, 1st ed., 265–94. University of California Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqh8.14>.

Looking at the environmental-political aspect of Chinatown in its very location, Dyl chronicles how the San Francisco Chinese immigrants challenged voices to relocate Chinatown. Previously, Chinatown real estate was considered cheap, but gained traction as areas surrounding it rose in value, leading to discussions of relocation. This was especially relevant following the Great Earthquake of 1906, as many land developers saw San Francisco as a blank slate, and pushed to repurpose what was Chinatown. However, the Chinese pushed back and asserted the desire to rebuild Chinatown where it was—made possible through the economic leverage that the Chinese held in revenue from both commerce and tourism. It is a demonstration of Chinese solidarity and power in Chinatown.

Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration, and DAVID KIPEN.

“Chinatown.” In *San Francisco in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City by the Bay*, 1st ed., 220–35. University of California Press, 2011.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppsqk.24>

As one of the first sources I came across, this article, filled with charged racial language, helped situate my thinking about Chinatown through the juxtaposition of a ‘new’ and ‘old’ Chinatown. Using the observable aspects of Chinatown such as the people’s way of

dress, cuisine, and architecture, this article provides a glimpse into what Westerners may think of Chinatown both pre-contact and at first contact.

Hansen, Lawrence Douglas Taylor. "The Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco and the Smuggling of Chinese Immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1882-1930." *Journal of the Southwest* 48, no. 1 (2006): 37–61. 38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40170313>.

This article details the involvement of the Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco in Chinese immigration through acting as a facilitator between Chinese laborers and Western contractors. Moreover, they served as an almost informal government in the San Francisco Chinatown, providing services such as medical care and housing to many immigrants. This source was also especially useful in describing the history of the Chinese Six Companies and how they arose from various huiguan— organizations based on ethnic groups and Chinese provinces.

Henderson, Andrea. "The Human Geography of Catastrophe: Family Bonds, Community Ties, and Disaster Relief After the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire." *Southern California Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2006): 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172296>.

This article explores the human geography of the San Francisco Chinatown, and how people relied upon this human infrastructure of family and community ties to help rebuild their community and the physical Chinatown following the Great Earthquake. It was especially influential in framing the idea that Chinatown was not only a physical place, but the people that occupy it, because even as the physical San Francisco Chinatown burned, the people remained.

Hirata, Lucie Cheng. "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs* 5, no. 1 (1979): 3–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173531>.

This source discusses the various manifestations of Chinese prostitution in 19th century America, noting how Chinese prostitutes varied in terms of how much autonomy they held. While this was not the focus of my paper, it provided context for the people who lived in Chinatown, and challenged the stereotypes that are held against Chinatown and Chinese people—especially Chinese women.

Kanazawa, Mark. "Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California." *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (2005): 779–805. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875017>.

Kanazawa, an economics professor at Carleton College, aptly describes and explains the changing economic structure of the mining industry following the California Gold Rush, and how that (both intentionally and unintentionally) served to further disenfranchise the Chinese miners. He discusses both the private mining sector's shift in entrepreneur and later industrial mining, and how that fueled anti-Chinese sentiments as the Chinese were competing directly with native miners— thereby leading to organized labor's push for

exclusionary legislation. Its aftermath include discriminatory laws such as the Foreign Miners' Tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Lyman, Stanford M. "Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliation in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1850-1910." *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (1974): 473–99. 486-7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638429>.

Looking at group affliction in the San Francisco Chinatown, Lyman focuses on Chinese secret societies, or tongs. Contextualizing them in the greater social organism of Chinatown, these secret tongs rose to popularity as individual Chinese immigrants sought refuge from the ubiquitous racial discrimination. This text was also influential in situating tongs against the huiguan—earlier organizations that grew to represent imperial Chinese interests in the US—as a balance of power in Chinatown.

Mei, June. "Socioeconomic Origins of Emigration: Guangdong to California, 1850-1882." *Modern China* 5, no. 4 (1979): 463–501. 478. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/188841>.

Mei tracks the pattern of Chinese immigration, specifically looking at the various regions that Chinese immigrants came from. There were many primary sources regarding different waves of Chinese immigration, and Mei's focus on where they emigrated from helps provide context on how huiguan were often based on ethnic and clan relations. Additionally, Mei's description of how patterns of immigration were impacted by changes in Guangdong, Xiangshan, Siyi, and other areas, further emphasize the diversity even within the Chinese immigrant population, thereby highlighting how Chinatown was a space for Chinese solidarity that was otherwise absent.

Okiihiro, Gary Y. "CALIFORNIA." In *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, 1st ed., 150–83. University of California Press, 2015. 154-155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqh8.11>.

In the "California" chapter of *American History Unbound*, Okiihiro explores different AAPI group's migration to California, specifically looking at labor. Southeastern China supplied many industrializing countries with labor, including the United States. And with the opening of Chinese ports, Chinese cities such as Shanghai became conduits of trade. Okiihiro also borrows the songs and poems of the Chinese migrants, thereby showing their enthusiasm and hope for their new life prospects in San Francisco.

Okiihiro, Gary Y. "SAN FRANCISCO." In *American History Unbound: Asians and Pacific Islanders*, 1st ed., 265–94. University of California Press, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxqh8.14>.

In the “San Francisco” chapter of *American History Unbound*, Okihiro provides an extensive look into the immigration and integration of various groups in San Francisco, such as the Japanese and Filipinos. Specifically in the Chinese section, Okihiro sheds light on the often invisible history of Chinese immigration, weaving in real conversations during the 19th century and actual accounts of Chinatown. Complete with historic photographs and poems, this source helps set the tone for my paper, alongside providing details on the popular businesses in the San Francisco Chinatown, such as laundromats and cigar factories.

RAST, RAYMOND W. “The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco’s Chinatown, 1882-1917.” *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (2007): 29–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2007.76.1.29>.

Rast’s paper explores how portrayals of Chinatown in the 19th and early 20th century, namely the two prevailing perspectives— one viewing Chinatown as an eccentric community of vice and the other viewing Chinatown as a reimagined refuge from the industrializing country—shaped tourism in Chinatown. For both interpretations, Chinatown residents often capitalized in the form of leading tours, and exercised autonomy in helping define what Chinatown was through its architecture (namely during reconstruction). This source was influential in elucidating what Chinatown meant to those desperate to consume it.

“San Francisco Earthquake” The Center for Legislative Archives, National Archives, last reviewed September 30, 2020. <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/sf>

This article provides a brief overview of the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906, summarizing the extent of its damage and how the US government responded federally (in providing relief). More importantly, it features photographs of destroyed homes and the camps that were constructed following the disaster, demonstrative of the earthquake’s severity.

“Searching for the Gold Mountain” Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/chinese/searching-for-the-gold-mountain/>

The passage offered numbers on the first large wave of Chinese immigrants following the California Gold Rush, along with situating this wave in the larger Chinese diaspora globally. It also discussed the disillusionment of Chinese immigrants when they arrived on the apparent “gold mountain” going into these men’s realities.

“The Surprising Reason Behind Chinatown’s Aesthetic” Vox, May 10, 2021. 3:55
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiX3hTPGoCg>

This video uses the history of the San Francisco Chinatown to explain Chinatown architecture. In providing an overview of Chinese immigration to and disenfranchisement in the US, this video helps frame Chinatown as a—in many cases the only— safe space for the Chinese. Architecture became a tool with which the Chinese used to reinvent themselves and the San Francisco Chinatown following the 1906 earthquake— creating a distinctly Chinese American identity that protected them from the labels that Westerners had slapped on the original Chinatown.

“Timeline of Chinese Immigration to the United States” *The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley*.
<https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/chinese-immigration-to-the-united-states-1884-1944/timeline.html>

This timeline from UC Berkeley’s Bancroft Library offers an overview of “Chinese in America,” starting from the first recorded Chinese immigrants in 1785. Although there are varying accounts of the number of Chinese in the US and the general flow of immigration due to undercounted censuses and destroyed records, this resource helped with a bigger picture understanding of Chinese history in the US.

Wong, K. Scott. “Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain.” *MELUS* 20, no. 1 (1995): 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/467850>.

Similar to Berglund, Wong describes the various characterizations of Chinatown and how they originate outside of the Chinese residents themselves. Moreover, Wong notes that when Chinese and Chinese American writers seek to portray Chinatown, they are put in the position of ‘debunking’ what Chinatown is perceived to be, as opposed to using language that defines Chinatown. The portrayals that Wong features in the essay demonstrate the varied, and often contesting, portrayals of Chinatown— supporting the argument that there is no one way to summarize or describe Chinatown.

Yeh, Chiou-Ling. “‘In the Traditions of China and in the Freedom of America’: The Making of San Francisco’s Chinese New Year Festivals.” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2004): 395–420. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40068199>.

This article discusses how the Chinese New Year celebration transformed from a private affair (during the 18th and first half of the 19th century) to a commercialized and community event that often involved white spectators. While not relating to the time period of my paper, it helped center how dynamic Chinatown is through how it persists in accommodating the needs of Chinese Americans. It still continued to be pivotal in the creation and solidity of a distinct Chinese American identity.

Yoshiko Kandil, Caitlin. “How 1800s racism birthed Chinatown, Japantown and other ethnic enclaves” NBC News, May 13, 2019.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/how-1800s-racism-birthered-chinatown-japan-town-other-ethnic-enclaves-n997296>

Interviewing academics specializing in Asian American and immigration history, Yoshiko Kandil provides an overview of how 19th century racism gave rise to ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown. As it pertains to my paper, the article helped provide more context on why Chinese immigrants migrated to the San Francisco Chinatown in the latter half of the 19th century, as hundreds of smaller Chinatowns in rural areas were the targets of xenophobic violence.

Zesch, Scott. "Chinese Los Angeles in 1870-1871: The Makings of a Massacre." *Southern California Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2008): 109–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172418>.

Zesch dives into the socio-political context of the Chinese Massacre of 1871, one of the earliest mass hate crimes against the Chinese. Anti-Chinese sentiment actually peaked in years following the massacre as they were perceived to be taking white laborers' jobs. However, as Zesch observes, it was the 'peculiarity' of Chinese immigrants and their otherness that angered the white residents, eventually culminating in violence.

Process Paper (499 words)

While exploring the ideas within the 2022-2023 National History Day theme, “Frontiers in History: People, Places, Ideas,” I was drawn to the frontiers that defined my understanding of the world, starting with home. Home is where you can rest your feet following a day’s work, home is where you raise your children. And as a Chinese American, I struggled with the idea of an initial home—that green apartment in Fuzhou—and the place where I input in address lines, with the zip code 11220—more than seven thousand miles away. This personal struggle pushed me towards looking at historic safe spaces for Chinese Americans, places where Chinese Americans were able to rest their feet and call home, leading me to Chinatowns. More specifically, it led me to the first Chinatown in the US in San Francisco, or *jiujinshan*, Gold Mountain.

My research began with quick searches on JSTOR with ‘San Francisco Chinatown’ typed out, then diving into the San Francisco library’s archives. Through following the leads in sources that interested me, including contemporary research on how Chinatowns still served as a bridge between China and the US, and a resting place and second home for immigrants, I was able to paint a fuller picture of what Chinatown symbolized. This contemporary understanding built upon previous historic knowledge on the hostile environment engendered by nativism following the initial waves of Chinese immigration, which set the stage for the creation of a Chinatown. This culminated in the ‘frontiers’ of Chinatown being limited to a few streets in San Francisco. Yet, Chinese people sought to protect these streets, creating the social infrastructure required for them to be safe without legislation protection and carving a home in America—breaking physical and cultural frontiers.

These people's interactions with Chinatown became the focal point of my paper—as it was the collective Chinese community that transformed Chinatown into pushing the frontiers of what it meant to be commercially successful in the US, and what it meant to be Chinese American. Organized chronologically, I sought to tell the myriad stories of Chinese resilience in the history of the San Francisco Chinatown, with the physical place and idea of home itself being the frontier.

Similar to other writing projects, I drafted this paper in pieces—first on the context of Chinese immigration, then the various social and legal influences on how settlement developed on the West Coast. As the stories of Chinese immigrants were the impetus behind this paper, I wanted to keep the project authentic to their experiences. These immigrants were not passive receptors of discrimination, but instead, actively engaged with and protested against their circumstances (such as the Chinese Six Companies). Thus, I began the paper with their words.

The San Francisco Chinatown was pivotal in creating a distinct Chinese American identity and through its reinvention from fire, ensured a place that Chinese can call home. Without this initial Chinatown, the history of Chinese in America would not exist as it is today—a history of struggle, resistance, and building a home.