'Chinatown' and the American Imagination

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A/P/A Studies Fall 2014
Gallatin K20.1229 & CAS V18.0370

Mondays, 12:30-3:15, Lab - Wednesdays, 12:30-1:45 @ Global Center #288
Office hours – I’ve got a crazy schedule! Please make email appt. beforehand, even
during office hours: Jack.Tchen@nyu.edu

Plus!
Laura Weinart-Kendt, writing and communications resource
Andrew Lee, historian, Bobs archival & research resource

In 2012, the US Congress expressed “regrets” for the Chinese Exclusion Act. This will be an intensive investigative working seminar focused on historical reckoning with the Chinese Exclusion Acts (1882-1965/68) in relation to the present crisis of Manhattan’s ‘Chinatown.’ How does the “Chinese Question” continue to impact the reality of migrants and the misunderstanding of China today? What happens when an American historical policy of exclusion and marginalization is invisibilized and the “model minority” celebrated? How does this “past” live on in the present?

Furthermore, will a living community of survival face displacement with the onslaught of post 9/11 hipsters, Soho-ization, Bloomberg’s zoning policies, Manhattan Institute “quality of life” rhetoric/policies, and overseas Chinese investments? Will it become a touristic shell—Chinatown in name only like Little Italy? What can we each do to change such systemic cultural political denial?

The answers are to be found in clues of the past still impacting on contemporary realities. And more fragments evident in the streetscape and in people’s stories. Historical context, but more importantly, historical imagination matters. We’ll be investigating these issues and producing work that will aid those who work and live in Chinatown better understand what is going on and to fight for peoples’ rights to the city.

We’re fortunate to have two terrific resource/teacher collaborators in our seminar—Andrew Lee, historian and research librarian, and Laura Weinart-Kendt, writer and writing coach. It’s a large group to be working seminar style, but I’m deeply committed to undergraduates learning how to conduct original research. Making it work depends will depend on all of us pitching in.

Together we’ll be engaged in exploring lots of issues and coming up with our best working analysis of what’s going on and what can be done. In the bargain, you’ll learn how to become a critical, cross-cultural researcher/practitioner.

Basics
This seminar will be immersed “the power of place.” Historically excluded and marginalized, Chinatown is one of the most notorious, taken for granted, yet least
understood neighborhoods of New York City – seemingly a permanent feature of the racialized landscape of the city and the American imagination. At the same time, China has emerged as a global player and either romanticized or perceived by power brokers in the U.S. as a land of hard workers and savior of American capitalism, or a land of despots who are the potential economic and military “threat” to U.S. global power. Is Chinatown perceived as the mysterious, exotic/erotic place for good eats of tourist fantasies or a dangerous, inscrutable, gang-ridden “China in the West”? Clearly, parts of both. The past and future are deeply intertwined. We’ll spend this term untangling and complicating.

Via readings, multi-media work, short resource lectures, soul searching, group dialogues, field research, guest speakers, fieldwork, contextual explorations, and projects, you’ll be ‘mapping’ your distinctive explorations and building a collaborative online map. We’ll bring your individual and group work together as a class project intended to help document and concretely aide Chinatown's post-9/11 recovery.

I believe in lifelong learning and democratic, participatory schooling. I also believe students can produce excellent, useful work informing the public. I want us to form a lively community in which we collaboratively deconstruct received knowledges and facilitate the building of more truthful counter-knowledges. We can facilitate the expression of powerful stories not normally known, nor told.

I also believe, and know, undergrads can do terrific original research. And that’s part of what you’ll be learning about in this seminar – not just content but also forms of research, approaches to thinking through questions, etc. Ultimately, you’ll be mapping individual and collaborative projects about 'Chinatown' for a collaborative website and something more usable.

To perform these tasks, you'll need to locate your own personal and historical position in relation to the production and reproduction of meanings and identities. This self-awareness in the formation of ‘the self’ and its relation to how various 'others' are constructed will be foundational to all the explorations of the class.

I welcome (and require) your fullest participation in formulating what you'd like to pursue this semester. I'm always trying to find a balance between structure and flexibility. I want to make sure there are plenty of opportunities for you as a class to articulate your resource and contextual learning needs and formulate what we do and how we do it.

Some sessions will be three venues: at the newly opened “Chinese in America: Exclusion/Inclusion” exhibit at the New-York Historical Society, the core exhibit “With a single step . . .” plus two important new exhibits at the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), and “Haunted File: Eugenics Records Office” at the A/P/A Institute, NYU. You’ll get the chance to see professional cultural production behind the scenes. Some sessions will be walking the streets of lower Manhattan. The work you each and collectively do is first and foremost for yourself and the collaborative seminar. What we do will also have some additional benefits.
The A/P/A Institute, which I run at NYU, is building a website (and more) for the “Below the Grid” Project. I have the goal of creating an augmented reality app for smartphones and GPS tablets. With your permission, you’ll be contributing to this endeavor. More on this later….

Walking practice
How might you know the present, past, future of a place, a block, an artifact? Being there, being with it, walking within it and through it, walking away from it, walking back to it . . . . Rather than fast individualistic research, grouping swaths of time/space (and imagining one “knows” something), we’ll be doing slow, focused, iterative, sensate, relational and collaborative research. Walking and being there is at the core. Get comfy shoes and be ready with layers as the weather gets colder and stormier. This is an all-weather seminar!

Three Thematics: theories and practices
The course is structure like a three-legged stool. The first thematic is the contest over the power of place, ongoing displacements, and our roles in that process. The second is the intensive immersion into what we know of as “Chinatown”—its history, the American imaginary, and translocal global linkages. And, third, is researching and re-presenting our site projects as engaging with the questions we are exploring—not just textbook and theory but in-the-mix practice.

Site areas
We’ll be forming working groups of individual site projects in up to eight site areas of extended Chinatown—each infused with historical and spatial significance. Each site area represents major contestations over space usage in the history and the future of the city.

Old core:
- Old Chinatown: Mott, Pell, Doyers
- Chatham Square, the original hub of modern NYC
- Below Chatham Sq. – the Two Bridges area: Below E. Bdwy to River, Brooklyn Bridge on the west to Montgomery St. to the east.

Post 1965/68 expansion:
- East Broadway
- Canal Street, Broadway east to Essex
- Canal Street northward
- Broome Street, Soho eastward
- Pearl Street southward

Extension sites:
Subway & minibus extensions:
- N, D, R trains, Brooklyn – Sunset Park to points south
- 7 train, Queens – Flushing, Jackson Heights, etc.
- Route 1, New Brunswick to Princeton

Chinatown buses:
- East Broadway, Chrystie to points north, south, west
Groups of 3-4 will form with each individual project chosen for a specific place within that area. For example, at Chatham Square is the stature of Commissioner Lin Zexu who led the fight against the British imposition of opium onto China leading to the Opium Wars. That statue could count as a “site” for one person to take on as their semester project. Besides presenting individual research, each group will present as panel on the larger significance of their site area, in this case East Broadway, today and in the past, and in relation to other sites.

**Point of View?**
How do we each locate ourselves in relations to “others”? How has Chinatown been located by the media and powers that be? Are such locations re-inscribed by tourists and hipsters? New Yorkers?

I take a dialogue-driven & chronotopic approach towards learning. Therefore, what feminists of color call our “subject position” is foundational to become aware of how our points of views have been formulated and constitute our sense of knowing our selves and our worlds. Over the term we’ll be challenged by Maori critic/researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s philosophical and practical challenge to Eurocentric, colonialist knowledge production. Her indigenous, feminist critique is useful, I believe, for all of our work.

In our digitizing U.S. republic, information is ubiquitous yet hard to sort out. I believe a liberating pedagogy needs to engage active learners in identifying from where we each come from, imagine ourselves going, and how we consciously and unconsciously position ourselves in society and globally. These basic issues of identification are at once personal and political, social and cross-cultural.

I will offer my analysis and point of view, but generally will not lecture except to provide condensed historical context and information to move the class along. I also won’t be pre-structuring each class session in a syllabus for the whole term. As I get a better feel for the mix of students, strengths and weaknesses, interests and blindspots, I’ll organize the week-to-come accordingly. Your participation and interests are what animates our classes from week to week.

Talking across our differences, honest analysis, rethinking, and the process of re-searching buried artifacts and fragments are some of the tools we’ll be using to deconstruct and reconstruct, decode and recode a more critical knowledge. Method and form have to be flexible to effectively probe the phenomenon and origins of subaltern New York. Our re-search will be collaborative, dialogue driven, personal and political, reflexive and ongoing. I won’t provide “answers” for you to regurgitate. We’ll all be formulating provisional questions and provisional answers with the goal of improving our approximations of understanding what this phenomenon has and is about.

Let’s not take any meanings for granted. Typically, for example, we take measures of time and place as fixed and essential. But are they?!!
Time, contrary to Greenwich Mean Time scientism, is a cultural historical construct that has been infinitely meaningful and manipulated. What is the “Present”? “Past”? “Future”? at any given moment? Place, contrary to British imperial measures of longitude (also from Greenwich as point zero) and the earlier Western political cartographic invention of latitude, is also so constructed. What about topos? Home, a safe space, what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls our “habitus” is part of the cultural cartography of here/there, insider/outsider, us/them, citizen/alien, etc.

Since 1912, GMT and 0:0 longitude and latitude have become the master measure of the center of the world—imperial time and place the template of center and periphery. Those who fall outside of these measures and who don’t conform have been deemed either deviant or out of time/place. In the dialogic production of notions of “the self” and others, places such as Chinatowns are produced.

Chrono-tope: Chonos or time and topos or place. A chronotope, therefore, is the culturally bound significance we tie to a specific site or artifact and how it is located in time and place. Such bounded places are so constructed with much cultural capital and what critic Walter Benjamin would have called auras – Jerusalem vs. Teotihuacan, or Times Square vs. Chatham Square, or Canal Street vs. Fifth Avenue, for three examples. What time and place do each signify to us today? The fragments and sites of Chinatown will be “excavated” as case studies, but also projected into the future. Why are such “unknown” sites significant? Why are they not known? How does the known in part also constitute the unknown? You’ll be situating your chose and collective sites in time and place from our vantage of the here and now of our seminar.

My role is three, no fourfold: the occasional despot (I organize the class and ultimately decide on the grade), the resource person/skills trainer/expert guide, and, most importantly, the process person. And, fourth, the infallible know-it-all professor!

Seminar Arc (14 weeks, including exam session)
- Weeks 1-5: key concepts, power/subaltern, walking/sensing, pick a site & group
- Weeks 6-12: artifact research, plus historical case studies, speakers, visits
- Weeks 13-14: production / presentations

Site Project Production Schedule (basic but fungible)
- Week 1-4: brainstorming for site project, forming groups, pitch individual project
- Week 4 & 5: approval of site project & group
- Weeks 5-8: research like crazy
- Week 9: project draft deadline
- Weeks 10-12: research more and reformulate
- Weeks 13-14: intense site project production work

Generally Wednesdays will be subdivided into general discussions, discussions on resources/context/guest speaker, and Fridays for group work. Field visits and research will a central feature.
In addition to sheets explaining each of the three segments, each week you’ll be receiving a sheet with the following week's readings, discussion points, trips, etc. Again, this is flexible and with your input will be adjusted from week to week.

Practical stuff
To learn about primary research, it’s best to be required to produce a tangible product as a marker of what you’ve discovered. This will be creating a multilayered, multidimensional website. Everyone will be digging up nuggets about their site – images, newspaper clips, stories, property ownership records, etc. This will constitute “the raw” materials, the fragments of your site. They are valuable in and of themselves and you’ll need to fully document them. In addition, you’ll be taking all these fragments, ingredients if you will, and turning them into something presentable online – something smart and creative! At the end of the term, each group will take us on a walk down their street and convey a vivid story of different layers of time and spaces embodied in that area and the contestation for that space – battles won, lives lots.

Typically this is in the form of a research paper, but to realize it online is more like curating a nonlinear exhibition. Whatever you do should be spirited, creative, and embody the special insights you bring to the site. The form can be straightforward but also something non-conventional. Like the work of so many creative artists, this can take any expressive form that can be conveyed online. Whatever the agreed upon final form, the project will need to embody careful and thoughtful research, drafts, comments, and a final version by last class – exam week. I’m more concerned about concision, quality, depth…not length. More on this soon….

Field Notebook.
Please keep all your notes and fieldnotes in one bound volume. Ideally, get a bound, hardcover 100 page or more composition-like notebook just for this seminar. If you have notes from somewhere else or a scribble on a piece of paper, just tape it into the notebook. When you read, write your notes into this. This will be the primary, low-tech research/field notebook.

Weekly assignments.
To build up to the paper or project, you’ll need to quickly identify a site or two or three that you are fascinated with and fixated on. I’ll assign a series of weekly decoding exercises to squeeze every bit of insight and historical context you can. These assignments will contribute to the research and formulation of your project.

Ning.
If you don’t already know how, learn how to access the Blackboard site for the class right away. When I open it to access, it will appear on your NYU Homepage. This is a means to posting your weekly assignments, sharing information and insights, and working collaboratively. (I’d also welcome suggestions on ways of better using all of its possibilities.)

Resources.
Basic readings will be posted on Ning, plus we’ll also be pulling from the following books:

Tchen, New York Before Chinatown (excerpts on Ning)
Genthe & Tchen, Genthe’s Photographs of S.F.’s Old Chinatown (Dover Publications online)
Tong Pok Chin, Paper Son (Kindle)
Henry Chang, *Chinatown Beat* (Soho Press)
Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown* (.01+$3.99 shipping on Abebooks)

Additional essays and chapters will be posted as PDFs on Blackboard under Course Documents.
You’ll also have access to other collections of JT, MOCA, and the A/P/A Institute. More on that later.

**Expectations**
I don’t believe in grades but am required to give them. I believe in effort, engagement, cultivating insights, and sustained work. Where did you start the term? How much did you learn by the end of the term? I believe in regular self-evaluations and giving feedback and getting feedback from “others” as essential. So, attendance is important. So is working collaboratively. And honest engagement with each other, yourself, and yours truly are imperative. We are all enculturated within various powerful culturally normative systems and our senses are habituated to find comfort and meaning within them. Yet, meaning cannot just be found in the “head” but must integrate “heart” and “soul,” smell, taste, touching with the touted Western “higher” senses of sight and sound, right and left, upper and lower, and in how we live our lives and practice our theories. This, to me, is what critical cross-cultural researchers are made of.

**Requirements:**
1. Active participation & collegial collaborative work.
2. Keeping up with your research, notes, and research log.
3. Leading discussions on two readings. Commenting on two.
5. Individual and team fieldwork, research, and presentation for Ctown Map.
6. Contribute to final class production.

**Grading:**

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Evaluations & self-evaluations will be conducted for each of phase and for the final grade. Extra credit options will be made possible.
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**Assignment #1: What is a“Chinatown”? (workshop one)**
Use the lab on Wednesday for your working groups!

Next week we’ll have workshop one exploring the thematics of the 1927 silent classic, Old San Francisco directed by Alan Crosland. Plus we’ll be discussing readings, your posts, and the start of your walking practice. And we’ll be extending the in-person collaborations online.

1. Workshop one
I believe in quick starts. We’ll have three quick rounds of panel workshops these first four weeks of the seminar. *Learning how to formulate questions is more important than coming up with textbook answers.* Each workshop should take a forensic approach. As you collaboratively and individually frame questions, you’ll want to hypothesize how to go about answering these questions, gather more clues, and reframe questions. Work like detectives.

Learning how to frame questions effectively, opening up your minds and bodies to relearn what you imagine you know already, sensing “Chinatown,” and collaboratively taking notes will be the most important skills we’ll be building. The questions you’ll start formulating these early weeks, we’ll likely ask the entire term.

Each panel will be made up of three. Together develop your overall thematic. Collaboratively write a short ‘graph and title your panel. Then each of you should dive into one subset of the thematic. Begin with a line, scene, whatever. Prep for a three-minute presentation. This is approximately 250-300 words but best to not simply read – though initially that’s okay.

Groups should meet to prep. Those commenting on readings should meet to prep. To make group meeting times easier, seminar students of past courses have asked for a scheduled “lab” session. Ours is Wednesday, same place-same first hour.

Two not presenting this week will sign up for making comments about the panel. We are exercising a model of “critical generosity” where you’ll acknowledge what has been said and work with the presenters in developing more questions. *Keep track of citations in all written materials and if you cite a key idea, make sure you mention the writer and have the reference handy. Cite classmates!* Write down key phrases, ideas, quotes you like or have questions about. More on this concept later in the terms. Each commenter will have 1-2 minutes only.

After this session next week, you’ll all be posting an “intervention” about “Old San Francisco” on the www and sharing that posting on our NING site. More on that next week.

2. Readings
These first weeks we’ll focus on basic analytic tools that might be helpful for decoding our opening question - *What is a “Chinatown”*? While we conduct collaborative questioning and clue searching, readings will help us develop a shared analytic backdrop to develop individual and group frames of references, key concepts, etc.

“The power of place” and urban rhythms will be two working concepts we’ll start with and see how far they’ll take us. For discussion next week, we’ll all be reading the following, accessible via the NING site but also via the links below.

**Process of reading –**
- get the basic spine of the argument
- get the key next level points
- take notes on what strikes your curiosity, what you question, etc.
- go back and do a more careful reading of sections that caught your eye the most

http://www.eki.ee/km/place/pdf/kp6_07_wunderlich.pdf


Two of you will sign up for working with me in leading a discussion on each of the readings, six total. I’ll want to formulate questions with you by Thursday nite in preparation. I’ll send you an email if I don’t hear from each reading pair. Best take advantage of the W lab session to meet with each other to read together, prep questions, and send me key questions you’d like to pose and we’ll work on them together.

Begin to integrate useful words, ideas, problematics from the readings and from our discussions into your panel presentations, comments on panels, postings, etc. We want to encourage this referencing of each other as much as possible to build up our learning community.

Our writing/communications guru Laura will help us in this formulation process and also in commenting on overall skills building!

3. Walking groups
We’ll count off to form small walking groups of 2-3 to explore Manhattan’s “Chinatown” and any other “Chinatowns” in the metro area. This is a freeform work so coordinate with your partners, wear comfy shoes, and a good pen/notebook. If you’re a habitué of part of this place, go somewhere else. You want to walk and sense with in a wide open way. Use all your sense! Tough, smell, feel the air and moisture on your skin, close your eyes and listen. Take notes like crazy. Sit down somewhere and soak in the scene. Check out a public place you’d normally not enter. Respect private place but also ask questions about what might be behind those doors, etc.

4. NING
I’ll be inviting you to join NING. Log in and include an avatar image. Get a feel for the site. If anyone wants to work with me in improving the friendliness, collaborativeness (word?), and use-ability of the site, I’d love your suggestions and help!

IMPT: Always check in on NING to see where we’ll be meeting any given week. Pls don't turn off the notification email lest you risk missing key emails.