CONTESTING HOLLYWOOD’S CHINATOWNS

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Chinatowns have long been used in American media as a geographic signifier for dark, mysterious, and dangerous people. Common media images of life in Chinatowns include the lascivious depictions of opium dens, prostitution, and gambling. Archaeological research on historic Chinese communities promises to nuance these oversimplified and racist stereotypes. Not only can archaeologists challenge inaccurate conceptions of history and the past, they can also interpret material culture in a way that illuminates how these representations had traction in past films and are perpetuated in the present. In addition to confronting Hollywood’s mythic Chinatowns, the history behind how these myths were created and their persistence into present-day debates is explored using primary documents. Historical archeology, in particular, with its unique emphasis on both the daily lives of individuals and cultural processes, provides a powerful forum for these discourses to be discussed, challenged, and mediated.

Nations are imagined communities that tie individual sub-
jects to specific regimes of sovereignty (Anderson 1983). Like other social groups, nations are constituted through social processes of inclusion and exclusion that often fracture along lines of gender, race, and sexuality (Stoler 2002). In the western United States, Chinese were often used as exemplary Others against which a racialized Anglo American national identity was formed (Shah 2001). Non-Chinese fears of Chinese immigration into the United States and resulting anxiety about the demographic constitution of the nation can be witnessed in media representations of Chinatowns. Themes depicting the Chinese as antagonistic to the health and security of the nation were associated with a post-Civil War depression that began in the 1870s, which forced Anglo Americans out of work.

Claiming that cheap Chinese labor was contributing to Anglo American unemployment, federal politicians passed laws that excluded Chinese from immigrating to and becoming citizens of the United States (Daniel 1991). These acts included the Naturalization Act of 1870, which banned Chinese from becoming naturalized citizens of the United States (Daniel 1991:245; Ngai 2004:38), and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which "made the Chinese, for a time, the only ethnic group in the world that could not freely immigrate to the United States" (Daniel 1991:246). State laws also targeted noncitizens; for example, the 1913 California Alien Land Law prohibited nonnaturalized immigrants from owning their own land (Guerin-Gonzales 1994:16). This law built into the legal structure of California exclusionary practices targeted at Mexican and Chinese immigrants that had been in place since the late 1800s (Haas 1995; Garcia 2001). The media’s interpretations of and role in creating these historical events were and continue to be materially articulated in political cartoons, films, and television shows. The archaeological endeavor can build on, challenge, and/or contextualize these themes by juxtaposing archaeological evidence against the rhetoric reiterated in this media.

Although this discussion specifically focuses on the archaeology of Chinatowns in California, many of these observations can be extended to other Chinatowns. Locally situated media that defined the Chinese in threatening and dangerous ways had
national and even international reverberations (Eng 2001; Shah 2001). Despite this international salience, all generalizations must be evaluated against the historical circumstances of local situations. The Chinese experience in other areas of the country and the world followed different historical trajectories because of different economic, social, and political conditions (Takaki 1989; Wegars 1993; Lydon 1999; Fosha 2004; Gardner et al. In press).

California Chinatowns

The Chinese presence in California extends back to the Spanish period of the late 18th century when several Chinese individuals accompanied the Spanish in their colonization of "Alta California" (Lydon 1985). Additionally, both Chinese and non-Chinese Californios made extensive use of Chinese goods, primarily porcelains, imported to Mexico from the Manila galleon trade (Mudge 1986; Voss 2002). Although there was a definite Asian presence, the number of Chinese in California remained small until the mid-19th century, when the Chinese population in the state rapidly expanded. This expansion was due to a number of historical factors in both China and the United States, including the Taiping rebellion in China and the California Gold Rush. This migration was part of the broader formation of a transnational diaspora as Chinese moved to countries around the Pacific Rim and beyond (Ong 1999).

In California, the Chinese quickly grew to become one of the largest non-White immigrant populations. For as many as 20% of the miners working in California during the mid-1850s (Rohe 2002), the journey to California was not a westward journey over land or a trip around the Cape of Good Hope, but a journey east across the Pacific to "Old Gold Mountain," the name still used in China for San Francisco.

California was a place with a large variety of ethnic groups, many of whom lived in segregated neighborhoods (Lotchin 1997). Nonetheless, the popular media have given a particular prominence to Chinatowns, presenting them as completely ethnically homogeneous and exotic places with rigid boundaries. Many of the Chinese who came to California settled in Chinatowns, and every major western city had one. The larger cities—San Francisco, San Jose, and Sacramento—tended to have correspondingly large Chinatowns, with San Francisco being home to an upwards of 20,000 overseas Chinese (Shah 2001:25).

In the late 1800s, a variety of factors led to the destruction and disbandment of many Chinatowns. Changing social and economic conditions in both the United States and China and increasing racial conflict and violence also threatened these communities (Allen et al. 2002). Historian Connie Yu (1991:27) explains how "racist attitudes and ridicule of the Chinese" become "part of popular vocabulary," manifested in anti-Chinese newspapers, violent acts against the Chinese, and increasingly stringent anti-Chinese laws. Racist anti-Chinese laws were extended to the national stage with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Daniel 1991). After the passage of this law, the return home of many Chinese, and the passing away of elderly bachelors, the Chinese population dwindled by the late 19th century. Despite these historical difficulties and pressures, some Chinatowns (such as those in San Francisco and New York) continue to exist as centers of contemporary Chinese and Chinese American culture in the United States.

San Jose's Market Street Chinatown

Located in downtown San Jose, the Market Street Chinatown was a gathering site for the nearly 3,000 Chinese immigrants living in and around Santa Clara County during the late 19th century (Yu 1991:29). During its time, the Market Street Chinatown was the largest Chinese community south of San Francisco. The Market Street Chinatown was not the first Chinese community in San Jose. At the same location, a previous Chinatown was formed in the 1860s and was occupied until 1869 when the wooden buildings of this community burned to the ground (Yu 1991:21). Members of the Chinese community built another, temporary
Chinatown in San Jose and lived there until the Market Street Chinatown was rebuilt in 1872 (Yu 1991:21). On May 4, 1887, an arson-sparked fire inspired by anti-Chinese sentiment burned the Chinese buildings to the ground. Rather than be driven away, the Chinese in San Jose regrouped and founded new Chinatowns in two separate locations. One community was attached to a factory and became known as the “Woolen Mills Chinatown.” The other community, the “Heinlenville Chinatown,” was located on the outskirts of town (Allen et al. 2002).

Although artifacts from Market Street Chinatown were excavated in 1985, 1986, and 1988, the cultural material from the site was never fully analyzed. History San José, a nonprofit organization, gained control of the collection in 2002 and entered into a joint project with Stanford University to process the artifact assemblage. Preliminary research has led to the publication of a number of reports based on materials from the site. These reports range from in-depth studies of single features (Clevenger 2004) to examinations of classes of artifacts across the site that include ceramics with “peck marks” (Michaels 2005), gaming pieces found at the site (Camp 2004; Chang 2004), tiny cups (Simmons 2004), and opium paraphernalia (Williams 2003). Additionally, archaeological materials from the site have been used as a case study to discuss overseas Chinese archaeology (Voss 2005) and the archaeology of masculinity (Williams 2006).

Hollywood’s Chinatown

Hollywood has long used Chinatowns and Chinese Americans to both create and convey cultural anxieties about the constitution of U.S. national identity. These tropes permeate historical and contemporary media and infiltrate archaeological interpretations of overseas Chinese communities. Although other forms of media are briefly considered (political cartoons), this analysis primarily focuses on three films: *Broken Blossoms*, from the age of silent cinema, *Mr. Wong in Chinatown*, from the late 1930s, and *The Corruptor*, a contemporary film released in 1999. Two powerful and intertwined discourses that echo throughout these films and represent imagined Chinese threats to America are the portrayal of Chinatowns as dangerous places outside of law and the imagination of Chinatowns as “beachheads” for the cultural invasion of America. The depictions of the Chinese and Chinatowns that emanate from Hollywood do not emerge sui generis from the minds of producers and directors. They are both generated by and generative of long-standing discourses regarding Chinatowns.

In many films, Chinatown has been depicted as a mysterious and dangerous space, existing outside of the rules and regulations of “normal America.” In contrast, Chinese immigrants who leave Chinatowns or live outside them are often depicted as ideal, moral, and assimilated U.S. citizens. The Chinese Americans who remain in Chinatowns are shown as envious or as harboring hatred toward the assimilated.

*Mr. Wong in Chinatown* (1939) is an installment of the serialized film series “Mr. Wong” starring Boris Karloff, as Mr. Wong. Set in San Francisco, Mr. Wong is a Chinese American private detective who solves various crimes involving the San Francisco Chinatown and the Chinese community. In this particular episode, Mr. Wong helps the San Francisco police investigate the murder of a Chinese “princess” who was in California attempting to buy military airplanes for the wars in China. Mr. Wong uses his connections with the Tongs—Chinese gangs commonly associated with crime, drugs, and prostitution by the media—in Chinatown to help solve the case. Throughout the series, Mr. Wong is the “Americanized” Chinaman who serves as a liaison between the separate worlds of Euro-American San Francisco and the foreign Chinatown.

In *Mr. Wong in Chinatown*, the Chinatown is primarily visited when a crime or other misdeed has been committed. The Chinese who live there are depicted as backward and foreign, whereas those living outside of Chinatown are more civilized, less prone to violence, and culturally “Whiter” (and, in Mr. Wong’s case, physically Whiter). The portrayal of the Chinese community in the film insinuates that it is the Chinatowns themselves that keep the Chinese from assimilating into American culture. To further
accentuate the danger of these places, the only economic activities that seem to take place (aside from the ubiquitous Chinese restaurants) are smuggling, prostitution, and drug use.

James Foley's *The Corruptor* (1999) is a story about Danny, a New York City police officer (Mark Wahlberg), assigned to "work the beat" in Chinatown. He is the only non-Chinese officer working in the precinct. Another experienced officer, Nick (Chow-Yun Fat), serves as the link between the seedy and unregulated world of Chinatown and the New York police force. Toward the end of the movie, we find that Nick is corrupt and has many connections with the Tongs. In the end, Nick is forced to choose between his loyalty to the police force and his allegiance to the Tongs. Though Tongs were important parts of life in many Chinatowns, they are better characterized as community organizations. The Tongs' criminal connections lasciviously used in the media, are overstated and rest on "very little reliable evidence" (Daniel 1991:245).

*The Corruptor* paints a similar picture of the New York Chinatown. The streets of the community are liminal legal spaces where crimes easily go unpunished by official authorities who must rely on sympathetic insiders to maintain order. This film also explicitly deals with Chinatown issues that were only hinted at in the older films: filth, moral depravity, and drug use. Whereas early silent films, such as *Broken Blossoms* (1919), often showed Chinese characters smoking opium, and the serialized movies made reference to opium dens and women of ill repute, the Foley movie is quite explicit in its depiction of drug use, gambling, and prostitution. In this film, several scenes take place in brothels, violently depicted murders occur at an alarming pace, and the officers regularly visit gambling halls as part of their "beat."

Symbolism and imagery have also sent a strong message about the danger, vice, and corruption of Chinese enclaves. Choy et al. (1994:102) explain how in political cartoons, the Chinese were "ridiculed ... as cultural inferiors, physically grotesque, morally depraved, and carriers of the deadliest diseases." In fact, in 1903 "the presence of the bubonic plague was a deliberate scare fabricated by the Board of Health in a campaign to convince San Franciscans of the necessity to get rid of the Chinese and to burn Chinatown" (Choy et al. 1994:102). Cartoons helped further San Francisco's Board of Health's political campaign, with captions reading, "The Bubonic Plague in San Francisco, Chinamen Confined within the Chinese Quarter." By the time the epidemic had been dismissed by federal courts as nothing more than a "political and labor maelstrom" (Molina 2006:28) related to the mayor of San Francisco's political platform, Anglo Americans' fear of the Chinese, which had its origins from the time the Chinese began to enter the United States, increased by manifold (Saxton 1970; Shah 2001). Cartoons frequently sensationalized Chinatowns, often showing Chinese Americans engaging in prostitution, smoking, gambling, and "debauchery of white women" (Choy et al. 1994:102).

The portrayal of Chinatowns as dens of vice and crime in both film and media venues creates a mythic place that bears little resemblance to actual Chinatowns. Archaeological research provides the tools to address this discrepancy. The most direct way to illuminate a more nuanced understanding of Chinatowns is by challenging these depictions on a factual level. For example, Chinatowns were not the "seedy dens of opium consumption" presented in these movies and cartoons. Material culture relating to opium production and prostitution, although present, reflects only a small percentage of the Market Street Chinatown's archaeological assemblage and was undoubtedly not the primary commercial activity within the Chinatown. This pattern seems to be consistent with archaeological evidence from other overseas Chinese communities (Wylie and Fike 1993). During the 19th century, opiate consumption in the form of opium, laudanum, and morphine was common in the United States (Courtwright 1982) and Canada (Anderson 1987:592). Although opiate use is commonly linked with Chinese use, "only 20% of the opium imported into the United States during the late 19th century was smoked by Chinese" (Wylie and Fike 1993:258).

Furthermore, opium pipe tops (also called pipe "bowls") at the Market Street Chinatown were found in features that were associated with a wide variety of depositional contexts, including residential, commercial, and mixed-use sites (Williams 2003) (Figure
12.1). Although it is true that patterns of disposal do not necessarily directly correlate with patterns of use, the variable contexts in which the pipe tops were found suggest a pattern of use most congruous with the idea that opium was consumed in different contexts, including commercial opium dens, general stores, and domestic residences. This implies that opium products at the Market Street Chinatown were not consumed exclusively or even primarily in concentrated locales and "dens," but were instead consumed over wider spatial and social contexts and perhaps, as historical documents confirm, by non-Chinese. In their research, Wylie and Higgins also come to a similar conclusion. They argue that opium was consumed in different locations corresponding to different social contexts, including recreational smoking, work-related smoking, and social smoking in residences (Wylie and Higgins 1987:365).

Smoking opium was a common feature in American societies after 1875 and was "considered particularly fashionable by White females" (Wylie and Fike 1993:258). Additionally, Schabitsky (2002:279) notes, "when compared with public intoxication and alcoholism, morphine was viewed by Victorian society as the lesser of the two evils." She similarly observes that "morphine addicts were often found in the middle and upper class circles" and that "opiate addiction was considered a malady of middle life" (Schabitsky 2002:284). An 1880 issue of Harper’s Weekly notes this trend, writing, "The consumption of opium in this country is by no means confined to the Chinese. It is spreading to an alarming extent among people of American birth" (Wylie and Fike 1993:258). This is not to say that Chinatowns were drug free. As Lydon (1985) and Raven (1987) both point out, many Euro-Americans frequented Chinatowns in search of opium. This challenges the idea that the drug use in Chinatown was worthy of the exoticization and excessive focus in Hollywood depictions of Chinatowns.

If, as archaeologists have demonstrated, Chinatowns were not the dangerous smoke-filled opium havens that Hollywood has implied and San Francisco's contemporary Chinatown is one of the safer areas of the city (Resource Development Associates 2002:37), why did these images hold such power in the past and, more importantly, why do they remain so powerful today? Perhaps imagining Chinatowns as dangerous places where moral depravity is the norm lends rhetorical weight and a sense of urgency to the trope that Chinatowns as predatory spaces threaten the sanctity of the United States.

Predatory Chinatowns

Through the lens of Hollywood, Chinatowns are not only places of grave danger, but are also often imagined as "outposts" of a foreign and predatory culture that pose an imminent threat to the imagined purity of the country. Like many other nationalist discourses, this trope is deeply embedded in complex class and gender relations and often revolves around anxieties about masculinity and the working class (McClintock 1995; Enloe 2000). In the context of media depictions of Chinatowns, this fear often focuses on the perceived threat to White working-class men by Chinese competitors.
with multiple arms and hands engaged in various forms of labor
with the caption "all-absorbing character of Chinese competition"
(Figure 12.2). Beside the cartoon, The Wasp writes:

On all sides it is reaching out for trades that it can master
and a crushing our opposition is the inevitable result. ... 
Our workingmen and women dependent upon their own
hands and arms for support look with sad hearts upon this
iconoclastic breaking down of all their employments, and in
bitterness of soul cry aloud, “How long, O Lord, how long.”
[Choy et al. 1994:90]

Beginning clockwise, one sees the multiple hands of the Chinese
man overtaking the United States by selling opium, increasing
taxes, and taking Anglo American miners’, launderers’, and
housekeepers’ jobs away.

Anxieties about competition between Anglo Americans and
Chinese Americans for employment are also demonstrated in a
cartoon entitled, “The Consequences of Coolieism” (Choy et al.
1994:125). In this cartoon, the purported dominance of the Chinese
in the labor market results in the “ruination of the American fam-
ily: the father commits suicide, the son is caught stealing bread,
the mother is in despair, and the daughter is hooked on opium”
(Choy et al. 1994:124). The nationalist implications of this trope
are obvious; a Chinese man replaces the Statue of Liberty, the sky
appears dark and ominous, and the harbor’s waters look polluted,
implying that the future of the country is questionable. Rather
than being a beacon of light and liberty, this statue’s luminance
projects ideologies of “filth, immortality, diseases,” and ruin to

Filmmakers quickly adopted the idea that Chinatowns are
predatory “extra-territorial” spaces existing outside of the rules
and regulations of “America.” D. W. Griffith’s 1919 film Broken
Blossoms is a particularly strong example of this theme. This film,
which presents one of the earliest images of a Chinatown in the
media, can be viewed as a cautionary tale against White moral
failure. In Broken Blossoms, a character known only as “Yellow
Man," moves to the West on a missionary expedition to "take the
glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of
turmoil and strife." After moving to London, he opens a general
store in the heart of Chinatown. One of his regular customers is
Lucy, a young White girl who is regularly abused by her father,
Battling Burrows. After one particularly bad beating, she stum-
bles into Yellow Man's store and passes out. Yellow Man nurses
her back to health, dressing her in his old "magical" Chinese robe.
The robe symbolizes Chinese culture and by enveloping Lucy in
his robe, the Yellow Man ritually turns her Chinese. A friend of
Burrows discovers that Lucy is staying with Yellow Man. Burrows,
as we learn in the movie, "suddenly discovers parental rights—a
Chink after his kid! He'll learn him!" He rushes into Yellow Man's
store, finds his daughter, and drags her back to his house before
beating her to death. Yellow Man follows Battling to his house
and, finding Lucy dead, shoots him. He then returns to his store
with Lucy's body, prays to Buddha, and commits suicide.

When the White father is not fulfilling his duties, and becomes
abusive, his daughter, Lucy, runs to a Chinatown. There, the car-
ing arms of an Asian man, "Yellow Man," await her. This same
sentiment resonates today in dire warnings of Asian Americans
outperforming White Americans in universities and the current
fear of outsourcing manufacturing and technology jobs to China.
The message is that if White people falter or stumble, their jobs,
their children, and the soul of their nation will be taken over by
hard-working Asians.

Underneath Mr. Wong's Chinatown, there are numerous
tunnels that the Chinese use to smuggle goods and people, both
within the Chinatown and to the docks of San Francisco. These
tunnels symbolize the secretive underworld of the Chinese. They
are particularly significant because the passages suggest a direct
physical link from the San Francisco Chinatown to China via the
ships waiting at the end of the tunnel. Goods and people can enter
the Chinatown without even setting foot on U.S. soil, further
emphasizing the "foreignness" of the Chinese.

There is no evidence of an extensive network of tunnels under-
neath the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose (and because of its
complete excavation, it is almost certain that tunnels would have
been found had they existed). Several towns, such as Pendleton,
Oregon, advertise tunnels underneath old Chinatowns as tour-
ist attractions. According to Priscilla Wegars (2006 pers. comm.),
director of the Asian American Comparative Collection, these
tunnels are primarily sidewalk vaults that were used for general
delivery, to admit light into basements, and were common fea-
tures of urban commercial buildings during the time. Claims for
tunnels underneath Chinatowns are based mainly on innuendo,
rumor, and clearly biased contemporary newspaper accounts.
For example, the evidence mustered for tunnels underneath the
El Paso Chinatown are derived from early 20th-century English
newspaper accounts (Farrar 1972:20–21). The difficulty in find-
ing verifiable archaeological evidence for these tunnels highlights
their scarcity and the fact that they were clearly not central features
of life in Chinatowns. Archaeologists have investigated enough
Chinatowns to determine that if there were tunnels underneath
some Chinatowns, they were the exception rather than the rule.

The Chinese did live in separate and sometimes isolated com-
unities where they found safety in surrounding themselves with
people from their own country who spoke their language, ate the
same foods, and dressed in similar clothes. Their marginalization
from the non-Chinese community was reinforced by numerous
state and federally imposed acts and laws banning them from rea-
ping the benefits of being naturalized U.S. citizens. This legislation
created a social and psychological barrier between Chinatowns
and the rest of these western cities.

The archaeological record, however, illuminates a more com-
plex series of interactions between the Chinese and their neigh-
bors. Alongside the Chinese medicine bottles and cookware, a
number of U.S. patent medicine bottles were found, as well as
a large number of European-produced cookware. Store ledger
records from general stores surrounding the Market Street com-

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munity document extensive and persistent relationships between
residents of the Market Street community and the surrounding
neighbors. Rather than being two isolated worlds, the Market
Street Chinatown and the rest of downtown San Jose formed a
synergistic relationship. This is not to imply that conflict did not take place between the Chinese and non-Chinese residents of the city. Rather, it shows that there were many nuanced, varied, and complex connections between the Market Street Chinatown and the surrounding community.

This pattern is seen in other Chinatowns across the world. Clearly, economic and social interactions beyond those pictured on film took place between the “exterior” Euro American communities and “inner” Chinatowns. Historian Sandy Lydon (1985) stated the Chinese in California had extensive formal relationships with local White officials and businessmen and that White Californians would often testify in court during immigration cases on behalf of Chinese neighbors. Julie Schablitsky (2002) has demonstrated that commodities were exchanged between Chinese and non-Chinese residents of Virginia City, Nevada. Praetzellis and Praetzellis’s (2001) examination of notions of “gentility” in Sacramento, California, illustrates that a Chinese merchant family purchased and displayed ceramic wares produced in Staffordshire to convey the image of middle-class respectability to their non-Chinese neighbors and to foster commercial relationships with the non-Chinese community.

This adoption of non-Chinese ceramics does not appear the result of simple assimilation (the act of becoming non-Chinese that Hollywood has painted as the antidote to the dangers of Chinatown). On the contrary, these adaptations were part of an uneven refiguring of identity that transformed both the Chinese and their non-Chinese neighbors in unique ways (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 2001). Australian archaeologist Jane Lydon (1999) has similarly looked at the strategies that the overseas Chinese in Australia used in their negotiation of a foreign culture. For example, many Chinese merchants would throw charity banquets for “patriotic” causes, acts that showcased their role as “good citizens” (Lydon 1999:146). This interaction moved beyond formal events and strictly commercial exchanges. In Sydney, there were even several European women who lived with Chinese men (Lydon 1999:138–140).

Camp’s study (2004) of gaming pieces found in the Market Street Chinatown challenges the notion that gambling took place in isolated opium dens. Artifacts such as dominoes, dice, chess, and other Chinese gaming pieces were found in several different contexts (Figure 12.3). Based on her spatial analysis and historical research, she suggests that gaming activities often took place in outdoor, communal areas where families gathered and shared food. Researchers have also pointed out that Euro American “outsiders” often ventured to Chinatowns: an observer of these activities recalled, “dollars in gold passed hands—often from the white hand to the yellow—and often, too, from yellow to white” (Lydon 1985:206).

Although it is true that Chinatowns are distinct locations, with identifiable material differentiating them from surrounding areas, this difference is never a totality. Archaeologists can challenge these formulations by studying topics that are likely to comment on, contest, or add nuance to these tropes.
Conclusion

Nationalism is a social process that plays a key role in the constitution of identities and social difference (McClintock 1995). With this in mind, these Hollywood depictions of Chinatowns as dangerous and predatory spaces make sense when they are understood to discursively delineate the edges and boundaries of the nation. The idea of the Chinatown as a dangerous place legitimates and accentuates the threat to the nation that the predatory Chinatown poses.

The historical persistence of these tropes and their presence across a wide range of media implies that they were not simply created by Hollywood but were formed through recursive relationships between the media, the legal structure, and daily interactions between Chinese and their neighbors. As Anderson (1987) reminds us, the concept of a “Chinatown” is reliant on the historically situated and culturally loaded idea that identities can be given a spatial and temporal location. In reality, Chinatowns, like most places, were spaces of multiethnic interaction, where people with different dialects, genders, ethnic affiliations, and ages congregated. Archaeology is equipped to untangle some of the ways these identities were constituted at a material level by contextualizing and historicizing the Chinese American experience in the United States.

Although the borders of nations and the delineations of who is and who is not a national subject may appear rigid in cinema, the contrary seems to be true in archaeological descriptions of history. Archaeological materials recovered from Chinese American neighborhoods must therefore be understood in relationship to the historical events surrounding them, and not simply used to measure acculturation or isolationist tendencies. This is not to say that the very real violence and discrimination that the Chinese faced on a daily basis should be ignored. The complex interactions between the Chinese and their non-Chinese neighbors must also be understood in the context of the potent power relationships of the time.

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As research at the Market Street Chinatown and similar investigations in turn-of-the-century America illustrates, Chinatowns were not simply, as Hollywood has asserted, lawless and foreign nations within a nation. There is no conclusive evidence for opium dens, tunnels, or brothels at the Market Street Chinatown; however, we know from historical documents, photographs, and similar archaeological work that these places existed. If, as some of these forms of media imply, these types of activities primarily supported the economies of the Chinatowns, a preponderance of archaeological evidence should have attested to these activities. Instead, what archaeological evidence does reveal are multiple, complex relationships between the residents of Chinatowns and their non-Chinese neighbors. This is only the beginning of an establishment of an archaeological model of the relationship of Chinatowns to the surrounding community that is based on interaction, mediation, conflict, and negotiation and not simply of exclusion and separation.

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CHAPTER 13

WHEN THE LEGEND BECOMES FACT

RECONCILING HOLLYWOOD REALISM AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REALITIES

Vergil E. Noble

[M]ythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of history.

—Karen Armstrong (2005)

This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

—Shinbone Star reporter Maxwell Scott’s (Carleton Young) reply to Senator Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), when asked if he would publish Stoddard’s true account of his own rise to public prominence, in John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)