

Shaping the Vernacular Landscape of San Francisco's Chinatown By Jared Kelly

San Francisco's Chinatown neighborhood is a notable landmark in San Francisco as its architecture, culture, and customs are distinct from the rest of the city. San Francisco's Chinatown is significant as it the largest Chinatown in the world outside of Asia. What is notable about Chinatown is the neighborhood has retained its status as an ethnic enclave while other San Francisco neighborhoods such as North beach, the Mission district, and Manilatown have lost their culture, customs, and status associated with being an ethnic enclave. Chinatown was able to retain its ethnic enclave status because of historical geographic processes that prevented its expansion, and modern processes which still continue to confine Chinatown. The boundaries of Chinatown were established by physical geographic processes, and social processes such as financial constraints, proximity to labor, and both formal and informal discrimination against ethnically Chinese individuals.

The neighborhood of Chinatown in San Francisco was shaped by a variety of geographic processes. The physical geography of Chinatown prevented its spatial expansion outside its current bounds. It is surrounded by Telegraph Hill in the northeast, Nob Hill to the west, Russian Hill to the northwest, and the bay to the east. The location of Chinatown is situated adjacent to the historic Yerba Buena Cove¹ which allowed close proximity to the bay as fishing and shipping were important industries for San Francisco's Chinese population. These industries were often run by Chinese business owners who had a competitive advantage over their fellow San Franciscans as the international trade to San Francisco was dominated by China. Chinese workers could not get labor in the city outside of businesses outside of ethnically Chinese owned enterprises with the exception of dangerous where they were considered disposable in work such as mining and railroad work. As a result Chinese laborers lived close to where they worked and Chinatown was settled near Yerba Buena Cove. Once the bay of Yerba Buena Cove was filled new spatial restraints on Chinese individuals

¹ Eddy, W. M. "Map of San Francisco Showing Business and Waterfront 1851-1852." In *Bancroft's History of California*, 169. San Francisco, CA, 1852. City Surveyor. Map details the location of the Yerba Buena Cove and the proximity to China town.
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emerged such as the development of an ethnic Italian enclave north of Chinatown in the neighborhood of North Beach². In North Beach informal discrimination often prevented ethnic Italians from receiving work from those who were not ethnically Italian. As a result of this informal discrimination ethnic Italian networks formed in North Beach similar to ones in place in Chinatown. In the ethnic Italian networks that developed units were rented, and jobs were distributed to those who were ethnically Italian effectively segregating individuals who were ethnically Chinese. The emergence of Chinese ethnic networks in Chinatown led it to be the only destination point for ethnically Chinese individuals to settle in San Francisco. Physical geography and informal processes were not the only factors that kept Chinatown confined as formal processes hindered the expansion of Chinatown.

Formal segregation and powerful factions within San Francisco keep Chinatown confined to the lowlands, and these processes still prevent modern outmigration. The City of San Francisco was notable as it prevented the distribution of city good and services from reaching the neighborhood³. As a result of the general public's Sinophobia, the lack of the city services, and Chinatown's proximity to the Barbary Coast⁴ the area became associated with numerous negative attributes and stereotypes. This includes organized crime, gangs, disease, decay, and vice. As a result of neglect the area was considered undesirable and led to inexpensive housing and rents becoming an appealing location to settle for new Chinese immigrants. These constraints have led to the modern financial constraint which prevents the outward expansion of the Chinese community into other areas of the city. Inhabitants of Chinatown are often unable to move outside of Chinatown elsewhere in the Bay Area because it is simply too expensive. This is seen in the demographics of Chinatown where the average median household income from 2009-2013 was about \$20,000 opposed to the average median household income in the same time frame for the rest of the city which was about \$76,000⁵. In Chinatown the

² Pamuk, Ayse. "Geography of immigrant clusters in global cities: a case study of San Francisco." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28, no. 2 (2004): 287-307.

³ Shah, Nayan. *Contagious divides: Epidemics and race in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Vol. 7. Univ of California Press, 2001.

⁴ Rast, Raymond W. "The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1882-1917." *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (2007): 29-60. Details the transformation of Chinatown from a location of vice and entertainment to a location of tourism, tourists frequent for its historical merit.

⁵ "Chinatown." *Los Angeles Times*. Accessed June 21, 2017. <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/chinatown/>.

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median age is 50 years old and 29% of residents are below the national threshold for poverty⁶. This is a stark contrast from much of San Francisco which consists of young and wealthy professionals. This has effects on the vernacular landscape as two thirds of Chinatown's residents live in single room occupancy hotels (SRO) that are still functioning⁷. In many San Francisco neighborhoods SRO housing has either been demolished or converted for other uses. The areas that surround Chinatown such as Nob Hill, Telegraph Hill, Russian Hill, North Beach, Embarcadero, and the Financial District all command some of the highest rents in the city preventing many from moving immediately outside Chinatown. The difficulty of moving out is compounded by a linguistic barrier as most inhabitants of Chinatown are monolingual speaking only Mandarin or Cantonese. According to the University of Minnesota Center for Infectious Disease, Research and Policy ¾ of Chinatown's inhabitants have a limited English proficiency⁸ and only 14% of the heads of SRO residences could speak English fluently⁹. Inhabitants are often trapped inside Chinatown as many who want to move out are unable to do so because of the linguistic barriers that exist outside of Chinatown.

Discrimination against Chinese migrants has been common in parts of the world which is notably seen in Southeast Asia countries such as in Indonesia with targeted violence against ethnically Chinese individuals, and discriminatory Bumiputera policies instituted in Malaysia. Anti-Chinese sentiment was not confined to Southeast Asia but occurred in the United States and San Francisco shaping the modern-day boundaries of Chinatown. Sinophobia was widespread throughout San Francisco and was seen most prominently in the 1877 San Francisco Riots where ethnically Chinese individuals were subjected to targeted violence and blamed for a dwindling economy. The Federal Government maintained a similar skepticism in line with the general public. Chinese migrants arriving in the US were subjected to harsh scrutiny immediately often staying on Angel

⁶ Green, Emily. "For Chinatown voters, mayor's support goes only so far." San Francisco Chronicle. November 02, 2015.

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/For-Chinatown-voters-mayor-s-support-goes-only-6604264.php>. Another San Francisco news source Newamericamedia.org offered more current 2015 estimates of \$25,909 vs \$91,938. However the credibility of the site could not be determined and citations were not offered for figures. This resulted in the use of 2009-2013 estimates.

⁷ Elrick, John. "The Yerba Buena Center: Redevelopment and a Working Class Community's Resistance." Found SF: Shaping San Francisco' Digital Archive.

⁸ From: California, More. "Disaster planning in San Francisco's Chinatown trains, empowers community members as responders during first 72 hours." University of Minnesota CIDRAP. Accessed June 22, 2017. <http://www.cidrap.umn.edu/practice/disaster-planning-san-francisco-s-chinatown-trains-empowers-community-members-responders>.

⁹ Katherine, Kam Posted: Dec 01, 2015. "Families Live Jammed into Chinatown Rooms in San Francisco." *New America Media*. Accessed June 22, 2017. <http://newamericamedia.org/2015/12/families-live-jammed-into-chinatown-rooms-in-san-francisco.php>

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Island for months while their European counterparts often stayed on Ellis Island for up to a week¹⁰.

Discrimination and prejudice towards Chinese individuals led to Chinese migrants settling in Chinatown. The discrimination the Chinese faced was often formal, sanctioned by the state and codified in multiple statutes. In 1858 the California State Legislature passed a law that made it unlawful for any persons "*of the Chinese or Mongolian races*" to enter California, in 1879 California's new constitution prevented the Chinese from being employed by corporations and municipal, county, or state governments¹¹. California's state government did not have a monopoly on formal discrimination against the Chinese as the Federal Government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This act became the first federal law which was passed to prevent a specific immigrant group from coming to the United States; although the law was designed to be temporary it was not repealed until over 60 years later in 1943¹². These acts of discrimination came during a time when the United States was strengthening its relationship with China. In 1868 The United States signed the Burlingame-Seward Treaty¹³ which gave China the status of the most favored trade nation in the world, and it was the first fully equal treaty China signed with a western power since the Opium Wars. Despite the growing relationship with China both formal and informal means of discrimination confined the Chinese population into the parameters of Chinatown.

The City of San Francisco was a vigilant player in attempting to combat the Chinese population within its city bounds resulting in legalized discrimination, and the ignoring of the Chinese contribution to society. The city passed miscegenation laws making it illegal for whites to intermarry with Chinese, it also passed laws restricting where the Chinese could live within the city¹⁴. Despite the numerous restrictions imposed on Chinese migrants and their families from the city, state, and Federal Government; the Chinese community was very impactful and were largely responsible for transforming the landscape of San Francisco, California, and ultimately the West. The mining industries which relied on cheap Chinese labor produced some of San

¹⁰ Daniels, Roger. "No lamps were lit for them: Angel Island and the historiography of Asian American immigration." *Journal of American Ethnic History* (1997): 3-18.

¹¹ Saxton, Alexander. *The indispensable enemy: Labor and the anti-Chinese movement in California*. Univ of California Press, 1971.

¹² Soennichsen, John. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. ABC-CLIO, 2011.

¹³ Schrecker, John. "' For the Equality of Men—For the Equality of Nations': Anson Burlingame and China's First Embassy to the United States, 1868." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 17, no. 1 (2010): 9-34.

¹⁴ Saxton, Alexander. *The indispensable enemy: Labor and the anti-Chinese movement in California*. Univ of California Press, 1971.

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Francisco's family's fortunes such as Elias Jackson Baldwin's family who made his fortune on the Comstock Lode. These fortunes transformed San Francisco and in the case of mining wealth led to the transformation of Market Street and later South of Market. Chinese labor was transformational to the West with skilled Chinese fisherman establishing inland and ocean fisheries, they were transformative to California's agricultural system by building vast structures of dams and levees, and they completely altered the West with the completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad that connected the Eastern seaboard with the West Coast of the United States. The establishment of the railroad had significant effects on the development of the United States and the ethnically Chinese were undervalued for their contributions. Chinese railway laborers were paid less than their white counterparts performing very dangerous work in harsh conditions; however despite the adverse circumstances they faced, the railway was successfully completed the project seven years ahead of the government's deadline¹⁵. The development of the railway gave more significance to San Francisco's port, and significantly increased the importance of San Francisco's shipping as it now had access to more markets than it did before the introduction of the railway. Despite the fact Chinese laborers transformed the West, and brought prosperity to San Francisco they were still considered unwelcome in spite of their accomplishments. In 1890 the City of San Francisco established the Bingham Ordinance that ordered all Chinese inhabitants move into the Chinese quarter or receive a misdemeanor and face six months of imprisonment¹⁶. The Chinese community was not viewed as important and this resulted in their history being largely neglected. Chinese history has not been seen as valuable in San Francisco until recently. Notable examples of Chinese history being erased are the destruction of the newspaper office where Sun Yat-Sen wrote the proclamation of the Republic of China¹⁷ in order to build the Transamerica pyramid, and the conversion of the Oriental Warehouse Bond and Free being transformed into high priced lofts rather than being preserved and open to the public for its historical merit. After formal segregation from governments began to fade, city residents kept the trend of prejudice alive

¹⁵ Chen, Yong. *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943: A Trans-Pacific Community*. Stanford University Press, 2002.

¹⁶ "The Bingham Ordinance Cal .Stat. 295." Daily Alta California Volume 82, Number 134. May 14, 1890. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=DAC18900514.2.25>. California Digital Newspaper Collection. Article details the law but is primarily a source talking about how the law is ineffective and it is difficult to prosecute individuals for breaking the ordinance.

¹⁷ Larry D. Hatfield, OF THE EXAMINER STAFF. "Transamerica Pyramid a controversial building." SFGate. February 18, 1999. <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Transamerica-Pyramid-a-controversial-building-3097193.php>. Also states this is the location where Sun Yat-Sen planned the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty

through the process of establishing racially restricted housing covenants that prevented individuals with Chinese heritage from buying or renting residences outside of Chinatown¹⁸.

Despite the unwelcome reception the Chinese received from the city, state, and Federal Government the story of San Francisco's Chinatown is largely a story of resilience. San Francisco once housed the founding father and first President of the Republic of China Sun Yat-Sen. Sun Yat-Sen overthrew the Qing dynasty and brought democracy to China after thousands of years of dynastic rule¹⁹. Presently a statue has been erected in Saint Mary's square in the honor of Sun Yat-Sen and his accomplishments. As Sun Yat-Sen stood as a symbol against oppressive dynastic rule in China, Chinatown has stood as a stronghold of resilience against prejudice and oppression. Relocation of ethnic enclaves had been a largely successful process in San Francisco which is seen with the removal of black Americans from the Fillmore District, the removal of the Filipino community from Manilatown, The consistently shifting ethnic demographics of the Mission District, and the urban renewal projects of Yerba Buena removing working class Irish and Filipino residents²⁰. In the early 20th Century Chinatown was destroyed by the 1906 earthquake. During this period the Committee of Fifty was established to rebuild and provide relief for San Francisco. During this period a subcommittee was established in the Committee of Fifty for the relocation of the Chinese with the infamous politician Abe Ruef spearheading the movement as chairman. The committee wanted to relocate the Chinese community south to either the Hunter's Point neighborhood or Daly City because Chinatown's land was considered to be too valuable for the Chinese²¹. However political battles ensued as many politicians believed that removing the Chinese would be detrimental to trade coming from Asia, and the government of China responded seeing the importance of San Francisco's Chinatown. The First Secretary of the Chinese Legation in Washington DC met with the governor of California to discuss China and Empress Dowager Cixi's opposition to the plan²². Ultimately the plans to

¹⁸ Julie Chao, OF THE EXAMINER STAFF. "HUD tracking 'whites-only' covenants in N. California." SFGate. October 25, 1998. <http://www.sfgate.com/realestate/article/HUD-tracking-whites-only-covenants-in-N-3062955.php>.

¹⁹ Schiffrin, Harold Z. *Sun Yat-Sen, Reluctant Revolutionary*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980.

²⁰ Elrick, John. "The Yerba Buena Center: Redevelopment and a Working Class Community's Resistance." Found SF: Shaping San Francisco' Digital Archive. Also details the destruction of the vernacular landscape including SROs and the Skid row that existed.

²¹ Fradkin, Philip L. *The great earthquake and firestorms of 1906: how San Francisco nearly destroyed itself*. Univ of California Press, 2005. The political exploits of Abe Ruef and the attempted removal of the Chinese following the 1906 Earthquake

²² Saxton, Alexander. *The indispensable enemy: Labor and the anti-Chinese movement in California*. Univ of California Press, 1971.

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remove Chinese inhabitants failed resulting in the rebuilding of Chinatown which still remains in its historic location. Despite the focused attempts of Chinese removal following the 1906 earthquake, the natural disaster provided opportunity for the Chinese community. San Francisco's City Hall and the Hall of Records were destroyed allowing many Chinese immigrants to claim US citizenship²³. Chinatown's resilience fortified the importance of Chinese culture and unity in times of adversity this was apparent later in the era of the 1950s. In the 1950s' Anti-Chinese sentiment increased because of the fear of communism spreading following the successful Communist Revolution that swept mainland China in 1949. Chinatown and its inhabitants became subject to more scrutiny from the FBI, INS, and the general public. On December 2, 1950 The San Francisco Chronicle published an editorial to combat anti-Chinese sentiment which stated "*Most Chinese are Americans, too, and anyone who display[s] a prejudice against them on [sic] discriminate, mass basis is displaying a lack of respect for American citizenship itself*"²⁴. Ultimately this proved to be another obstacle the Chinese community had to overcome in order to be accepted in San Francisco.

Chinatown has been frowned upon since its inception as it has been given a reputation for organized crime, gangs, vice, disease, and later communism. Many of San Francisco' ethnic neighborhoods have lost their ethnic identity or have seen it shift to other locations either within the city or outside the city. Chinatown has seen its cultural identity survive as a result of ethnic networks that remained strong because of continued discrimination against those who were ethnically Chinese. The location still serves as an important enclave to the Chinese community and is a source of support for newly arrived Chinese expatriates. When people step through the threshold into Chinatown they are met with a unique landscape as buildings reflect architectural styles that would be seen in China such as pagoda roofs but at the same time mixing in architectural elements from the West creating a unique style and a statement about Chinatown and its inhabitants. The Chinese community was fundamental in shaping the landscape of San Francisco and the West. Without the Chinese influence on San Francisco transformations such as the development of Market Street and redevelopment of SOMA would have likely never occurred as they were financed from mining wealth predicated by cheap

²³ Northern California Coalition on Immigrant Rights. "Chinese Immigration." Found SF: Shaping San Francisco' Digital Archive.

²⁴ Yeh, Chiou-ling. *Making an American Festival: Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown*. Univ of California Press, 2008.

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Chinese labor. Despite the Chinese contributions to society they continued to be disrespected as their history was ignored and erased in many parts of the city. Regardless of this erasure the Chinese community has continued their resilience and their transformation of the city. This is reflected in the demographics of San Francisco where in 2000 the Chinese were the ethnic group with the largest ancestry of any ethnic group in San Francisco County²⁵ and in 2010 they constituted the largest single ethnic minority group in San Francisco²⁶. The Chinese community has begun the process of expanding outward beyond Chinatown pushing past the 19th and 20th centuries that were marked by formal and informal means of confinement. This is seen in the current branching out of Chinese institutions outside of Chinatown into the Richmond District, and the Sunset District. The most notable example of this branching out is the transformation of a Lutheran Church into the Buddhist temple the Hua Zang Si in the Mission District of San Francisco. Although the Chinese community was subjected to severe political pressures, prejudice, and the complete destruction of Chinatown in the 1906 earthquake it has maintained its own unique aesthetic and stood the test of time creating its own distinctive vernacular landscape in San Francisco.

²⁵ "Largest Ancestry: 2000." Map. In *United States Census Bureau Special Tabulation*. factfinder.census.gov. San Francisco County is the only county within the United States where the largest ethnic ancestry is Chinese.

²⁶ QT-P3 – Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin: 2010". *2010 United States Census Summary File 1*. United States Census Bureau. Chinese population constitutes about 21% of the total population.



This photo serves as an example of Chinese influence outside Chinatown. This establishment shows the modern growth and emergence of the Chinese community as a more powerful force in the city both politically and religiously. This growth has occurred despite historic political processes and cultural prejudices that encouraged the repression of the Chinese community. This Photo was taken on 23 June, 2017 and shows the Hua Zang Si a Buddhist Temple in the place of a former Lutheran Church. It is located in the Mission District a distance away from Chinatown. Its address is 3134 22nd St. San Francisco between Van Ness Ave. & Capp St.

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