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Go East, Young Man

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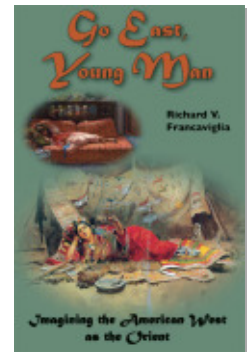
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The Far East in the Far West

Chinese and Japanese California

“The Pacific Coast has its natural front door toward the Orient.”

Rollo Walter Brown, *I Travel by Train* (1939)

THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN THE WINTER OF 1848, followed by official confirmation of the gold strikes a few months later, bound California to Asia as surely as it bound it to the rest of the United States. In California, the real Orient, in the form of Chinese immigrants, was destined to meet the fantasized visions of the Orient carried westward by Anglo-Americans. Stories of mining wealth brought both the Asians and the Americans face-to-face for the first time. For their part, the Anglo-Americans were primed by literature to conceive of such fabulous wealth in Oriental terms.

Consider again the popularity of the *Arabian Nights* tale about Aladdin and the magic lamp as a case in point. As Felix Paul Wierzbicki wrote in *California As It Is, and As It May Be* (1849), “Heretofore we have heard nothing but Arabian Nights stories about the gold region, drawn, if possible, with more vivid colors than even the Asiatic fancy could conjure up.” Wierzbicki went on to warn would-be gold seekers that although “the whole civilized world is electrified with these surprising stories and set in motion, and every day brings strangers to our shores from the most distant regions of the earth,” people should be wary of such extravagant claims. As Wierzbicki put it, “Even our government at home had not received an official account from its subordinates here, that represent the truth in its simple garb,” but nevertheless people “were content to seize upon a few remarkable cases” and act with near abandon. One wonders whether Wierzbicki was being overcautious or simply found the crush of newcomers from all “regions of the earth” disquieting to his sense of California as bucolic paradise.¹ For whatever reason, Wierzbicki was too

cautious in this case, for the historical record confirms that California's Gold Rush represents one of the truly remarkable mineral discoveries, and resulting migrations, in world history. Even though a substantial number of the argonauts returned home within a decade, the die had been cast. California soon became the Golden State. Small wonder, then, that references to Aladdin's magic lamp abounded here. As a popular 1850 history noted, "When miners had seen the hoards of gold, some of it in flakes, but greater part in coarse dust . . . it seemed as if the fabled treasures of the Arabian Nights had suddenly been realized before them."² Significantly, although Aladdin's story is Middle Eastern in origin, that young man discovers the hidden wealth underground as he travels to China. By using his newfound magic lamp, Aladdin not only becomes rich but also attains a social status that he once only dreamed of. The story of Aladdin involves traveling great distances and returning home able to transform one's life. Small wonder that it became one of the premier metaphors in describing the mining West over the next fifty years.³ Aladdin became what Americans commonly called a nabob—a Hindi term for one who returns home from the East a rich man.

Word of the California Gold Rush spread so quickly that it reached the east coast of Asia at about the same time it reached the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. When news of the "Golden Mountain"—or "*Gum Shan*," as California was called in China—reached Guangdong Province in 1849, portions of China were in chaos. Extensive flooding in the Pearl River had displaced thousands, and food shortages now brought the country to the brink of catastrophe. Learning of opportunities to mine gold in California, thousands of Chinese men joined the Gold Rush, rapidly transforming the landscape and ethnicity of the American West shortly after their arrival. Although there were a hundred or so Chinese in California in 1849, the number soon swelled to thousands, as those who sought new opportunities in Gold Mountain boarded ships in Canton (Guangzhou). Most of these Chinese men who migrated to the West at this time were from the hard-hit Guangdong Province, and most of them left families behind for what they thought would be a relatively short time—only long enough to return home wealthy. Their journey seemed natural for several reasons, among them Guangdong Province's long history of gold mining.

By the early 1850s, Chinese miners and their works became an integral part of the western landscape. Driven away from many of the richest placer mining sites by Anglo-American miners, the industrious Chinese often picked over the dregs. Despite this, they had a knack for recovering a substantial amount of gold, though how much they found is unknown. As the Chinese

became a fixture in the California goldfields, they transformed the landscape, leaving carefully piled stones in their wake. This methodical handiwork typified the discipline and organization with which the Chinese worked. They soon participated in other gold mining booms, including southern Oregon, but it all started in California.⁴

For their part, Anglo-Americans lured to the Gold Rush had a revealing expression about their experience. To them, it involved “Seeing the Elephant,” a term of obscure origins but signifying the exotic or unusual. According to Gerald Conti, “Seeing the Elephant” may have originated as far back as the time of Alexander the Great, whose Macedonian warriors triumphed over King Porus’s elephant-mounted troops in the Indus Valley. A thousand years later, the Frankish world got its first look at an elephant when an enterprising Arab merchant brought one from Baghdad to Aix for the Frankish emperor. But the use of the term *seeing the elephant* in America has, according to Conti, a “more ironic derivation.” It may have originated in 1820s New England, when a farmer traveled to town to see a circus but never made it. Like all respectable circuses, this one had an elephant, and the farmer looked forward to seeing it. According to the tale, the farmer’s horse-drawn wagon had entered an intersection obscured by trees, only to be smashed to smithereens by a circus wagon. The farmer’s wagon was wrecked and his horse killed, but he consoled himself with the fact that he had “Seen the Elephant.”⁵

The term was so intriguing that it was used to signify one’s experience in searching for adventure a couple of decades later by soldiers in the US-Mexican War. However, the phrase became especially widespread during the California Gold Rush, when many Americans from the nation’s East and Midwest dropped everything in order to strike it rich in the goldfields. Interestingly, even those who failed to find wealth in the Gold Rush could still claim to be enriched upon their return. They may not have become rich, but at least they had seen the elephant.

The elephant, of course, is native to both Africa and South Asia, and it became the perfect symbol for the exotic. In the vivid imaginations of mid-nineteenth century American gold seekers, seeing the elephant personified adventure. In *Great Platte River Road*, Merrill Mattes concludes that the elephant was “the popular symbol of great adventure, all the wonder and the glory and the shivering thrill of the plunge into the ocean of prairie and plains, and the brave assault on the mountains and deserts that were gigantic barriers to [finding] California gold.”⁶ Appropriately enough, one of the Far West’s first locomotives was named “Elephant,” and it operated on California’s Sacramento Valley Railroad in the mid-1850s.⁷

In Gold Rush–era California, seeing the elephant might also mean getting an eyeful of the bawdy side of life that was forbidden in much of rural and small-town America. As San Francisco began to boom during the Gold Rush, one part of the city—the Barbary Coast—soon gained the reputation as the proverbial den of iniquity. Situated on the city’s northern edge, the Barbary Coast was named after North Africa’s famed shoreline of the same name, the lawless zone where slave traders plied their human wares, pirates and other miscreants congregated, and vice flourished. Similarly, in the San Francisco counterpart, social critics found much to abhor. Writers in the 1850s and 1860s tell of Asian women being purchased, opium being consumed, and violent crime running rampant. One nineteenth-century observer noted that one could go from a largely Caucasian area of the city and within ten steps enter “another world,” where “the uncouth jargon of the Celestial Empire resounds on every side.” In the Barbary Coast, he observed, “the stores are filled with strange looking packages of goods from the Orient; [and] over the doorways are great signs, with letters in gold and vermilion, cut into the brilliant blue or black groundwork, the purport whereof we know not.” This writer also described the many pleasures available in this “barbaric” portion of San Francisco.⁸ Note, however, that if the real Barbary Coast suggested a North African Muslim presence, the San Francisco equivalent found the Chinese filling the niche as prostitutes, drug dealers, thieves, and worse. In a way, this is similar to the general term *street Arabs* that one often heard in American cities. These were not real Arabs but rather impoverished people of any race, including poor whites. The term’s origin, though, no doubt refers to what was then a common sight in portions of the Arab world, namely, the proliferation of beggars in public places.

Anglo-American residents in California continued to marvel at the handiwork of Chinese miners long after the Gold Rush subsided in the 1860s. So too did increasing numbers of tourists seeking a firsthand look at the Golden State. Chinese miners toiling in boulder-strewn riverbeds were popular subjects for late nineteenth-century photographers. In a striking stereopticon photograph, properly dressed Victorian-era European Americans observe Chinese miners at their craft in Northern California (fig 5-1). The miners have diverted water and have in effect turned the creek bed’s rocks and gravel upside down in order to extract the gold. The contrast between the miners, in their traditional (and practical) ethnically rooted dress, and the more elegantly attired observers, is noteworthy—a reminder that sustaining Victorian culture took backbreaking work, much of it performed by lower-class laborers. This photograph also serves as a reminder that increased leisure time, a hallmark of Victorian culture, was not shared by all.



Courtesy Oregon Historical Society (negative no. 016370)

Fig. 5-1. In this pair of nineteenth-century stereopticon photographs juxtaposing work and leisure, tourists observe Chinese miners reworking a played out placer mine in Northern California.

China's special and peculiar relationship to the American West since the era of the California Gold Rush intensified with the building of the transcontinental railroad. As an astute observer and shrewd entrepreneur, Central Pacific Railroad's Charles Crocker realized that Chinese workers could perform miracles for the transcontinental railroad he and other members of the "Big Four" envisioned. Thus, in the mid-1860s, the Central Pacific Railroad induced even more Chinese to come to California. In 1866, aware of the industriousness of the Chinese in California who were now performing wonders constructing the Central Pacific Railroad as "Crocker's Coolies," Union Pacific's manager, Grenville Dodge, wrote that "I have for several years been anxious to visit China, with a view to endeavor to introduce and build Rail Roads, believing it would be one of the best and quickest agents to build up and bring into communication that Empire." By doing this, Dodge felt "I could so develop the facilities of Rail transportation in China as to make it there as it is here a national blessing."⁹ Despite Dodge's enthusiasm, however, China was not as open to westernization at that time as he had hoped. Forty years later, an American entrepreneur offered a more sobering assessment: "It must always be kept in mind that the twentieth century development of China will be along lines Chinese and not European; that is, it will be in conformity with native characteristics, modified by modern ideas."¹⁰

Regardless of his enthusiasm in 1866, Dodge had his hands full competing with the Central Pacific. And besides, history has shown that more than a century would pass before China could blossom into the commercial giant

it is today. Nevertheless, Dodge knew something about the character of the Chinese worker, which helped explain the intensity with which railroad construction proceeded. By summer of 1868, the Union Pacific was rapidly laying rail across the Great Plains, bound for a meeting with the Central Pacific Railroad somewhere—the location was yet to be determined—in the interior West. For its part, Central Pacific was performing herculean roadbed grading with its force of Chinese workers, who repeatedly proved their ability to get jobs done quickly and efficiently.

In popular culture, no single aspect of the western drama was more associated with the Chinese than the building of the transcontinental railroad in the mid to late 1860s, and no place more so than California. The relationship was symbiotic. Facing stiff competition from the Union Pacific, which was rapidly building west out of Omaha, the Central Pacific's Chinese laborers helped the California-owned railroad surmount the Sierra Nevada in 1865. By 1868, more than ten thousand Chinese workers were on the Central Pacific payroll grading the railroad line through Nevada. To document their efforts for the reading public, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* dispatched Joseph Becker to California. Becker's goal was to write a series of articles, but he had to move quickly because the newspaper's goal was to "scoop" other publications flocking to the West. Given the growing power of visual images at the time, the newspaper also dispatched two artists, Harry Ogden and Walter Yaeger, to help Becker record the railroad's construction. In California, especially, their drawings featured Chinese workers engaging in the drama of building the West. Cultural historian Deidre Murphy observes, however, that these scenes show the Chinese workers as deferential to the American technology: "Mesmerized and physically 'sidelined' by the train, they linger somewhere between the landscape all around them and the speeding railroad cars before them."¹¹

Even when a train is not present, however, the Chinese are significant features in the California landscape. In this regard, Joseph Becker's *Wood-Shoots in the Sierra* is worth a closer look (fig. 5-2). Becker depicted the distinctive flumes or chutes that conveyed lumber (notably redwood railroad ties) down to the Chinese working on the railroad. These enter the scene at steep angles, emphasizing the canyon's depth. Situated in the deep canyon, the Chinese workers are elements in this composition, their forms unifying the "shoots" (i.e., chutes) with the railroad. That railroad line disappears around the bend, where a huge pine tree marks the juncture of mountain and railroad bed. The sheer size and steepness of those mountains render the scene exotic—rather like a Chinese painting where sky and landscape merge in a hazy, ethereal mix. It is above all, though, the presence of Chinese workers in the scene



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Fig. 5-2. In *Wood Shoots in the Sierra*, Chinese workers supply wooden ties to the Central Pacific Railroad they helped build through the mountains. Source: *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 1868.

that renders it exotic. As most observers and readers of the period knew, the railroad line would not have been built the way it was without Chinese labor.

On May 10, 1869, when the Pacific Railroad was completed, and the golden spike was driven home at Promontory Summit, Utah, many people commented on the nation's changing geographic position and geopolitical situation. When the two locomotives touched pilots (cowcatchers) to complete the transcontinental railroad in 1869, an illustration immortalizing the event noted "The East and The West" had met, with "The Orient and Occident Shaking Hands after Driving the Last Spike." Given the position of the trains, the illustration's caption considers the Central Pacific to be the Eastern (Oriental) road and the Union Pacific is the Western (Occidental). This at first seems counterintuitive, for after all, the Central Pacific came from the west, and the Union Pacific from the east. However, the caption also represented an ironic truth: the Central Pacific, with its large contingent of Chinese workers and its direct connection to a Pacific port (San Francisco) directly linked to ports of the Orient was, in fact, the truly "Eastern" (that is, Oriental) railroad in the drama. Similarly, the Union Pacific, building from east to west, would normally be considered the eastern road, but symbolizes the push to open the West—that is, it represented the driving spirit of a westward-moving nation.¹²

In reporting events of that day, the *Pacific Tourist* related “a curious incident” associated with “the laying of the last rails,” which “has been little noticed hitherto.” This incident took place when “two lengths of rails . . . had been omitted.” To fill this gap, the Union Pacific had rails brought up and placed “by Europeans.” The Central Pacific, however, brought up its rails with “the labor being performed by Mongolians.” As might be expected, the foremen overseeing the work of both crews “were Americans.” This the *Pacific Tourist* viewed as highly symbolic. As they put it: “Here, near the center of the Great American Continent, were representatives of Asia, Europe and America—America directing and controlling.”¹³ One of the many motives that Americans had to Orientalize the West was a belief that the United States was destined to rule peoples of diverse ethnicity there, and elsewhere.

In addition to their major role in transcontinental railroad construction, the Chinese also worked for other railroads. For example, they helped grade rights-of-way and bore tunnels for California’s narrow gauge Santa Cruz & Felton Railway. In 1879, a blast in one of the tunnels killed two dozen Chinese workers, only one of whom was identified by name in a report published in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. That Chinese worker was named “Jim” and, as a telegraph agent named Cook noted, possessed a “heroic spirit that dwelt in the clay of the Mongolian slave.” Given the virulent anti-Chinese sentiment at the time, however, many white laborers felt that the remaining Chinese workers should be sent into the most dangerous part of the tunnel, where they would either “wing their flowery way to the Celestial land or hunt the sources of the fires that keep the volcanoes in perpetual motion.” This was a perfect Victorian-era metaphor for what the white workers felt about the Chinese, who would either find heaven or hell, but be gone in any event. In reality, things were not that simple. The conditions in the tunnel remained so dangerous that Chinese workers refused to enter, that is, until an exorcism of sorts was performed to rid the tunnel of its evil spirits. The *Sentinel* noted that ridding the site of “the devils they asserted were in the tunnel” was accomplished when the Chinese “proceeded . . . by burning incense and plastering Celestial hieroglyphics over the face of the first set of timbers.”¹⁴ Arcane rites like these fascinated Anglo-Americans and helped impart an exotic touch to California’s engineering works.

As historian Daniel Liestman noted in a recent essay, the arrival of the Chinese in the American West was treated with ambivalence by Anglo-Americans.¹⁵ Historian Laurie Maffly-Kipp also interprets this ambivalence by noting that despite the negative characterizations of the Chinese, “many Anglo Westerners, particularly those in California, also evinced great aesthetic

delight in the distinctive substance of the ‘mystical East,’ seeing the presence of Chinese culture as a singular hallmark of their Pacific paradise.” Maffly-Kipp also observes that the characterization of Chinese ceremonies in California, such as “Chinese Feeding the Dead,” which appeared in popular publications like *Harper’s Weekly*, “reminded Euro-American readers that religion was a physical and communal experience” shared by all peoples. However, “it also suggested the disquieting elements of such ceremony, gestures and actions hidden in the blur of bodies and shadowed places.” Whereas the Anglo-American elite at the time sought to depict the Chinese as having a valid religion, popular culture knew (or believed) better: writings like Bret Harte’s story “Wan Lee, the Pagan” offered an “array of physical and emotional responses—both positive and negative” that were intellectual and visceral. Anglo-Americans took a strong interest in Chinese burial customs, rites, and ancient spirits, which somehow seemed far more potent and far less benign than Christian saints. Maffly-Kipp astutely notes that Anglo-Americans inherently feared certain aspects of Chinese culture, especially those (like opium) that could insinuate themselves into one’s body. And yet, “the encounter with religious difference”—like Orientalism itself—“could also lead to a new acquaintance with oneself.”¹⁶

The Chinese presence expanded into other parts of California. In addition to gold mining, the Chinese were involved in other mineral production ventures. In describing the well-organized efforts by Chinese workers in late nineteenth-century Death Valley, historian Dean Lemon noted that borax ore “was scraped by Chinese laborers from the valley floor into piles so that it could drain, then shoveled into carts, transferred to horse drawn wagons and [then] brought to the plant.” The ore that the Chinese workers excavated from the dry lake bed here was cottonball ulexite, one of nature’s peculiar products in extremely arid lands such as interior California and Tibet. The description of the Chinese workers’ handiwork here, though, is particularly interesting to those fascinated by how people make sense of cultural landscapes. As Lemon went on to observe, “Those who have been fortunate enough to fly over Death Valley have seen the extensive patterns of the [ulexite] harvesting areas, which look exactly like huge Chinese checkerboards still apparent after 115 years.”¹⁷ This, of course, is a partly accurate and partly fanciful description. The regularity of this ordered landscape is indisputable, but comparing it to an evocative aspect of Chinese material culture—a board game—imaginatively reinforces a sense of Chinese order on the otherwise chaotic landscape of California’s Death Valley. By making such connections, Lemon ingeniously brands the landscape with a Chinese rectangularity that in turn mirrors their highly

organized and highly effective work habits. Lemon's imaginative description is a reminder that perceptions of cultural landscapes reflect deeply held beliefs and values.¹⁸

Not far west of Death Valley as the crow flies, but almost three miles (5 km) higher in elevation, California's stupendous alpine scenery called for an explanation. Given the Orientalism of the times, some observers interpreted it in Asian terms. In describing the Sierra Nevada, for example, Orientalist writer William Speer noted that "the Creator has set, in royal majesty, the throne of the sovereigns of the vegetable world" here. Those sovereigns were, of course, the regal giant redwoods, which appeared "taller than the tallest columns or spires that man has built in the New World, towering in a pyramid of living green." These trees were so ancient that they invited high praise, and Speer was up to the task. As he put it, "There is an empire with which we associate naturally such an emblem, the oldest empire in the world." This, Speer noted, might suggest "Assyria, Persia, Egypt, Greece, [or] Rome, [which] have risen and gone," but he had something else in mind. It was, in fact, "the Chinese race," as he called it, which he noted "is still the same, scarcely tinged by the admixture of others." In Speer's mind, China was a venerable empire where "the primeval religion, customs and literature are still vigorous and fresh." Like the sentinels in the Sierra, China was magnificent: "We contemplate, amidst all the ruins [that] Time has wrought elsewhere, such an empire with constant amazement and curiosity." China, in other words, reflected a culture that was both ancient and essentially unchanged. Like the giant trees, it was magnificent. Pondering both the trees and China, one could stare down time, that is, witness it operating without creating ruin. In this manner, Speer juxtaposed features of what he called "The Oldest and Newest Empire."¹⁹ The observers quoted here recognized that Chinese and other eastern Asian peoples had become a significant element in the West's cultural landscape since their arrival in the mid-nineteenth century. More to the point here, Asians had also now become a significant element in broader popular perceptions of the West. To Anglo-Americans, Asians stood out. Given the vast cultural differences between "the races," as people put it, Chinese people tended to be segregated from the white population. One writer went so far as to claim that "Whites and Chinese seem as incapable of mixing as oil and water."²⁰ In this regard, postcards can be especially informative of popular sensitivities, or rather insensitivities. In addition to mining and railroad scenes, images of the Asian West appear in two other distinctly different but related forms—the built urban landscape loosely called *Chinatown*, and the human-centered portraits best called *Asian subjects*.

The first, Chinatown, commemorates one of the West's more easily recognized repositories of Asians. Although other cities in the United States, including New York, might feature a Chinatown, it is a peculiarly western phenomenon, closely associated with mining and railroad development. California played a major role in the establishment of Chinese American culture, but it soon spread to other areas. Consider, for example, the Nevada mining and railroad towns of Virginia City, Elko, and Winnemucca. All have an identifiable section of town that earned the name *Chinatown*. Similarly, each of the West Coast's larger cities—Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, for example—has a substantial Chinatown. In Chinatown, an encounter with the Orient—sometimes sinister, sometimes inspirational—awaited.

Although the name suggests the negative factor of segregation, Chinatown was, and is, a place of considerable charm, intrigue, and mystery. On the negative side of its attractiveness, at least in the mainstream view, Chinatown was associated with vice, namely drugs (especially opium) and sex (prostitution). In prose and fiction, writers would explore and exploit Americans' fascination with Chinatown. Those writings involved racial and cultural stereotyping but above all promoted the idea of Chinatown as offering pleasures forbidden to the broader Anglo-American Christian culture.

The growing popularity of Chinatown in the 1880s suggests its close ties to evolving Victorian culture. As historian Kenneth Ames observed, the tendency for Victorians to surround themselves with an array of artifacts borrowed from many places, including the Near and Far East, suggests something deeper than simple aesthetics. As he put it, "People in Victorian America were deeply conflicted over most of the central issues that occupy human societies—issues of power and power relations, the distribution of wealth and resources, gender roles and expectations, definition and enforcement of appropriate beliefs and behaviors, and resolution of tensions between continuity and change."²¹ Small wonder that their material culture was a hodgepodge of artifacts borrowed from around the world.

Not so coincidentally, perhaps, this era also gave rise to the museum. It too was a collection of material things—specimens, artifacts, and the like—that might reflect "bourgeois acquisitiveness" on the one hand but were also "invested with a meaning deeper than as signifiers of status." To Americans, as historian Steven Conn observed, these objects "were connected directly with ideas and with knowledge of the world." Conn also argues that the fifty-year period from about 1876 to 1926 witnessed a profound change in American intellectual life from an object-based epistemology to one in which the objects lost meaning.²²

During the Victorian period, Oriental (and other) artifacts became so commonly used as to nearly overwhelm the typical dwelling and its occupants as well as the cultural landscape itself, as replicas of pagodas and ancient palaces sprang up full-blown and Chinatowns became centers of interest. This, according to historian Siegfried Giedion, represented a devaluation of symbols. It resulted from the mechanization of the culture, which could now produce a huge number of near replicas of things that were once associated with nobility.²³ As Ames succinctly put it, “We still do not really know why the culture chose to give its material culture exaggerated form,” but as he concludes, “Victorian Americans’ culture was . . . consciously and deliberately a culture of artificiality, of imitation, of pretending and pretention.”²⁴ Art historian John MacKenzie observes that Orientalism represented “a reflection of Victorian doubt and apprehension, suffused with a yearning for transcultural inscription.”²⁵ By this, MacKenzie meant that Orientalists were intrepid enough to adopt new designs from a foreign culture that could enrich their own, but this tendency revealed some very deep concerns about cultural solidarity and identity.

These statements may be true enough, but in the case of Chinatown there is another factor at play. Although Chinatown seems to be as much an Anglo-Orientalist invention as a real place, it is worth noting that it was as much the invention of Chinese American entrepreneurs who lived and worked there. Typically, an association of influential Chinese Americans worked closely to create the image of Chinatown, from stylized architectural elements (for example, pagodalike facades) to stylized urban design elements (such as impressive, Chinese-style arches) marking the entryway to this part of town. Colors were, and are, important to capturing the feel of China. Bright, saturated colors—Chinese or China red, for example—dominate here. This deliberate visual theming began about 1890 and continues to the present, for Chinatown has become as much a marketable commodity as an authentic cultural neighborhood. However, Chinatown also represents an early flowering of Chinese American cultural pride as well as a partnership between European American and Chinese American leaders.

In 1900, the *San Francisco Call* enthusiastically predicted that the city “will become the twentieth century art center of the world.” Anticipating readers’ questions, the paper rhetorically asked: “Why? Because nature has offered with a prodigal hand mountain and sea together; sand dunes, Chinatown, and the bay, and, most of all and above all, the true sentiment of this city’s mysterious charm—the fog.” This city’s mysterious quality was portrayed in decidedly Orientalist terms by the *San Francisco Call*, which could only gain from the characterization. In describing “Theodore Wores [who] spent five years in the



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Fig. 5-3. In this postcard mailed in 1905, Fish Alley in San Francisco's Chinatown offered a glimpse of the exotic in this part of the city.

Orient and returned to San Francisco to find a perfect garden of Oriental bloom right here in our Chinatown," the *Call* was pleased to offer a version of the "why-travel-abroad (when you can have it here)?" sentiment. As Wores put it: "If you wish to study the Orient [you should] locate in San Francisco." To further prove the point, the paper printed photos of several Asianlike scenes, including two Chinese children in authentic Chinese dress, a scantily clad and shapely young Asian girl, and a number of equally evocative landscapes such as the rocky wave-pounded seashore, small sailing vessels in the harbor, and forested hilly scenes.²⁶

Turn-of-the-century postcards of Chinatown in San Francisco are especially evocative and deserve a closer look for the image(s) they convey of a people and place. A color postcard of Fish Alley in San Francisco's Chinatown (fig. 5-3) offers a glimpse of the ethnic character of this district, with its hanging lanternlike ornaments, ornate railings, and a sidewalk lined with tables and baskets. The dress of all the people in the postcard is authentic enough to suggest the real thing—at least in the mind of the postcard buyer/sender. Inscribed on December 31, 1904, this card was postmarked San Francisco, January 1, 1905, and sent to relatives in Los Angeles as a New Year's greeting.

Tellingly, many early twentieth-century postcards of Chinatown feature residential scenes, almost invariably with Chinese individuals or families. "A



Fig. 5-4. As seen in this postcard of “A Happy Family in Chinatown,” ca. 1906, this part of San Francisco reflected a mix of peoples living in humble surroundings.

Happy Family in Chinatown” (fig. 5-4) builds on that theme, but looking more closely, we see that the family members appear to represent several ethnic groups. On Chinese American menus, “Happy Family” refers to a meal featuring a mixture of chicken, beef, and shrimp as well as vegetables; thus this Happy Family terminology on the postcard suggests an ethnic smorgasbord of mixed races. Moreover, the condition of the home, with its ramshackle siding and jerry-built stovepipe, might have reminded postcard viewers that many of these “happy” families were not well-off. Here we are supposed to interpret the Oriental as both satisfied and acculturating. Throughout the West, however, such seemingly mundane scenes revealed the Chinese family as the “other,” a

counterpart to the ideal American family that was likely white, Christian, and upwardly mobile.

The California encounter with the Chinese was always ambivalent. Recalling her experiences in a central California Chinese mining camp, Helen Rocca Goss noted that “it was a childhood thrill to look into an open door and see a squatting man holding his bowl of rice and using chop sticks.” However, she quickly added that it was “not such a thrill sometimes, to see and have to pass, cross old sows, wallowing in a dirty muddy ditch.”²⁷ Then, too, sometimes the Chinese were cast in truly sinister roles. They had a reputation of being both deferential and vengeful. In this latter regard, which titillated Anglo-American cultural fantasies, they were associated with sensational crimes in numerous cities, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

Consider lastly a postcard featuring a lone male subject. Its main theme—a “Chinese Highbinder”—stands proudly, some might say defiantly, on a boardwalk in front of a building (fig. 5-5). This color image makes one wonder just where the picture was taken. Was it in San Francisco, where the postcard was published in about 1904? Or perhaps in China, taken by a traveler or missionary visiting that foreign land? It is probably a San Francisco scene, for *highbinder* was a common term in that city. As the term was used for someone who can be hired for criminal deeds, including assassinations, this highbinder seems ominous indeed. But then we must also wonder: Is this Chinese man really a highbinder at all, or just posing as one?

Postcards like this raise as many questions as they answer: Was the Chinese man (whether or not he was a real highbinder) paid for posing, or was he just standing there in a more or less natural state? Most revealing about this image is the simple, four-word message inscribed below the picture: “Don’t he look fierce.” We know that the card was sent to a woman, but was the sender male or female? The sender of this postcard obviously thought the subject seemed, or was supposed to seem, menacing. So we are here left with additional questions. Because there is no question mark at the end of that sentence, one wonders whether the sender meant it as a simple statement of fact—the Chinese Highbinder looks fierce—or as a mocking statement something along the lines of “he thinks he looks fierce, but I/we know better.” If there was a gender difference between writer and sender, then that makes our speculation about the reaction of the addressee when she received the card all the more interesting. Was this some male on a visit to San Francisco trying to impress a woman he knew? Our question, however, is mooted by an interesting fact about this card: mailed from Watsonville, California, on October 1, 1906, and sent to a Miss Helen Wheeler in Santa Barbara, the verso of this card reveals that it



Fig. 5-5. Mailed in 1906, this postcard of “A Chinese Highbinder” contains the provocative inscription “Don’t he look fierce.”

was never actually received, or as the postal mark soberly indicates, “Failed of delivery for want of time.”

The seamless equating of California with the Orient coincided in part with the visibility and effectiveness of Asian workers here. In 1870, George W. Pine discussed the Chinese and Japanese in considerable detail in his “Bird’s-Eye View of California.” As the large estates were being “divided up for the good of

the many,” Pine noted that “the Japanese have purchased large sections of land here, for the purpose of cultivating the mulberry and making silk.” Pine added that “they are, no doubt, the most skillful silk growers in the world” but noted that the physical environment helped support their activity. Here in California, as Pine concluded, “the climate and soil is supposed to be admirably adapted to the business”—a subtle way of implying that climatic conditions are similar between Asia and California.²⁸ In point of fact, California’s Mediterranean climate differed from that of humid East Asia, though both places could sustain mulberry trees whose bark could be converted into a silk-like linen, according to Louis Prevost’s 1867 book titled *California Silk Grower’s Manual*.

The efficiency of the Asians was disquieting to Anglo-Americans, who hoped California would be a land of plenty and ease. Upon arriving in California, Anglo-Americans assumed they could purchase a place in the sun where living would be easy and competition nonexistent. But, as J. Russell Smith reflected in 1925, “the Oriental, willing to work longer hours than we, willing to live on less, could pay more for the land which he bought or leased.” The question, then, boiled down to this: “What race, what culture, shall own California? Shall it be the economically efficient Mongolian or the less economically efficient Caucasian?” The answer, Smith felt, was self-evident: Asians would wind up the winners. This realization, according to Smith, explains “the movement for the exclusion of the Chinese and Japanese, largely at the insistence of California and other Pacific states.”²⁹ That, however, assumed a level playing field, which California and the West was anything but, especially for Asian workers. After thirty years of tensely coexisting with Asians, white Californians agitated for their exclusion. The 1880 Treaty Regulating Immigration from China was followed by California’s homegrown Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The popular press of the time not only agitated for such legislation but also had a field day depicting its outcome. The cover of the August 18, 1887, issue of the *WASP*, published in San Francisco, proudly depicts “The Last Load” of Asians arriving on the west coast. Although the *WASP* could sting any ethnic group with impunity, it was especially hard on Asians. However, immigrants often find a way of circumventing restrictive policies banning them from entering countries, and the Asians were no exception. Despite official policies, many were able to arrive in California undetected. When the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed most of the official immigration records, authorities had an even more difficult time determining who was, and who was not, in the Golden State legally. Despite efforts to prohibit their arrival, then, Asians were here to stay, albeit as second-class citizens.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the Asian population was either segregated into well-defined sections of cities or settled in scattered locales such as mining districts and railroad workers' camps. This separation, however, did not guarantee a safe haven for Asians who lived in California. In Los Angeles, for example, the Chinese Massacre of 1871 involved a mob of about five hundred whites storming the city's Chinatown, where about twenty Chinese were killed, and some of them mutilated and hanged. At this time, Los Angeles was still pretty much a sleepy Mexican town, though Anglo-Americans were beginning to arrive in larger numbers. The part of town most affected was a mixed-race area called "Calle de los Negros," which had been home to some of the community's most wealthy Anglo-Americans, but by the 1860s was called Chinatown by some. With the arrival of the railroad to San Pedro, though, the area had become downright rough and increasingly disorderly. The cause of this vicious mob action was the accidental shooting of an Anglo-American rancher who got into the cross fire of two Chinese men fighting over a woman. As historian Scott Zesch noted, the aftermath of the mob violence was chilling: "The dead Chinese in Los Angeles were hanging at three places near the heart of the downtown business section of the city; from the wooden awning over the sidewalk in front of a carriage shop; from the sides of two 'prairie schooners' parked on the street around the corner from the carriage shop; and from the cross-beam of a wide gate leading into a lumberyard a few blocks away from the other two locations." Adding to the savagery of the event, one of the victims had been hanged without his trousers, and a finger on his left hand had been removed.³⁰ Not all places in California were violent, but an air of racial oppression still hung in the air well into the twentieth century.

And yet Asians were becoming a vital part of the character of the West, and no amount of racial prejudice could stop that process. If, as we have seen, Americans were ambivalent about the Orient (and Orientals), no place better illustrates these feelings than San Francisco in the early twentieth century. Consider, for example, developments in Golden Gate Park, a huge tract of land that had been a forlorn area of sand dunes and marshes until visionary city leaders in the 1870s sought to cultivate it and make it part of city beautification. As part of the city's face-lift after the earthquake and fire of 1906, Golden Gate Park was revitalized to feature vignettes from varied cultures. Given the long-held fascination with Imperial Japan, the Tea Garden represented a magical area, complete with pavilions, statues, and lush plantings. As seen in a beautifully tinted postcard from the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition (fig. 5-6), the Japanese Tea Garden imported the beauty and mystery of the



Author's collection

Fig. 5-6. A beautifully colored postcard from the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition provides an ethereal view of the “Japanese Tea Garden, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.”

Orient into a heavily visited part of the city. It also confirmed that the city had consciously embraced Asia as part of its public identity.

At the same time that this was happening, however, Japanese and Chinese farmworkers in California were living in near poverty in agricultural areas nearby. To experience another China in the West, one might visit the numerous Chinese farm towns in California’s Sacramento Valley. None of them is more poignant than the Delta town of Locke, whose “buildings stand empty” even though it “has been designated an historic landmark to keep North America’s last rural town built by those Chinese from passing unnoticed into oblivion” (fig. 5-7).

Locke was one of several Chinese towns in the Delta where workers found menial employment. These laborers “often were isolated from the rest of the community,” and “the Chinese viewed the ghettos as temporary residences until the time for ‘bitter strength’ was over and the laborer could return to his native village in China to live out the remainder of his life in comfort.”³¹ As Peter C. Y. Leung observed in a moving poem, for a dollar a day (or as he put it, “one day—one dollar”) the Chinese built “a hundred miles of levee” and made the tule marsh fertile, and so by “our labor, now this land becomes grand.” And yet, “here we are, these Chinese immigrants our story untold, our words scattered, like the fruits [*sic*] forgotten seed.” As Leung concluded, “Only our pictures remain / tattered and yellowed, waiting to be seen.”³²



Photo courtesy Clarence Chu

Fig. 5-7. In the historic Chinese agricultural community of Locke, California, this former gambling house was closed down by the state in the 1950s and now serves as the Dai Loy Museum.

These rural “China towns,” as Leung called them, were vanishing, but Chinese communities could pretty much disappear even from urban places such as San Jose. Here, in the section of town once called Hellendale, a Chinatown thrived in the 1870s but was destroyed by fire. Undaunted, members of the community built a new Chinese temple, or joss house. Described as “a two story brick structure, unmistakably Oriental in appearance,” it was constructed under the direction of Yee Fook in the mid 1880s. As the site of a spectacular Chinese New Year celebration in 1887, the temple became a landmark. It was indeed unmistakably Chinese, as its “large pieces of elegant wood carving, superimposed on a background of mother of pearl, gave an air of magnificence to the place.” But alas, although the temple was “one of California’s few landmarks of this type,” it was “regrettably . . . torn down”³³ in the 1940s before its historical value was realized; today, there is little awareness that a Chinatown ever existed in San Jose.

Fortunately, the beautiful Joss House in the Northern California town of Weaverville (fig. 5-8) escaped such a fate. Typical of many gold mining towns in the area, Weaverville had a thriving Chinese community in the nineteenth



Author's photograph, 2010

Fig. 5-8. Dating from 1874, the historic Joss House (Chinese Temple) in the Northern California mining town of Weaverville is now a State Historical Park.

century. Weaverville attracted Chinese miners from several different parts of China and was the site of the infamous 1854 “Chinese War,” or Tong War—a bloody internecine melee that involved four separate Chinese companies (the Yong-Wa, Se-Yep, Neng-Yong, and Sam-Yep) and left eight men dead and twenty wounded. Constructed in 1874, Weaverville’s Joss House became the crown jewel of the Chinese community. The building’s exterior startled travelers with its unique zigzag-style gable ends simulating waves of water that could extinguish a fire—yet another example of what some Anglo-American observers called “Chinese superstition.” The building’s equally remarkable interior was imported from China and includes statues of emperors and ancestors, as well as a profusion of stylized animal statues and other icons, each of which had symbolic meaning. Called the “Temple of the Forest Beneath the Clouds,” this Joss House is one of Northern California’s most distinctive buildings. Unlike San Jose’s ill-fated Joss House, Weaverville’s became a state park in 1954, a result of the vision of Moon Lim Lee, who was one of Weaverville’s last Chinese residents, and the farsightedness of a state that was just beginning to recognize the importance of its diverse cultural history to future generations.