

Exploring Chinatowns, Cultural Exchange, and Orientalism: Traversing Urban Spaces from the 1890s to 1920s

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When spring arrived in 1902, Chinese American Ng Poon Chew had already been in the United States for twenty-one years. He worked as a clergyman in a San Francisco Presbyterian church and lived in one of the country's various emerging Chinatowns. That spring, Chew penned an article entitled "The Chinaman in America" for *The Independent* in which he called for the end of Chinese immigrant exclusion into the United States because the people of his homeland were no threat to the American status quo. On the issue of labor competition with native-born citizens, Chew wrote that the immigrants "could not possibly compete with Americans" because the Chinese tended to stay in their own "clusters and colonies," away from the threat of mixing with white middle-class Americans.¹ By simultaneously defending the inclusion of Chinese immigrants and imparting a sense of inferiority, Chew provided a rare voice for the time. He communicated the unique perspective of someone caught between two cultures—ethnic immigrant heritage and the American one he had grown accustomed to for the past twenty-one years. This pervading notion of "twoness," this mixing of cultures, was all too common at the time when

¹ Ng Poon Chew, "The Chinaman in America," *The Independent*, April 3, 1902, 54.

white native-born citizens started to take more interest in US Chinatowns.

Because the 1890s to 1920s represent a time of great change to US urban spaces, historical studies must acknowledge that many people saw cities—especially places within them like Chinatowns—as increasingly foreign spaces. With pockets of new worlds found on a block-to-block basis, many of San Francisco’s white middle-class residents sought to rationalize the cultures of “othered” people by reimagining their cultures into a more comfortable American context.² This was far from an exceptional experience as Americans on both the East and West coasts often took East Asian cultural elements from their local Chinatowns and infused them into many facets of popular culture. The industrial innovations of the 1800s also marked a vibrant shift in how Americans viewed their country, themselves, and the spaces around them—especially urban areas where class, race, and other social factors more often intersected. This article investigates all the ways that urbanites took in Chinese culture. Whether physically slumming in Chinatowns for parties and daytime tourism or partaking in cultural exchange through games, fashion, and popular entertainment, white middle-class Americans often appropriated pieces of Chinese culture as accessories and means of leisure in order to redefine the modern self. This article discusses how this type of cultural exchange came to fruition by tracing its history and provides a more in-depth analysis of these direct and indirect exchanges. Ultimately, the interactions between

² For the sake of clarity, when I refer to the term *othered*, I am specifically addressing Americans that were not part of the so-called “mainstream” of the time (i.e., any ethnic immigrant groups, blacks, and those not considered part of the white middle-class urban population. For this article, I refer to white middle-class, native-born Americans as “mainstream.”) This article specifically focuses on Chinese Americans as the “othered” people in question, with various “othered” groups serving as comparisons.

mainstream Americans and Chinatown inhabitants were not symbiotic; native-born Americans built cosmopolitan personas out of other cultures, while the groups they took from battled to reconcile their customs with pervading Americanism.

Extensive literature has been devoted to tracing the ways people found amusement across burgeoning urban spaces, especially in places like Chinatowns. Whether through more specialized accounts of certain songs or games or a general overview of slumming and tourist operations, scholars have explored the different ways in which white middle-class Americans have directly or indirectly transformed Chinese culture for themselves. And, importantly, this scholarship highlights how these emerging urban spaces encompassed many divisions of race, class, and other social matters. Taken together, these points of view provide a better perspective of the urban landscape—particularly the dealings in Chinatown—during this period.

To understand why Americans ventured into other cultural spaces in turn-of-the-century cities, it is best to trace the historical context of the time and the reasoning for certain spatial arrangements. The rise of industrial and modernized America within the context of social developments like immigration is the prime place to start. Lynn Dumenil's book, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s*, and Michael McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* provide an overview of the 1910s and 1920s to establish the social conditions that made cultural exploration in urban spaces possible. They argue that the generation coming to age after World War I was disoriented in terms of the self; lost and confused, this generation looked for glimpses into other worlds for leisure and new cultures to use as accessories for the new Americanism they were trying to redefine.³ As McGerr puts it, many Americans looked to liberate

³ Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 161.

themselves from their confined Victorian spaces while finding the new urban self.⁴ Dumenil's and McGerr's studies, however, represent more of an overview of these decades without honing in on immigrants and othered groups in these urban spaces. Much of scholarship on early twentieth-century America focuses exclusively on the middle-class white perspective, overlooking the rise of immigrant and minority communities who would contribute to a more complete picture of the developing urban self during this period.

A few studies focus on an othered perspective. Sabine Haenni's *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880–1920* focuses on immigrants as active agents in urban development and, in doing so, provides alternative scholarship to the white middle-class viewpoint. She asserts that the rise of immigrant-created leisure allowed for social mobility instead of confinement.⁵ Esther Romeyn's *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880–1924* compares the differences between experiences of the mainstream and the “othered,” arguing that the white middle class was “transcendent” in finding their sense of self in the city and that their mobility (in sampling different cultures) came with a positive connotation. Immigrants, on the other hand, were constantly subject to judgment and always “fixed” as certain caricatures or stereotypes; they never moved on from that scrutiny.⁶ These two “other”-focused works—with contrasting arguments—illustrate the complexity of turn-of-the-century urban America.

While these studies provide a historical context for early twentieth-century America, other scholarly works delve into the types of cultural exploration that Americans undertook at this

⁴ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 224.

⁵ Sabine Haenni, *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 19.

⁶ Esther Romeyn, *Street Scenes Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880–1924* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xxi.

time. Indirect cultural transmission through live entertainment, games, and music helped shape the lives of both white middle-class Americans and othered people. Scholars Thomas Heise and Christoph Lindner use literary works of the period to showcase writers' attitudes about othered groups. Writers' perceptions and stereotyping of othered areas provided those who did not want to go into these spaces with a version of the cultures they dared not explore themselves and contributed to the morphing of othered people's cultures for an Americanized context. Heise and Lindner observe cultural exchange through a white middle-class lens, as insiders writing for other insiders.⁷ Although this type of media helped define the self for this insider audience, it became an exclusionary agent for the othered people they were writing about, who were often caught in the stereotypes by which they were defined.

Other scholars have honed in on more specific orientalist cases of indirect cultural transmission to shed light on the phenomenon of urban cultural exchange within the context of Chinatown. For example, Charles Hiroshi Garrett focuses his study on the song "Chinatown, My Chinatown," while Mary C. Greenfield charts the rise of mahjong across cosmopolitan America in the 1920s.⁸ Both studies show how widely disseminated games and music involving other cultures helped Americans find their sense of self. By accessorizing Chinese

⁷ Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011); and Christoph Lindner, *Imagining New York City Literature, Urbanism, and the Visual Arts, 1890–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 25.

⁸ Charles Hiroshi Garrett, "Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining America's Borders with Musical Orientalism," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 1 (2004): 119–74; and Mary C. Greenfield, "'The Game of One Hundred Intelligences': Mahjong, Materials, and the Marketing of the Asian Exotic in the 1920s," *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (2010): 329–59.

culture and implementing it in an American context, native-born citizens contributed to the idea of the “fixed” cultural lens that Romeyn wrote about in her work.⁹ Americans continued to roam and find new cultures, while the Chinese were forced into the stereotypes perpetuated by these songs and games.¹⁰ It appears from both of these studies that Americans really did not play these songs or games to create cultural understanding and that Chinese Americans only faced more inward turmoil at the hands of these cultural items. Although “Chinatown, My Chinatown” and mahjong eliminated the notion that othered groups were inherently undesirable, these groups were clearly not fully accepted into American society either.¹¹ This scholarship shows how the outsider-to-insider transmission still resulted in othered people receiving fewer benefits for finding the urban self.

A study of urban spaces at the turn of the century is incomplete without mention of direct and physical cultural transmission, namely the practices of slumming and daytime tourism.¹² Chad Heap’s *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* provides an extensive discussion

⁹ When I use the term *accessorizing*, I mean that mainstream Americans often took pieces of Chinese culture that appealed to them, whether it be for recreational purposes (like games or music) or literal accessorizing with fashion and apparel. I chose the word *accessorizing* because of its implications of surface understanding—I assert that most Americans taking parts of Chinese culture did so without in-depth regard to the cultural meaning itself.

¹⁰ Greenfield, “The Game of One Hundred Intelligences,” 332.

¹¹ Garrett, “Chinatown, Whose Chinatown?” 121.

¹² Slumming, as defined by contemporaries, refers to the act of going into othered people’s spaces, such as Chinatown and Harlem, for the sake of leisure and entertainment to engage in activities often seen as unacceptable by mainstream standards. For them, it was a physically separate space to engage in these activities without crossing any societal boundaries.

of US slumming practices, observing them along class, immigrant, and even sexual lines. His study emphasizes the idea that Americans were indeed curious about other cultures but only within the narrow context of finding leisure and urban meaning for themselves.¹³ Robert M. Dowling's work on slumming in New York City provides a more specific account of slumming on a regional basis. He asserts that slumming took place across the *entire* socioeconomic spectrum—in other words, even immigrants and the working class partook in a sort of reverse slumming in upper-class neighborhoods.¹⁴ For a West Coast perspective, Raymond W. Rast looks at how Americans economically exploited San Francisco's Chinatown scene for daytime tourism business.¹⁵ Each of these studies illustrates that Americans took advantage of Chinese culture to promote their own American leisure, curiosity, culture, and economic goals. Even the physical act of slumming proved to be an endeavor that Americans undertook for their own sake rather than genuinely considering the cultures they surveyed.

By 1885, many urban areas had transformed into hubs for pocketed worlds, divided neighborhoods amongst the poor, the rich, natives, European immigrants, Asian immigrants, and other groups not considered part of the cultural mainstream. Evidence of such divisions appears in writer Howard Clemens' overview of New York City's various ethnic newspapers. As Clemens wrote, "Besides the fifteen hundred English publications in New York City there are no less than eighty newspapers and periodicals printed in foreign languages and

¹³ Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Robert M. Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Raymond W. Rast, "The Cultural Politics of Tourism in San Francisco's Chinatown, 1882–1917," *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (2007): 29–60.

dialects.”¹⁶ This exemplifies the large array of multiculturalism that immigrants created just by settling in these new spaces within urban areas. The unprecedentedly large waves of immigration came to the United States with the rise of rapid industrialization and modernization across the country. The development of urban space within this period was the biggest and most vibrant the country had seen up to that point.

On the East Coast, millions of southern and eastern Europeans came for the promise of better lives in America, often abandoning their rural jobs for factory work in urban areas like New York City. On the West Coast, Chinese immigrants came for work building railroads, filling positions that white Americans had no interest in taking.¹⁷ Although many immigrants once used major cities like San Francisco and New York as mere landing places, by the 1890s, immigrants were settling in these areas instead. In 1891, an article in the *New York Sun* explained, “about two-thirds of the whole number of immigrants, and particularly those of Italy, Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, and Russia, establish themselves in the thickly-settled cities or towns in the Eastern States.”¹⁸ As immigrants shifted from agricultural professions to the industrial-based ones in urban centers, they began to cluster in their own urban neighborhoods due to cultural familiarities and an increased sense of community.

With this unprecedented influx of new people, cultures, and ideas, the turn of the century became an era of expansive cultural exchange, unprecedented for these urban spaces. As Sylvester Baxter wrote in “The New New York,” “the city’s jumbled mass spread itself evenly, without much distinction,

¹⁶ Howard Clemens, “The Alien Newspapers of New York City,” *The Bookman*, September 1901, 37–46, 37.

¹⁷ “The Chinese in America,” *Forum*, January 1902, 598.

¹⁸ “The Immigration to America: A Study in Figures,” *New York Sun*, July 1891, 417.

over the lower half of the island.”¹⁹ As more immigrants clustered in urban spaces, the vibrancy and complexity of American urban spaces like San Francisco and New York City increased. White middle-class Americans now saw neighborhoods clustered with a diversity of cultures representing different fashions, foods, and customs. As Helen F. Clark wrote for *Century Illustrated Magazine* in 1896 about New York, “here we have a quota of all the nationalities that have come to us, dwelling, to a very considerable extent, in colonies by themselves.”²⁰

As crowded spaces like New York improved their overall organizational infrastructure, it became increasingly clear to middle-class Americans that modernity meant connecting with brand new worlds right at home in the city. As Baxter further wrote of places like New York, “the cramping city plan with new boulevards...that make for the recreation and better health of all classes; vast advancements in public movement, better pavements, cleaner streets; colossal betterments in transit” helped to carry “the metropolitan waves to yet remoter population margins” like Chinatown.²¹ While some members of the younger generation partook in more inward artistic activities and transformations in traditional forms to express their urban ennui and discomforts, other Americans found mixing with other cultures a natural way to open themselves up in a city that afforded them more opportunities to do so.²² This often meant partaking in various forms of cultural exchange and leisure like slumming in these “remoter population margins” or partaking in pieces of culture.

¹⁹ Sylvester Baxter, “The New New York,” *Outlook*, June 23, 1906, 8.

²⁰ Helen F. Clark, “The Chinese of New York: Contrasted with Foreign Neighbors,” *Century Illustrated Magazine*, November 1896, 104.

²¹ Baxter, “The New New York,” 8.

²² On the younger generation’s activities, see Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 150.

Leisure itself represented an important rising American cultural force, especially when it came to the idea of urban selfhood. For many Americans, urban selfhood meant finding their sense of self and maintaining spiritual comfort in a place that had become systemized, fast-paced, and incredibly vast to the point of being impersonal.²³ Americans became more attuned to the opinions and company of others, which led to obsessions with self-expression through group activities and consumer culture. As one commentator in a 1916 issue of *McClure's Magazine* noted, leisure was not done to promote a Victorian sense of idleness but rather to achieve "spiritual efficiency...a power to maintain the proper measure of life; a high serenity that finds each moment long enough, and none either over-filled or empty."²⁴ For many Americans, leisure often meant indulging in the fantasies brought on by the new worlds they encountered in the expanded urban space, leading to huge intakes of new foreign foods, fashions, travel experiences, and immigrant performances. They sought meaning in their explorations, and they constantly questioned and created open dialogues about the cultures they wanted to explore.²⁵

The interest in new cultures cropped up in both advertising and stories found in periodicals. For instance, a Macy's advertisement for mahjong exploited upper-class women's desires to feel worldlier, claiming that playing mahjong could put them on equal footing with someone marrying a duke or hunting in Africa.²⁶ In the 1901 story, "The Lightning Change" from *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, writer Albert Payson

²³ Ibid., 158.

²⁴ H. H., "Leisure," *McClure's Magazine*, April 1916, 19.

²⁵ Kristen L. Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 12.

²⁶ *New York Times*, February 25, 1924, 15, reproduced in Greenfield "The Game of One Hundred Intelligences," 352.

Terhune included verses from “The Song of the Wanderer” (a work chronicling the tale of a traveler going over “Asian mountains” and “Up the pyramids”) to showcase a glimpse into the world outside the comfort of the United States.²⁷ This sudden fascination with outside worlds, however, probably did not equate to a desire for equal cultural footing—or any real understanding—as many Americans approached other cultures with a patronizing, self-righteous gaze.

This sentiment appears in a segment from “The Lightning Change.” After the character Keith sings the song, a girl asks him why he knows a song he has only heard once so well. Keith responds, “I’ve a knack for remembering silly things.”²⁸ This exchange neatly showcases the prevailing attitude Americans had towards the so-called alien cultures they encountered in urban spaces. Aspects of these cultures were something to be remembered and scrutinized, but they were also ultimately beneath Americans—“silly” in that cultures could be picked apart and ultimately criticized for the sake of leisure and entertainment. This partaking of new culture came at a time when mainstream Americans became increasingly aware of the world around them, acknowledged that the world had come to their doorstep, and sought to downplay the importance of immigrants’ cultures in a globalized space.²⁹

If urbanites could not travel to other countries to satisfy their curiosities, they could seek solace in cultural imports and physical visits to other communities, to the pocket worlds they might have avoided before. People partook in this leisure in various ways, ranging from physically going into cultural hubs

²⁷ Albert Payson Terhune, “A Lightning Change: A Columbia College Tale Seventh in the Series of College Tales,” *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*, July 1901, 104.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 12.

like Chinatown or Harlem to participating in indirect cultural exchange by simply reading periodical accounts or sampling cultural pieces like games, music, food, and fashion. Both methods of cultural exchange provided Americans with a chance to redefine their own urban identities and form opinions—and perhaps misconceptions—about the cultures they surveyed.

Of the two methods, indirect cultural exchange through periodicals and newspaper stories represents the most accessible way people came into contact with other cultures during this period. Along with the eighty ethnic newspapers in New York City by 1901, fifteen hundred English periodicals also existed.³⁰ The numerous publications show the influence that turn-of-the-century printed media had on people's day-to-day lives and hint at newspapers' ability to act as connection points across the breadth of the cityscape. The language and tone used in periodicals helped form people's perceptions of othered people without them actually having to venture or go slumming into othered people's communities. Clemens' overview of NYC newspapers called all of these othered groups "aliens."³¹ Other articles also portrayed many newly arrived Asian Americans as otherworldly. For instance, one person in *The Catholic World: A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science* claimed, "Money is the only thing that will open the door or mouth of the silent Celestial."³² This sort of language was not abnormal in articles about immigrants at this time, as othering language ran rampant in many publications written for other insiders—white middle-class Americans.

While giving their readers a look into the ethnic communities they were perusing, the authors of these articles often othered immigrants with negative language and tone. In

³⁰ Clemens, "The Alien Newspapers," 37.

³¹ Ibid.

³² E. Lyell Earle, "Character Studies in New York's Foreign Quarters," *The Catholic World: A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science*, March 1, 1899, 782.

some of their accounts, authors even described immigrant communities in primal, animalistic language. In Mary Davidson's 1900 account of her time in San Francisco's Chinatown, she referred to groups of Chinese immigrants as "hordes" and "many young mice."³³ Further animalizing Chinese Americans, she referred to an infant's eyes as "tiny round black beads, better known as eyes."³⁴ Other writers were even more negative in their accounts of the Chinatowns they visited. For instance, a 1905 *New York Times* opinion piece referred to the Chinese as "perishing" from their inability to assimilate, while *Forum* associated this group with a "peculiar, unknown, and dangerous element," a community "utterly without sympathy for this country."³⁵ In 1919, a short fiction story in the *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* said of the San Francisco Chinatown, "Promise me you won't ever go down into that damnable place again, dear" and called the Chinese American store clerk an "Oily Oriental."³⁶ In 1899, *The Catholic World* further described Orthodox Jews as possessing the "shrewdness of a Shylock" and other East Side immigrants as acting with general "savagery."³⁷ These authors often produced colorfully written accounts of ethnic communities, inviting less suspicion in terms of the physical spaces these people lived in, but their patronizing language (combined with the widespread influence of print media) reinforced stereotypes of othered groups in urban spaces.

³³ Mary Davison, "The Babies of Chinatown," *The Cosmopolitan: A Monthly Illustrated Magazine*, April 1900, 605.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Alexander Wallace, "Seeing Chinatown," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1905; and "The Chinese in America," *Forum*, January 1902, 598.

³⁶ The Stevensons, "Chinatown, My Land of Dreams," *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, January 1919, 42.

³⁷ Earle, "Character Studies," 782.

When considering the narratives written about immigrants at this time, scholars must take other socioeconomic factors into account. This means examining othered groups that were on the precipice of not being othered at all—the white ethnic Americans and the nonwhite immigrants that achieved economic success. For instance, the survey from *The Catholic World* used most of its derogatory language to describe the only nonwhite immigrants not in their ideal: the Chinese. Every other group described in the article—the Italians, Orthodox Jews, and Syrians—received mild descriptions, and the author E. Lyell Earle even went as far as to say the Italians were “raising up a goodly family of sons and daughters in American tastes and manners.”³⁸

As for the nonwhite immigrants, the only Chinese American safe from patronizing treatment in the *Forum* article was Chin Tan Sun, the supposedly richest “Chinaman” in 1902. The paragraph about him is mostly neutral in tone, describing him as being “six feet tall, and a well-proportioned, good-looking man,” nicknamed “Big Jim” amongst companions.³⁹ In part, the tone was congratulatory, especially about his marriage to a white woman. These exceptions show that the only way to escape description in a patronizing tone was to get closer to living up to the American ideal. Otherwise, writers more often than not provided their readers—other mainstream Americans—with the right level of suspicious condescension and vibrant imagery, as illustrated by some writers who explored Chinese American laundromats in an 1896 article titled “Americanized Chinamen” in *Maine Farmer*. They repeatedly mused at the owners using names like “Charlie Ling” or “Cha Q. Lee, First Class Chinese Laundry.”⁴⁰ The author argued that the storefront signs reflected “the natural result of the Chinaman’s

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “The Chinese in America,” *Forum*, January 1902, 598.

⁴⁰ “Americanized Chinamen,” *Maine Farmer*, September 3, 1896, 2.

imperfect acquaintance with English...it is often alleged that the Chinese never become truly American, but here was a Chinaman pretty thoroughly Americanized, one would fancy.”⁴¹ The key word here is *Americanized*, never outright calling these Chinese Americans *American*. The goal was simple: inspire curiosity with fanciful accounts about the physical spaces of other communities but also let Americans know that the people living inside them were still inferior.

Cultural exchange did not cease at reading written accounts about other communities. Although many misconceptions and stereotypes were disseminated through written media, Americans engaged in cultural exchange through participation in popular culture like fashion, games, music, and other forms of entertainment. In sharing in this sort of commodified leisure, Americans accessorized other cultures by adopting it and morphing it for an American context. As seen with the glamorization and commercialization of games like mahjong, mainstream Americans often changed the original meaning of cultural items. In the case of mahjong, rules were often simplified or modified to appease an American audience looking to play at utmost ease.⁴² Other games, such as Fan-tan, had also become popular towards 1890, when enthralled Americans flocked to listen to people like Stewart Culin explain the game at symposiums and conferences.⁴³

These two games fostered an outsider-to-insider dynamic; the people promoting these games (whether for scholarly or monetary benefit) were bringing the original cultural product to the United States, where they became ambassadors for the games’ authenticity. For instance, Stewart Culin became an ambassador for Fan-tan through his 1896 feature article about the game in *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*. He wrote,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Greenfield, “The Game of One Hundred Intelligences,” 332.

⁴³ “Chinese Games of Chance,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1888.

“the game itself is extremely simple” and accentuated its Chinese origins as “to be recovered, not from written records, but by the study and comparison of the customs of primitive people.”⁴⁴ His statements imply that he was the country’s only reliable source for learning about the game. In 1892, the *Christian Union* not only endorsed the game of Wei-chi in an article called “An Ancient Chinese Game” but also asserted that it was “simple in principle” despite the board possessing 361 pieces.⁴⁵ Like Culin’s article on Fan-tan, the writer of the Wei-chi article also suggested a vague, primitive origin, stating that it was “probably derived from the Babylon astronomers.”⁴⁶ Americans were getting their hands on actual Chinese games and changing the original context of them by affixing or simplifying the rules and established cultural meaning. This was all done through these new ambassadors and the members of subculture that inspired fashions, themed parties, and other written media. This cultural exchange was different from writers providing accounts of the communities they visited in that there was an *original* context at hand with these cultural products.

Even with the original contextual meanings provided, white middle-class Americans continued to imagine these other cultural groups in ways that were more accessible to their own sense of identity. In a 1924 interest piece about the merits of mahjong versus bridge in *The New York Times*, the writer’s opinion on mahjong’s Chinese inventors proved to be a double-edged sword for their collective image. While the article praised the Chinese for being the best at their own game, it also phrased this quality in way that made this group seem devious. The article explained, “They have created this and other games to keep their powers fresh. They are like a sleepy house cat which

⁴⁴ Stewart Culin, “The Origin of Fan Tan,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, August 1896, 153.

⁴⁵ “An Ancient Chinese Game,” *Christian Union*, September 3, 1892, 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

still sharpens its claws on a tree in the garden, and the tree this time is mahjong.”⁴⁷ This is also another instance of animalizing language. Although these games directed middle-class Americans away from the idea that Chinese people were dangerous or that their culture was to be avoided, writers clearly still characterized Chinese Americans as devious to refuse them full cultural inclusion. In fact, the article further details that mahjong was here to stay after “its nice adjustment to psychological and emotional needs.”⁴⁸ Ultimately, Americans’ thinly veiled, exclusionary language and the adjustments away from the original Chinese context revealed that these Chinese items were not intended for appreciating the cultures in question. They were ultimately for leisure, and a very American kind at that.

Physical acts of orientalist cultural exchange also took place through New York City slumming and San Francisco tourist ventures. The improvement of city sidewalks, transportation systems, and environments helped create an easier urban space for people to explore, which meant visits to other neighborhoods people might not have ventured into before. For instance, a 1905 issue of *Town and Country* mentions the ways tourist operations improved; “the old plan of slumming with a detective and going through the Bowery and Chinatown have been partially abandoned, as the tourist-cars provide all the necessary protection and guidance for such excursions.”⁴⁹ By the time the turn of the twentieth century came around, the city had transformed enough for people to explore cities themselves, to partake in the cultures that had felt closed to them before.

Chinatowns in particular became popular on both coasts. By 1899, a Catholic pastor in a *New York Times* article calling for the

⁴⁷ “The Joined Battle of the Games,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1924.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Features of the West Side,” *Town and Country*, January 7, 1905, 15.

abolishment of New York City's Chinatown griped, "I live in the midst of Chinatown. I am kept awake night after night by the noise of these Mongolians...and by the shrill laughter of their white women."⁵⁰ He added, "In fact, when strangers from other sections of the country come to the city to go 'slumming,' the chief point of interest...to gratify their depraved taste is Doyers, Pell, and Mott Streets, known as the Chinese quarter."⁵¹ The author of a May 1893 slumming account published in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* wrote, "The foreign quarter of a cosmopolitan city reveals many curious things. It is the more interesting because foreign habits and things are grafted upon native surroundings, the hybrid being in many cases more interesting than the original."⁵² Both articles illustrate that Chinatowns were becoming less and less heterogeneous in demographic with white, middle-class Americans coming into the fold, but what makes the *Frank Leslie* article even more interesting is the fact that it claims the "hybrid" culture of Chinatown was "more interesting than the original." The mixing of two cultures firsthand is clear, but the American context often shines through first and foremost, past the "original" culture. In the *Frank Leslie* article, the keyword is "grafted," implying a thin veneer, a thin *understanding* of the Chinese culture at play, and an American zeal that made it better.

The meeting of cultures was also apparent in cities like San Francisco. As Theodore Wores writes in an 1896 article in *St. Nicholas*, "In this strange and curious meeting of the oldest civilization of the East with that of the youngest of the West, queer neighborhoods are sometimes formed."⁵³ In another

⁵⁰ "Sounds Chinatown's Doom: District Board of Improvements Wants Pell Street Widened," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1899, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "Seitz in Chinatown," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, May 1893, 18.

⁵³ Theodore Wores, "The Children of Chinatown in San Francisco," *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*, May–Oct 1896, 576.

article in 1895, W. H. Gleadell calls the West Coast Chinatown “the Metropolis of the Pacific Coast and the El Dorado of the Asiatic...this miniature China.”⁵⁴ Attitudes towards Chinese Americans in these slums were similar to those found in the eastern cities. Although Americans acknowledged the presence of all these new people and cultures in their country and felt like exploring them, they still held the sense that Americans would always remain superior as a demographic. For instance, Will Brooks wrote in the *Californian*, “let us rejoice, that for the present the Chinaman is still heathen, and perhaps unpleasant, but yet undeniably picturesque.”⁵⁵ In a few instances, Americans even controlled how Chinatowns appeared to other Americans. After a 1909 ban on Chinatown tourism trips in San Francisco by six companies who operated them, *The New York Times* noted, “the opium smokers, gamblers, blind paupers, singing children, and other curiosities were all hired.”⁵⁶ This reflected the acceptance of other cultures into this vastly expanded urban space (and the American mindset in the 1890s onward) yet not a true acceptance for Chinese Americans or equal standing with mainstream Americans, who sometimes had control over the Chinatowns they were spectating.

Still regarded as “barbarians,” popular rhetoric when it came to othered cultures during this period, preconceptions about the Chinese and the actual physical boundaries of Chinatown kept Chinese Americans from achieving a reciprocal relationship in urban selfhood.⁵⁷ The physical act of slumming or immigrants’ participation in other voyeuristic activities became a double-edged sword for the Chinese American community. On

⁵⁴ W. H. Gleadell, “Night Scenes in Chinatown, San Francisco,” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature*, September 1895, 378.

⁵⁵ Will Brooks, “A Fragment of China,” *Californian*, July 1882, 2.

⁵⁶ “Ban on Downtown Trips: Six Companies Forbid Sightseeing by Tourists in San Francisco,” *The New York Times*, July 23, 1909, 20.

⁵⁷ On “barbarians,” see Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 6.

the one hand, it opened up Chinese communities to the larger city populations that used to reject them outright and prevented people from viewing the Chinese American community with full revilement. On the other hand, the ease with which these middle-class Americans could simply enter into these physically defined spaces like Chinatown, make their judgments, write their articles, and go back to their homes in other parts of the city signified the gulf of separation between being fully “American” and simply becoming “Americanized”—and many mainstream Americans hardly saw Chinese Americans as that either. For instance, in 1895, Eleanor B. Caldwell expounded on “the picturesque in Chinatown” with all the different theatre costumes, furnishing styles, and “rags of gorgeous hues, reds, yellows, blues” but also did not hesitate to call San Francisco’s Chinatown “the very bowels of the underground” at the same time.⁵⁸ Despite less outright exclusionary rhetoric, to many mainstream Americans, the Chinese immigrant remained an othered alien, one to be seen under the guise of temporary spectatorship.

Americans’ acknowledgement with condescension left many Chinese immigrants at a crossroads. Just as Americans became more aware of Chinese culture and Chinatowns in their urban spaces, the Chinese were painfully aware of the American status quo that pervaded across cities. The opening anecdote concerning the “Americanized Chinaman,” Ng Poon Chew, illustrates the crossroads. His article in *The Independent* simultaneously called for the inclusion of Chinese immigrants into the United States but not necessarily the American landscape itself. Acknowledging that the immigrants “could not possibly compete with the Americans” and that “they really have no home here,” he asserted that Chinese Americans could not fully assimilate into places outside of the physical limitations of

⁵⁸ Eleanor B. Caldwell, “The Picturesque in Chinatown,” *Arthur’s Home Magazine*, August 1895, 653.

Chinatown.⁵⁹ Chew further asserted, “The claim has been made that they [Americans] do not care to associate or amalgamate with Chinese people. It would be utterly impossible for them to do so, whether they wished to or not.”⁶⁰ Chew, a long time pastor in the Chinese American community, observed that Chinese immigrants clung together in these communities for a sense of familiarity, perhaps in defense of the rapidly developing urban spaces around them. This goes back to the idea that urban exploration was only a mobile, fluid effort for those in the mainstream, one that left those in othered groups clustered in their communities, stuck in place to be scrutinized by those observing them.⁶¹ Chew even recounted his own experiences in trying to move out of Chinatown, stating that he had always been compelled to stay there and that it would be “impossible” to get out, despite having been acclimated to the United States for twenty-one years.⁶²

Another telling Chinese American perspective is that of Lee Chew, a Chinese American businessman who also appeared in *The Independent*. Having lived in both western and eastern Chinatowns, Chew not only wrote of his time in native China but described the Americans he encountered while staying in the United States. His account is different in that he is less conciliatory than Ng Poon Chew about the treatment of Chinese Americans in the United States, griping “the treatment of the Chinese in this country is all wrong and mean...Irish fill the almshouses and prisons and orphan asylums, Italians are among the most dangerous of men, Jews are unclean and ignorant. Yet they are all let in, while Chinese, who are sober, or duly law

⁵⁹ Chew, “The Chinaman in America,” 54.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Romeyn, *Street Scenes*, xxi.

⁶² Chew, “The Chinaman in America,” 54.

abiding, clean, educated, and industrious, are shut out.”⁶³ While he did acknowledge “Americans are not all bad,” his experiences as a servant and laundromat worker (then owner) illustrated a sense of injustice that many Chinese Americans felt at the time: native-born Americans treated the immigrants as cheap labor, objects of spectatorship in tourist businesses, and cultural items but hardly ever considered them to be true Americans. This resulted in the discontents expressed by these two “Americanized Chinamen.” Ng Poon Chew’s views express something more conciliatory, a struggle between Chinese culture and the American one he had adopted, while Lee Chew’s views express outright agitation. Either way, they both encompass how Chinese Americans felt at this time: constantly in the spotlight, commodified and used, but alienated all the same.

In Lee Chew’s closing question, he asked the people of San Francisco, “Under the circumstances, how can I call this my home?”⁶⁴ This was the sentiment echoed by many immigrants at the time, many of whom felt alienated despite their exposure to the vastly expanded urban spaces of the 1890s to 1920s. Although some Chinese Americans like “Big Jim,” Lee Chew, and Ng Poon Chew were able to break through the boundaries of the stereotypes that mainstream Americans placed them under, many others remained spectacles for the rest of these rising cities to consume. Americans found advantages in the pieces of the cultures they picked up, whether it was the scholarly fulfillment of Americanizing Chinese games like Fan-tan and mahjong, the leisure and entertainment of playing those games, or physically going to Chinatowns. Some Americans even benefitted economically from their ties to Chinatown by operating tourism businesses that ushered other mainstream Americans into the space. All in all, by delving into this early

⁶³ Lee Chew, “The Biography of a Chinaman,” *The Independent*, February 19, 1903, 417.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

form of orientalism and tracing the ways Americans viewed and used Chinatowns as a cultural space, it is apparent that Americans gained more as mobile players from their interactions than the Chinese American immigrants ever did as participants in that same urban space. Americans were afforded all the different pocket worlds a city had to offer, while Chinese Americans were confined to one pocket world that many felt would be too difficult to ever leave.