

THE OVERSEAS CHINESE EXPERIENCE AND SAN JOSE'S CHINATOWNS

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THE CHINESE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

During the mid-19th century China was a land in turmoil. The 1840 defeat of China in the Opium War led to, among other things, the concentration of land ownership, inflation in the value of silver, and increased importation of foreign goods. All this resulted in severe economic problems. Simultaneously, China was experiencing widespread floods, droughts, and famine. When combined, these factors led to widespread starvation and civil unrest, including the Taiping Rebellion in 1851.

Hardest hit were residents of the "Kwangtung" Province. The residents of "Kwangtung" were known to westerners as Cantonese, named after the port city of Canton. Until China's 1840 defeat in the Opium War, Canton was the only Chinese port open to foreign trade. In contrast to the rest of China, the Cantonese were exposed to many western ideas and goods, and news of the outside world. Facing starvation and depredation by predatory landlords and widespread banditry, many impoverished villagers emigrated out of the province. In 1848, rumors of a gold discovery in a rich new land reached Canton. Soon the myth of riches in California, known as "Gum San" or Golden Mountain, began to spread, supported by the return of sojourners with gold nuggets in their pockets.

Many Chinese men quickly arranged to leave for his mystical new land. Leaving the village was a serious and risky decision. As such, it was generally only the poor who were desperate enough to make the trip. Most borrowed money from relatives or signed on as indentured servants to pay for the trip to "Gum San." The voyage quickly gave the Chinese a taste of the struggles ahead of them. The voyage usually lasted about eight weeks, during which time they were packed into the holds of ships, in conditions little better than the infamous slave ships of the Atlantic. To maximize profits, captains frequently exceeded passenger limits, squeezing 400-500 people into one

ship. In unsanitary conditions, with poor provisions, and exposed to a host of diseases many lost their lives en route, never having seen "Gum San."

Those that did make it to California generally disembarked in San Francisco. There they were met by a Chinese labor agent or representative of one of the District Associations. This contact would arrange a job and transportation to the work place. The new arrival would then generally be quickly shuttled off onto a steamer or sailing ship up river to the mines in the interior of California.

In 1849, along with many other argonauts, the first of these ships arrived in California. There were only about 50 Chinese living in California in 1848, but there were 25,000 by 1852, and 40,000 by 1854. Like their non-Asian counterparts, hopes ran high for quick and easy riches. Tradition bound women to the home, and because it was expected to be a quick trip, most of the Chinese that came here were single men who planned to return home with new found wealth. Like their non-Asian counterparts, most were sadly disappointed. Great quantities of gold were not easily found, and most Chinese were pushed to marginal areas. Many soon turned to other pursuits including several famous railroad projects, reclamation projects, factory work, and agriculture.

ANTI-CHINESE ACTIVITIES

The Chinese were at first welcomed as clean, industrious workers in the labor-hungry American West. Due in part to a lack of familiarity of whites with Chinese culture, the initial acceptance began to change rapidly. In 1854, a legal decision found Chinese unable to testify against whites in a court of law. As the productivity of many mining districts began to decline, so did the economy. Chinese were singled out as contributing to the situation because of their willingness to work for low wages. It soon became

popular to exclude Chinese from staking or holding mining claims. In addition, laws were passed limiting their freedom of movement, and special taxes such as the Foreign Miner's Tax were levied against their wages. Anti-Chinese sentiment reached a crescendo in the 1870s as the state entered into a severe economic depression. Anti-Chinese sentiment finally reached such a pitch that in 1882 President Hayes signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, blocking the further immigration of Chinese into the U.S. The Geary Act, passed in 1892, required those Chinese residing here to carry Certificates of Residence.

CHINESE RESPONSE TO HOSTILITIES

Chinese resistance and counter measures took a variety of forms. In some instances it was simply impromptu banding together. For instance, Robert Peckham, the owner of the San Jose Woolen Mills noted that if you pick on one the "...the whole lot will stand up for each other..." Spite also worked, as in 1885, when San Jose laundrymen responded to an anti-Chinese laundry ordinance by cutting off the buttons of their patron's shirts.

Perhaps the most well known, and effective measures were the "hui guin" or District Associations. Most of the Chinese who emigrated into California came from either the Sze Yup, Heungsan, or Sam Yup districts within the Kwangtung Province. Transplants from these districts gradually coalesced into regionalized District Associations. These Associations helped Chinese adjust and survive in the rough world that was California in the 19th century. When a new arrival stepped off the boat, a representative from his respective district would meet him on the dock, provide him with a place to stay, and arrange for employment. Once settled, the new arrival could look to his District Association for continued employment, physical and legal protection, social interaction and comfort from fellow countrymen, and ultimately the return of his remains to China should he have not made that final journey during life. As outside harassment increased, both legal and illegal, the role of the District Associations became more important. They often hired prominent white attorneys to represent members in legal matters. Already by the 1850s, the stakes were so high that the frequently competing associations banded together to form the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, known to whites as the Chinese Six Companies. This organization systematically opposed all anti-Chinese legislation, and generally sought to protect the well being of all Chinese through representation. They

went so far as to challenge the Supreme Court after the passing of the Geary Act.

The most visible form of protection against antagonism was the Chinatown. The formation of ethnic enclaves is a natural phenomenon, as persons of similar background group together. This grouping protects ethnic boundaries and provides comfort in sharing space and time with like minded people. This activity was not exclusive to the Chinese. Ethnic neighborhoods were quite common throughout the U.S., generally being composed of first or second generation immigrants. For the Chinese they seem to have been exceptionally important, for few immigrant populations were also as visually distinct. They were so distinct from other neighborhoods that they warranted notice both officially and unofficially. It seems that every community in the west from Virginia City Nevada, to San Francisco, to Los Angeles had a designated "Chinatown." These communities served several purposes. They were social centers where immigrants could gather in the comfort of their countrymen. They served to promote and perpetuate Chinese culture by propagating group participation in traditional events and ceremonies. They provided employment centers. Chinatowns also served to protect their residents through grouping and organizing the community, and at times by even providing a physical barrier against their hostile neighbors.

SAN JOSE'S CHINATOWNS

By the time of the Gold Rush in 1849, San Jose had a population of almost 3000 people and was a major urban center in California. It was also home to a small community of Chinese who worked as cooks, servants, laborers, and even at a few houses of prostitution on Market Street. By 1860, there were 16 Chinese persons noted in the census including servants, laundrymen, and day laborers. Over time San Jose's Chinese population grew, and as was common among many immigrant groups, they took up residence near each other. San Jose would eventually be home to no less than five different Chinatowns (Figure 1).

MARKET STREET CHINATOWN

By 1866, local Euroamerican officials noted the beginning of San Jose's first Chinatown. At this time, three merchants were assessed for property at the southwest corner of Market and San Fernando Streets. By 1869, the Chinatown had expanded to at least eight

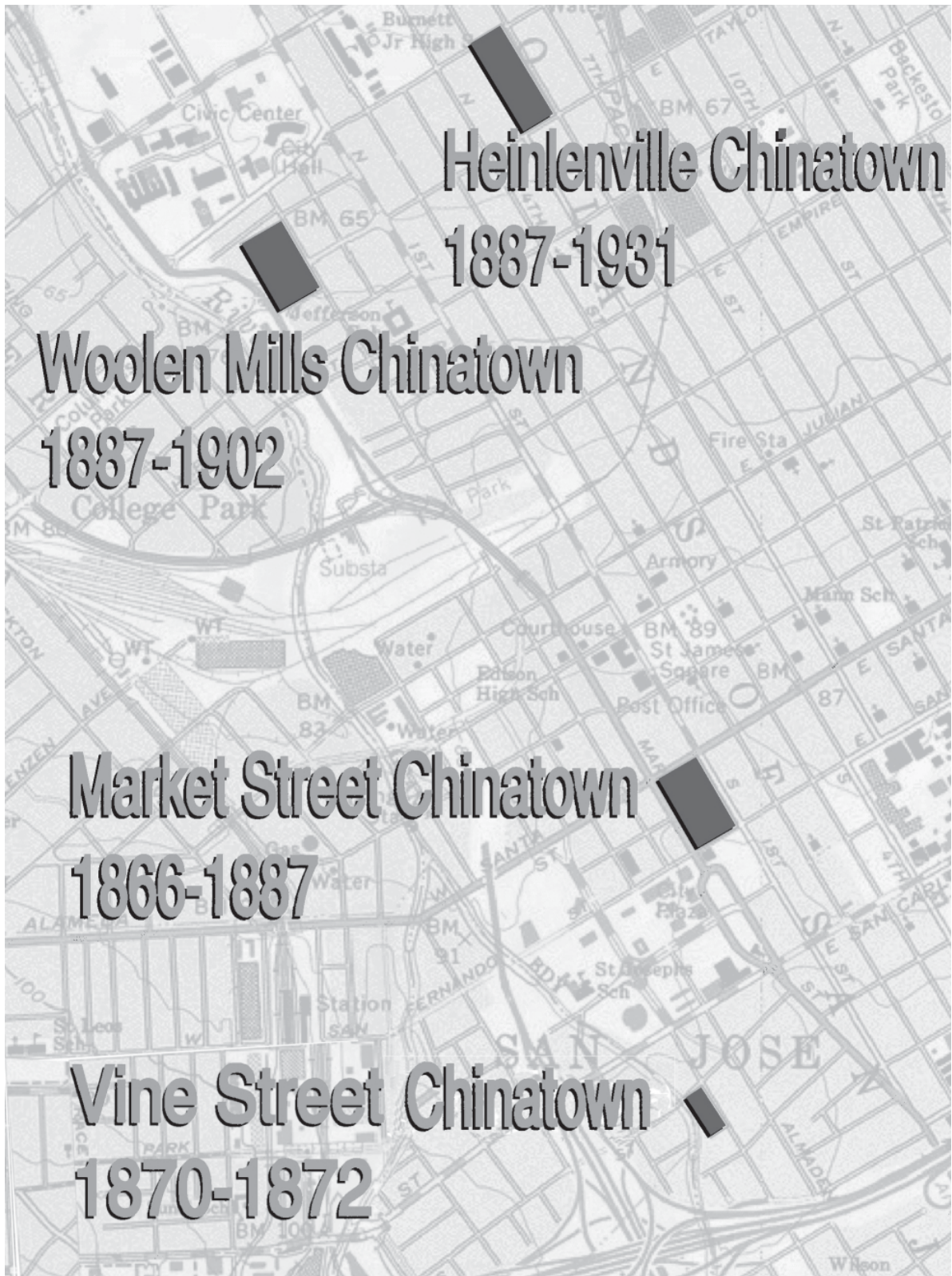


Figure 1: Downtown San Jose Chinatown locations.

buildings, including a hotel and four merchants. The following year two Chinese operated employment offices were noted at the northeast corner of Market and San Fernando Streets. Prominent in the community at this time was a labor broker known as "Sam Long Charley." He was among the first San Jose Chinese who leased land on which to cultivate strawberries, setting a trend in horticultural patterns that continued throughout the 19th century. The town grew to include a grocery, laundry, and more merchants. By January 1870, local citizens were expressing concerns at City Council meetings about the congregation of Chinese in the vicinity. A couple of weeks later, the Chinese quarter was hit by fire and burned to the ground. Although noted as a nuisance by the *San Jose Mercury News*, the paper also chastised the fire department for their lack of effort in vanquishing the blaze.

VINE STREET CHINATOWN

After the fire at Market Street, the Chinese population quickly began construction of a new Chinatown. Within weeks a group of seven Chinese known as the *New Chinatown Land Association* leased four acres on Vine Street near the Guadalupe River, and began building what has become known at the Vine Street Chinatown. Initial construction included at least a dozen wooden buildings. In a stroke of ingenuity, they hired a Caucasian carpenter to build them a single structure. They observed his work on a daily basis, until the building was completed. At this time he was paid for his services and dismissed. Then, to the dismay of many local onlookers, they proceeded to build a series of exact replicas of his product. By March, 45 structures had been erected, and by July the number had increased to at least 88. The census that year noted 454 persons residing in the Vine Street Chinatown. The town grew to include grocers, merchants, and San Jose's first known temple or "Joss House." The town proved to be short lived. Severe flooding of the adjacent Guadalupe River during the winter of 1871-72, combined with pressure from surrounding residents, led to the relocation of the Chinese community back to Market Street.

SECOND MARKET STREET CHINATOWN

In March 1870, not long after the original Market Street Chinatown burned, Li Po Tai, a wealthy San Francisco businessman, leased the land of this first Chinatown on Market. Ah Fook, also known as Ng Fook, arranged the 10-year lease. Ah Fook was rapidly

gaining status within the Chinese population in California. An initial contract was undertaken for four brick buildings valued at \$10,000. Li Po Tai began to lease additional land in the area, and the town quickly expanded. Even before its inundation by flooding, residents at the Vine Street Chinatown began returning to Market Street. Li Po Tai's hold on the revived community slackened as others, including Ah Fook, began leasing and building their own structures on and around Market Street. By 1884, the Market Street Chinatown encompassed almost the entire area facing Market Plaza between San Fernando and San Antonio Streets. Within the town, a division gradually appeared. The area at the corner of Market and San Fernando Streets came to be dominated by brick structures, and was known as "Brick Town." The remainder of the Chinatown was dominated by wooden structures and became known as "Wood Town." It was comprised of older brick, adobe, and wood buildings scattered throughout this area. By 1880, 614 persons lived at this new Market Street Chinatown according to the Federal Census, although researchers generally feel this number is far too low. Census takers routinely undercounted minority populations. In any case, the community had become quite well established and diverse enough to include a wide variety of merchants and services.

Anti-Chinese sentiment was reaching an all time high at the same time Market Street Chinatown was reaching its apex. Anti-Chinese arsonists burned the local Chinese Mission School that was operated by Methodists. The City of San Jose saw fit to exclude much of the Chinatown from the fire district. An ordinance was passed blocking the discharge of the fireworks, which held a key role in many Chinese ceremonies. The carrying of baskets suspended on poles from the shoulder was banned. Even flying kites on public streets was banned. The harassment increased as the value of the land occupied by the Chinese increased. To a point, the Chinese had been tolerated because they had occupied the older Spanish part of town. By the 1880s, San Jose's business district was expanding south along First Street, and the land on which the Market Street Chinatown was situated was becoming increasingly desirable. In 1887, plans were being laid to construct a new City Hall on the Plaza, directly across from the Market Street Chinatown. On May 4, 1887, the day before a bill was to be passed to fund the new City Hall, fire broke out in the Chinatown. The circumstances surrounding the fire were suspicious, and few doubted that arson was the cause. The non-Chinese fire department did little to quell the blaze until the Chinatown was mostly destroyed. The few buildings that survived were

struck by a second fire in July. The *San Jose Daily Herald* gleefully declared that "Chinatown is dead. It is gone forever."

WOOLEN MILLS CHINATOWN

After the Market Street Chinatown burned for the second time, the Chinese population split, and two new Chinatowns were established in San Jose. One was the Woolen Mills Chinatown, located at the northwest corner of Taylor and First Streets. The town was located on land leased from a white land owner, L.M. Hoeffler. Woolen Mills Chinatown borrowed its name from the nearby San Jose Woolen Mills, where a number of its residents were ultimately employed. This community was also known as Ah Fook's or Chin Shin's (also known as Big Jim) Chinatown, derived from the town's two primary Chinese backers. Harassment of the Chinese continued, as white residents of San Jose sought to block the construction of the town by demanding they hook up to the town's new state of the art sewer. It was expected that the Chinese would not be able to overcome the estimated cost of \$10,000. Ah Fook and Chin Shin met this challenge and moved forward with the construction of the town. Ah Fook had long been recognized as the leader of San Jose's Chinese community, and it was expected that most local Chinese residents would relocate to his new community. His death in February, 1888 put these expectations in doubt. Despite Ah Fook's death, the town's surviving benefactor, Chin Shin, managed to move forward with construction and settlement.

At its peak, Woolen Mills Chinatown encompassed 15 blocks. The town included several blocks of wooden "tenements" or residential structures, brick mercantile stores and shops, a temple or "Joss House," a cook house, and a cannery. While the town was home to a number of merchants, it seems to have housed mostly laborers who worked in nearby industries and farms. Archaeology conducted at the Woolen Mills indicates that it was never really an affluent community. Woolen Mills peaked early in its life and began a slow, steady decline. By 1901, the cannery had closed, the buildings were converted into a laundry, and two and a half blocks of the "tenements" and shops had been abandoned, probably due to a fire in that section of town. In 1902, what remained of Woolen Mills burned and was leveled. Chin Shin returned to China and many of the remaining residents moved to the Heinlenville Chinatown.

HEINLENVILLE

When the Second Market Street Chinatown burned, a portion of San Jose's Chinese population relocated to a Chinatown known as Heinlenville that was constructed at the same time as the Woolen Mills Chinatown. Located at Sixth and Taylor Streets, this town was named for John Heinlen, the German land owner who leased the land to 11 Chinese merchants and associations. Heinlenville was to soon surpass Woolen Mills in size and affluence. Heinlen hired prominent architect Theodore Lenzen to design and construct 13 one-story brick buildings to be used as dwellings, four one-story buildings to be used as stores, and two two-story buildings to be used as a restaurant, stores, and dwellings. While Lenzen constructed his buildings, the Chinese built a two-story temple on the corner of Sixth and Taylor Streets. Taking into consideration the previous treatment of the Chinese in San Jose, a fence, topped by barbed wire, was constructed around the Heinlenville to protect its residents.

At its peak, Heinlenville was home to 4000 people, and was the largest Chinese community outside San Francisco. The town flourished, and assimilated many of Woolen Mills residents over the years as the competing community declined. Despite, or perhaps because of, the town's affluence, a series of bloody "tong wars" rocked the community until 1923 when the armed gangs were finally brought into check. After John Heinlen's death the family continued to manage the town until 1931, when the land was finally sold to and cleared by, the City of San Jose for a Corporation Yard. This concluded the final chapter in the complex story of San Jose's Chinatowns.

CONTINUANCE OF SAN JOSE'S CHINESE COMMUNITY

As Heinlenville dwindled, some residents moved to California's other Chinatowns, including those in San Francisco, Stockton, Sacramento, and Watsonville. Many Chinese families remained in the San Jose area, although they were without a local community center. Today, Chinese descendants have a strong presence, and this has been bolstered by the arrival of new Chinese immigrants. The Chinese Historical and Cultural Project was formed to recognize, celebrate, and preserve this heritage. A temple has been rebuilt in what are now the grounds of History San Jose, and a Chinese community festival is held on the Museum's grounds about every other year.

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