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The Archaeology of Chinese Immigrant and Chinese American Communities

Historical archaeologists have long turned toward the Atlantic—to Europe and to Africa—in their quest to better understand the origins and development of American society and culture. This publication marks a literal turning point for North American historical archaeology, a reorientation towards trans-Pacific movements of people, cultures, and materials. Cultural, economic, and political interconnections between Asia and the Americas can be traced to the first colonial settlements established in the New World, and they have only become stronger and more influential with the passage of centuries. From the mid-19th century onward, mass immigration from Asian countries transformed the demography of the Americas.

Archaeological research on Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans is far from a new phenomenon. Since the 1960s, archaeologists have been researching the landscapes, buildings, and archaeological sites created and maintained by these communities, but this area of research has exploded in the past decade. It is not just the raw number of archaeological studies on historic Chinese communities that has dramatically increased. More importantly, archaeologists are developing novel theoretical and methodological frameworks for researching and interpreting Chinese heritage sites in the United States. These new approaches are being generated through collaborations between archaeologists and present-day Chinese heritage communities as well as through scholarly conversations among researchers in archaeology, Asian American studies, and postcolonial studies.

This thematic issue introduces this new body of scholarship to the broader community of historical archaeologists. It serves “more as a weather vane than a compass” (Espiritu et al. 2000:129) in that the articles chart the current

state of the field and indicate emerging directions for new research. To this end, the collection includes not only scholarly research articles but also commentaries and resource materials.

In the first article, “Overseas Chinese Archaeology,” Barbara Voss and Rebecca Allen trace the development of archaeological research on Chinese heritage sites in North America and provide an historical context for the archaeological case studies that follow. Voss and Allen argue that historical archaeologists studying Overseas Chinese communities will benefit from a sustained engagement with Asian American and Asian studies, and they outline prospects for a multiscalar, multisited, and multidisciplinary research program on Chinese diaspora history.

The next three articles introduce conceptual and theoretical concerns in the archaeology of Overseas Chinese communities. In “The Response of California’s Chinese Populations to the Anti-Chinese Movement,” Scott Baxter challenges the common portrayal of Chinese immigrants as passive victims of racial persecution. By contributing a new understanding of Chinese material responses to persecutions, Baxter extends recent scholarship that has examined the legal measures taken by Chinese communities. From the fortification of Chinatowns and the construction of fire-fighting infrastructure to the acquisition of weapons, Chinese immigrants actively defended themselves and their communities. Voss, in “Between the Household and the World System,” suggests that Overseas Chinese archaeology requires a re-examination of the units and scales used to measure association and significance in archaeological research. Archaeological studies of the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose, California, suggest the importance of community-based social collectivities, such as neighborhoods and district associations, that were able to act meaningfully in the face of anti-Chinese racism and institutionalized discrimination. This “middle scale” of analysis leads to new research questions that speak more directly to the concerns of Chinese heritage communities. Bryn Williams, also drawing on research conducted on the Market Street Chinatown collection, challenges researchers to examine the concept of masculinity as an explicit research

topic, especially in relationship to those Overseas Chinese communities that were composed predominantly of adult men. In “Chinese Masculinities and Material Culture,” Williams traces the interplay between two hegemonic discourses of masculinity that circulated in 19th-century California: a discourse that feminized Chinese men and relied on orientalist perceptions of Chinese culture and a discourse that was based on the dual, complementary characteristics of *wen* and *wu*. Ceramic artifacts associated with tea and liquor consumption were material objects through which both Overseas Chinese and European Americans negotiated these discourses of masculinity.

The next group of three articles, by Roberta Greenwood and Dana Slawson, Thad Van Bueren, and Rose Estep Fosha and Christopher Leatherman, all present the findings of archaeological research conducted at “unusual” Overseas Chinese research sites. Counter to the tendency towards doing research on urban Chinatowns, Greenwood and Slawson examine the architecture and material culture of Wong How, a man who developed an isolated seaweed-gathering enterprise along the rural Central California coast. Their article, “Gathering Insights on Isolation,” pointedly notes that the architecture of Wong How’s residence and a small collection of Chinese-manufactured items from a nearby deposit could be misinterpreted as evidence of insularity and traditionalism. Yet oral histories, legal records, and other material traces indicate the extent to which Wong How participated in broad economic and legal networks as well as relationships with his non-Chinese neighbors. The theme of ethnic plurality continues in Van Bueren’s study of late-19th-century Chinese workers at a small farm in California’s Mother Lode region. Situated within the “multicultural milieu of the frontier,” Chinese agricultural workers lived and labored alongside native Californians and European immigrants. Van Bueren’s archaeological analysis is complemented by the study of a remarkable Chinese language document associated with the Chinese farmworkers: a ledger created and maintained by their cook. In addition to providing detailed insights into the timekeeping, commerce, diet, and employment of this group of Chinese workers, the ledger affords an opportunity to examine the domestic arrangements that sustained the largely adult

male Chinese workforce. Fosha and Leatherman report on recent excavations of a Chinese neighborhood in Deadwood, South Dakota. Living more than 300 miles from other sizeable Chinese immigrant communities, the Chinese residents of Deadwood were situated very differently than were their compatriots in California or other strongholds of Chinese immigrants.

Fosha and Leatherman also introduce the topic of Chinese immigrant and Chinese mortuary practices, a subject that recently has received increasing attention from scholars studying Overseas Chinese communities (Chung and Wegars 2005). In Deadwood, excavations have uncovered the remains of a cemetery burner used to incinerate ceremonial paper offerings to the deceased as well as possible evidence of *shao yi* (burning the clothes) rituals, during which goods once owned by the deceased were destroyed. Articles by Nicholas Smits and Chana Kraus-Friedberg continue this exploration of Chinese immigrant funerary practices and their cultural significance. Smits reports the findings from an urban Chinese cemetery excavation site in Portland, Oregon; his research traces the continuation of Chinese funerary customs along with the incorporation of European- and American-manufactured goods. Smits proposes that these mortuary rituals were social practices through which Chinese residents of Portland enacted transnational Chinese American identities. Kraus-Friedman similarly interrogates the relationship between mortuary practices and the formation of transnational Chinese identities. Her article presents the results of a grave-marker survey conducted at the Chinese worker cemetery in Pahala, Hawai’i. This study foregrounds the cultural interplay among Chinese immigrants, native Hawai’ians, and other non-*haole* (nonwhite) working-class laborers during Hawai’i’s plantation era. Kraus-Friedman suggests that “local” identities in Hawai’i are an expression of transnational cultural negotiations in which both local birth and ethnic distinctiveness are prized.

The final article, co-authored by Julia Costello, Kevin Hallaran, Keith Warren, and Margie Akin, presents the analysis of an archaeological site associated with an early-20th-century gambling hall in San Bernadino, California. Although sensationalized in contemporary media, gambling halls were important sites of relaxation and social interaction for many members of Overseas

Chinese communities in North America. In “The Luck of Third Street,” Costello and colleagues explore the materiality of this aspect of social life. Their study is especially notable in its analysis of a cache of 1,300 Asian coins found at the site. Used as tokens in many common games, the coins also provide indications about the complicated web of commercial relationships that connected the Chinese in North America to economic developments throughout China and South Asia.

Following these nine articles, two essays reflect upon the current state of Overseas Chinese archaeology in general and the scholarship presented here. Paul Mullins, an historical archaeologist whose research has focused on consumer practices and racial politics among African Americans (Mullins 1999), encourages archaeologists studying Overseas Chinese communities to more directly attend to issues of power and race across color lines in North American society. He notes that while many archaeologists decry the influence of essentialist models of race and ethnicity, the archaeology of Overseas Chinese communities is still pervaded by a circumscribed sense of ethnic identity. Mullins suggests that one of the biggest challenges facing those studying Overseas Chinese archaeology in North America is the question of how to position Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans in relation to “other” Americans. Connie Young Yu, a Chinese American historian and descendant of 19th-century immigrants, has been especially influential in drawing attention to the experiences of Chinese immigrant women and the importance of the arts in Chinese immigrant culture (Yu 1989, 2001, 2002). Her reflections on the articles presented here, as well as on Overseas Chinese archaeology in general, are a powerful reminder of the importance of sustained collaborative relationships among archaeologists, historians, and heritage communities. Yu draws careful attention to points where a greater understanding of Chinese history and cultural practices could transform archaeological interpretation, and she notes the value of expanding the scope of historical understandings of Chinese immigrant populations through archaeological research.

This thematic issue closes with a “resources” section intended to guide readers towards additional information about Overseas Chinese

archaeology. The first resource lists organizations concerned with the study of Overseas Chinese immigration and communities. Priscilla Wegars, founder and curator of the Asian American Comparative Collection (AACC), provides the next resource—a synopsis of the archives’ artifact and documentary collections. The AACC has been particularly important in standardizing methods of classification and description of artifacts recovered from Overseas Chinese sites and deposits. Furthermore, the AACC as well as Wegars herself have consistently played active roles in challenging inaccurate, stereotyped, and demeaning portrayals of historic Chinese communities in the United States and Canada. The third resource is a bibliography, focused on Overseas Chinese archaeology and architecture, that will be particularly invaluable to scholars searching for unpublished theses and cultural resource management reports.

A Note about Language and Translation

English language publications that use sources written in Chinese must solve issues of translation and transliteration. Written Chinese is not a phonetic language, so Chinese characters can be spoken in mutually unintelligible dialects. An historic document written in Chinese or a glass bottle inscribed with Chinese characters could be transliterated in multiple ways. A formal system of transliteration (*pinyin*) conventionally is used to convert Chinese characters into roman letters. This standard is used in nearly all English language scholarship that engages with Chinese language materials.

While Mandarin (*putonghua*) is the national language of the People’s Republic of China, the majority of Chinese immigrants to North America during the 19th- and early-20th centuries spoke a variety of Cantonese dialects. Their descendants often retain a strong Cantonese identity. Many Chinese American heritage organizations and the AACC (Wegars, this volume) advocate using the Cantonese dialect when transliterating Overseas Chinese archival and archaeological materials. We support this and are attuned to the importance of publishing Overseas Chinese archaeology in a manner that is accessible to the broader community of Asian American studies and Asian studies scholars.

The approach used here combines *pinyin* transliteration with Cantonese transliteration whenever possible. In most cases, Chinese place names and terms are written first in *pinyin*, followed by a Cantonese transliteration in parentheses. Personal names and colloquialisms, however, retain the historical roman spelling found in English language archival sources.

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