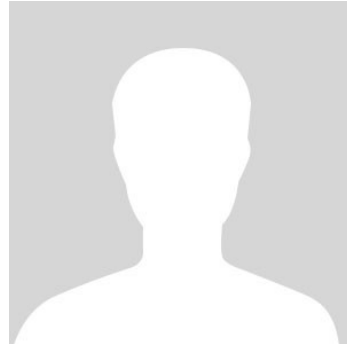


# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*

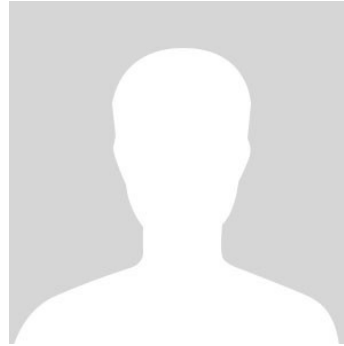
### Participants:



#### Host

Elena M'Bouroukounda

Student at Princeton



#### Host

Piao Liu

Student at Princeton

### Links and References:

#### Bibliograph and Related Online Content

Cheng, Irene. "Structural Racialism in Modern Architectural Theory." *Race and Modern Architecture*, 2020, 134–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw-bg7.11>.

Choy, Philip P.. *San Francisco Chinatown: A Guide to Its History and Architecture*. United States: City Lights Publishers, 2012

Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.

Künnemann, Vanessa., and Ruth Mayer. *Chinatowns In a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon*. New York: Routledge, 2011

Lin, Jan. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Quan, Jing. "SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN--A HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING." Thesis, University of Arizona, 1994.

Tsui, Bonnie. *American Chinatown: A People's History of Five Neighborhoods*. 1st Free Press hardcover ed. New York: Free Press, 2009.

Walker, Mike. "The Vibrancy of Chinatown Is at Risk. We Must Protect It." *Medium*. *The Bold Italic*, March 10, 2021. <https://thebolditalic.com/the-vibrancy-of-chinatown-is-at-risk-we-must-protect-it-90cd5ef518b9>.

Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

"San Francisco: the Metropolis of the West : Wright, Hamilton" Internet Archive. San Francisco : Western Press Association, 1910

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*

### Transcription:

#### Introduction

This is "All Roads Lead to Chinatown", a podcast about deconstructing settler colonial narratives in architectural history. My name is Piao Liu and my name is Elena M'Bouroukounda and we are both from The School of Architecture in Princeton University. This podcast will analyze the reconstruction of San Francisco Chinatown through two architecture cases after the earthquake in 1906, exploring how the very image of Chinatown was realized, produced, and experienced in the beginning of the 20th century.

#### Definitions

In the last episode, we talked about the landscape and architecture design of the Biltmore Estate in the 19th century. Today, we want to reverse the perspective by focusing on one ethnic group and their identities and conflicts in a settler colonial context. As one of the most historic neighbourhoods in American cities, Chinatowns emerged together with the expansion of railroads and settler colonization of American lands. However, they are often still ethnic quarters of unknown spaces, mysteries, exotic shops, worldly food, and places of "must-see" within a city: "both in the United States and in Europe these 'urban enclaves' have come to represent Chineseness and orientalism."<sup>1</sup> The image of Chinatown is a transnational fantasy based on "invented traditions" of deliberately displays of architecture styles, festivals, and practice of consumption.<sup>2</sup> However, this image was not a true reflection of the original cityscape of China nor was a honest depiction of Chinese immigrants and their identities. It is a constructed and later widely reproduced image of this ethnic community as a self-redefinition and a response to the existing social hierarchy. We are going to focus on two architecture cases in the San Francisco Chinatown, to discuss two different self-modifications that involve the change of living styles, aesthetics, gender roles, and representations, in order for this excluded community to survive, sustain, and eventually establish their own identities in a settler colonial context.

#### Setting for the Argument: Transcontinental Railway

When we refer to the settler colonial body politic in the early United States, we are referring to a body politic consisting primarily of European settlers, who descended from British and French colonial settlements on the east coast and eventually made their way out west. Considering that the largest influx of Chinese and Asian immigrants settled on the west coast, during the midst of the ever expanding colonial project, we start our narrative with the role in which these immigrants played.

Chinese immigrants came to the United States for work, primarily with the building of the transcontinental railroads from the west coast through the middle of the country. It is essential to note that the expansion of the rail system, a colonial mechanism that works to contain territory and establish a presence throughout native land without the building of extensive settlements, was primarily built by immigrants who were not considered part of the body politic.

What was originally a relationship between the European settler colonial entity and the native population becomes populated when a immigrant minority population (Chinese immigrants) who are utilised to carry out the work. In this way, Chinese immigrants become the agent of settler colonialism without being a part of its body politic.

While these immigrants benefited from the labor provided by the colonial project, they were largely excluded from the societal rights and comforts afforded to the white subject. Both the availability of labor and the exclusion from urban spaces lead to a multiplicity of architectural developments, both in the ephemeral settlements that were built up along the railway for laborers and in the permanent chinatowns that developed at the end of the line., where laborers for the project arrived from across the Pacific Ocean and where railyards were constructed and the railways themselves began. The developments of these early urban enclaves, allowed the Chinese architectural identity to flourish without disruption. This would change in the wake of natural disasters at the turn of the century which physically damaged these spaces and in turn directed the focus of the body politic back on to Chinatowns. As architects, who were primarily white, bid for the rebuilding of these communities, the settler colonial project which one existed in parallel to these communities, worked to assimilate and hybridize the aesthetics of these spaces.

#### Transition

This narrative spans from the Midwest to Sacramento but for the sake of this podcast, we are going to fast forward a number of years into the development of chinatowns across California, particularly the Chinatown in San Francisco, which would grow to become one of the largest and most established in the United States. We have noted in our story of the transcontinental railways and the establishment of the first Chinatowns, that Chinese laborers who lived in these urban enclaves managed to maintain a sense of architectural identity that was separate from the Western visual identity of the larger communities in which they lived and worked. In this way, these workers existed in parallel to the settler colonial projects, and obtained work from it, they were never subsumed into the identity of the body politic. We recognize that this may have been but the intention of the community and a product of exclusionary practices from a white body politic. We take you to a specific urban enclave, Chinatowns, and explore how the image of Chinatowns developed, established, and reproduced in the beginning of 20th century and its self-correcting neocolonial status in the settler colonialism of America.

#### San Francisco Chinatown

Chineseness has always met with a combination of exploitation, animosity, and marginalization since the Chinese immigrants first came to the United

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*

States in the late 19th century as cheap labour. Etienne Derbec, a French journalist, reported that houses in San Francisco made by Chinese carpenters were “the prettiest, the best made, and the cheapest local dwellings.”<sup>3</sup> The Chinese immigrants brought a source of mass labor for the economic development but they were restricted to live in one area, where they can only rent without any property ownership. The area of Chinatown has been labeled with so many negative connotations such as dirty, unhygienic, inferior, unsafe, unassimilated, and uncivilized: “(By the 1870s) Chinatown had become almost impregnable. Chinatown had become a fortress... The ghetto...”<sup>4</sup>. Chineseness was also complicated with the issue of gender. Chinatowns were specifically for males and male laborers, due to immigration policy and workforce of that time. The U.S. census of 1900 showed that there were about 19 men to every woman<sup>5</sup> in the San Francisco Chinatown area.

### Sing Fat and Sing Chong Buildings

Buildings in San Francisco Chinatown before the 1906 earthquake looked similar to those of other neighbourhoods. They were mostly of western influences with brick houses and Italianate Victorian facades. The earthquake in 1906 that destroyed Chinatown also brought an opportunity to rebuild it for the desires of the Chinese community, the white property owners, and the city of San Francisco. Look Tin Eli, a secretary of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and other prominent merchants including Tong Bong and Lew Hing proposed a vision of a new “Oriental City”: “veritable fairy palaces filled with the choicest treasures of the Orient”<sup>6</sup>, starting with their first two architecture projects on Grant Street, Sing Fat on the southwest corner and Sing Chong on the northwest corner. Look Tin Eli wrote about this vision in the city promotion book, *San Francisco: The Metropolis of the West*: “Greater San Francisco may well be proud of its new Chinatown, and well may she write it down as one of her most valued assets, for it is the one distinguishing mark which proclaims her different from any other great city in the whole civilized world... And every American citizen realizes how much these quiet, industrious (Chinese) people have done for the commerce of Greater San Francisco.”<sup>7</sup>

The new buildings were well received from the white residents. On May 26 1910, the *Washington Post* ran an advertisement declaring that the “gilded domes of her pagodas add striking features to the beauty of the new city.”<sup>8</sup> For most of the properties owned by non-Chinese in Chinatown (25 of 316 properties were owned by Chinese), the San Francisco Real Estate Board wrote to the white property owners: “...the Chinese style of architecture will make it picturesque and attractive to tourists... the San Francisco Real Estate Board does hereby recommend to all property owners, to have their buildings re-built with fronts of Oriental and artistic appearances.”<sup>9</sup>

The architects of the Sing Fat and Sing Chong buildings are T. Paterson Ross and A.W. Burgren. Trained in the Beaux Arts tradition, their reference to Chineseness was largely based on images. In order to create a monumental and iconic Chinatown cityscape, they used mostly religious and imperial architecture from the Song dynasty (960–1279) of Beijing, the capital of Imperial China. Ross and Burgren emphasized on the roofs, choices of colors, and formal outlines in their building designs. Massive curved roofs with eaves curled at corners were applied. Pagoda towers were erected on the flat roof as pure decorations and visual focus. Colored terra cotta were used to create an outline within yellow brick facades. At night, the buildings were lit up showing their formal outlines of Chinese roof and large openings.

“Columns, indiscriminately surmounted by capitals, supported the roof, creating an ‘exotic’ appearance. The eclectic use of standard classical building elements - brackets, cornices, parapets, Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian capitals, and antefix - combined with an oriental roofline, furthered the exotic image... Where buildings abutted each other, the continuous pattern gave the illusion of an ‘Oriental’ streetscape.”<sup>10</sup>

Designed as multi-use buildings with commercial spaces on the ground floor and residential spaces for a community of single males, the steel framed structures allow large openings and glass enclosures. The Sing Fat and Sing Chong buildings were leased to Chinese from white owners.

### Julia Morgan YWCA Building

So as we look to the second case study, with the question, in what way do these later examples of a Chinatown architect built by non-Chinese architects, reflect our observation that in overtime the urban nclass is encroached upon by the body politic?

We find our second abridged case study in San Francisco. The building we discuss is Julia Morgan's YWCA. It is important to consider who Julia Morgan was. A native of San Francisco, Morgan became the first female student to earn a degree from the architecture division of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Upon graduation in early 1900, Morgan returned to the Bay Area, where she spent her career. During her career, Morgan designed and completed more than 700 private homes, public buildings and commercial properties. Morgan designed a total of 16 buildings for YWCA associations— including ours — between 1913 and 1929. These associations existed in a number of different communities and Morgan was known for integrating the visual identity of the community into the design.. For example , in the year preceding the project, Morgan designed a YWCA in Lanīākea at the end of 1924. By this time, she was well acquainted with the YWCA and for this reason, she was thought to be fit to design Chinatowns center for women. In her design, Morgan mixed elements of traditional Chinese and Tuscan architecture.

The building consists of community programming that goes beyond the YWCA and in fact expands architecturally beyond the space of this case study. The building the Morgan designed was an appropriation of The Chinese Historical Society of America , which was built on the same lot in 1932 . Located at 965 Clay Street was historically designated and with that designation this site carried a loaded history of territorial and racial conflict between Chinese immigrant residents and white San Francisco residents. Before the construction of the 1932 building, the site was home to an “Oriental School for Chinese students who were excluded from attending white schools. Though Morgan's design was seen as a consensus between these two communities, a design vision that brought some middle ground to the site, much of the same sentiments of segregation continued .

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*

It is important to note two things about this case study. The first is that the interior of the building very much followed the architecturally expressed contemporary racial, gendered and class divisions dictated by the settler colonial body politic. The interior of the building was segregated, which one experienced through a mirroring or doubling of spaces. Though the space was dedicated to women, within its walls, spaces for white women and spaces for asian women were clearly delineated. The same spatial narratives that were produced by a patriarchal and white supremacist society, applied to a building with seemingly progressive ambitions. A second note to consider in this case study is the depth to which Morgan applied chinese architectural features. The focus of case studies done on this building focus solely on the facade, as that is where Morgan It is important to note two things about this case study. The first is that the interior of the building very much followed the architecturally expressed contemporary racial, gendered and class divisions dictated by the settler colonial body politic. The interior of the building was segregated, which one experienced through a mirroring or doubling of spaces. Though the space was dedicated to women, within its walls, spaces for white women and spaces for asian women were clearly delineated. The same spatial narratives that were produced by a patriarchal and white supremacist society, applied to a building with seemingly progressive ambitions. A second note to consider in this case study is the depth to which Morgan applied chinese architectural features. The focus of case studies done on this building focus solely on the facade, as that is where Morgan expressed the "Chinese" influence of the design. The ornamentation of the facade, which can be seen in the engraved motifs that signal the entrance and the pagoda-like icons that line the perimeter of the parapet, is just that, ornamentation. This statement is not meant to disparage the use of ornamentation or to position it as shallow in any way, but to remind one that the use of these elements in their original context were not solely decorative but also structural.

### Conclusion

The San Francisco Chinatown and its self-modification image in response to the city gave us a perspective looking into the relationship between ethnic and immigrant laborers and a global market. Chinese laborers are the extension of settler colonialism - the transnational railroad - in a context of globalization. The relationship between these two groups is conflicting, contradictory, and also mutual-profiting. The settler colonial cities are extremely aware of the economic benefits of the ethnic laborers and what their neighborhoods bring to tourism and trade, but are also constantly excluding and marginalizing them. At the same time, the ethnic groups are always responding to the settler colonialism, positioning and correcting themselves to be part of the rightful inhabitants based on the criteria of white authorities:

"In people's pursuit of livelihood in the global world, the local, the traditional, and the specific become tools; we use them to define ourselves and our position within the global market; we turn them into commodities on the global market; and we use them as billboards to enhance our presence there. We assert and invent our own identities, traditions, and institutions to position ourselves in the global market. Globalization, then, is also the source of its opposite, of belonging, root-seeking, and identity building, where this is globally exploitable and reconstituted for the sake of the global."<sup>11</sup>

The Orientalization of San Francisco Chinatown is a strategy of the Chinese community to save the site of Chinatown, maintain its Chineseness, reforce instead of threatening the existing social hierarchy, and finally establish a successful image for the white authorities: "the invention of Chinatown by its own merchants should remind us that Orientalism, though primarily a product of the western imagination, is not a monolithic force moving from the West to the East, or from non-Chinese to Chinese. It is, like any discourse, multilayered and multivocal."<sup>12</sup>

These two architecture cases in San Francisco Chinatown have shown us two different ways of how the ethnic laborers and white groups navigate themselves in response to each other and how ethnic groups establish their identities in a settler colonial America. San Francisco Chinatown managed to maintain its community and a place in the city by embracing Chineseness from non-Chinese perspectives, adopting modifications and definitions of white citizens, and declaring the similarities in values and Americanness. Chinatown, therefore, as a transnational identity and community, is a "global phenomena of immigration and ethnicity in the context of globalization and reconfiguring their own social spaces and social relations in new ways."<sup>13</sup>

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*

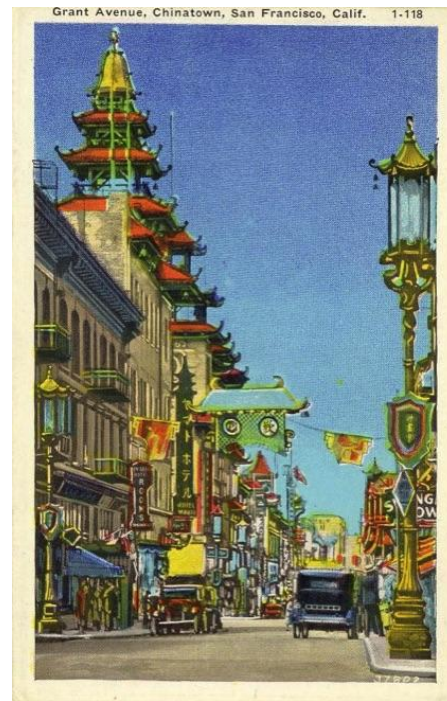
### Endnotes

- 1 Künnemann, Vanessa., and Ruth Mayer. *Chinatowns In a Transnational World: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon*. New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 4
- 2 Künnemann and Mayer, p. 2
- 3 Choy, Philip P. *San Francisco Chinatown: A Guide to Its History and Architecture*. United States: City Lights Publishers, 2012. p.29
- 4 Künnemann and Mayer, p. 4
- 5 Quan, Jing. "SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN--A HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING." Thesis, University of Arizona, 1994. p.40
- 6 Choy, p.43
- 7 "San Francisco: the Metropolis of the West : Wright, Hamilton" Internet Archive. San Francisco : Western Press Association, 1910.  
<https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscometr00wrig/page/n5/mode/2up?view=theater>.
- 8 Walker, Mike. "The Vibrancy of Chinatown Is at Risk. We Must Protect It." Medium. The Bold Italic, March 10, 2021. <https://thebolditalic.com/the-vibrancy-of-chinatown-is-at-risk-we-must-protect-it-90cd5ef518b9>.
- 9 Choy, p.44
- 10 Choy, p.45
- 11 Künnemann and Mayer, p. 219
- 12 Künnemann and Mayer, p. 13
- 13 Künnemann and Mayer, p. 220



# Race & Podcast Shownotes

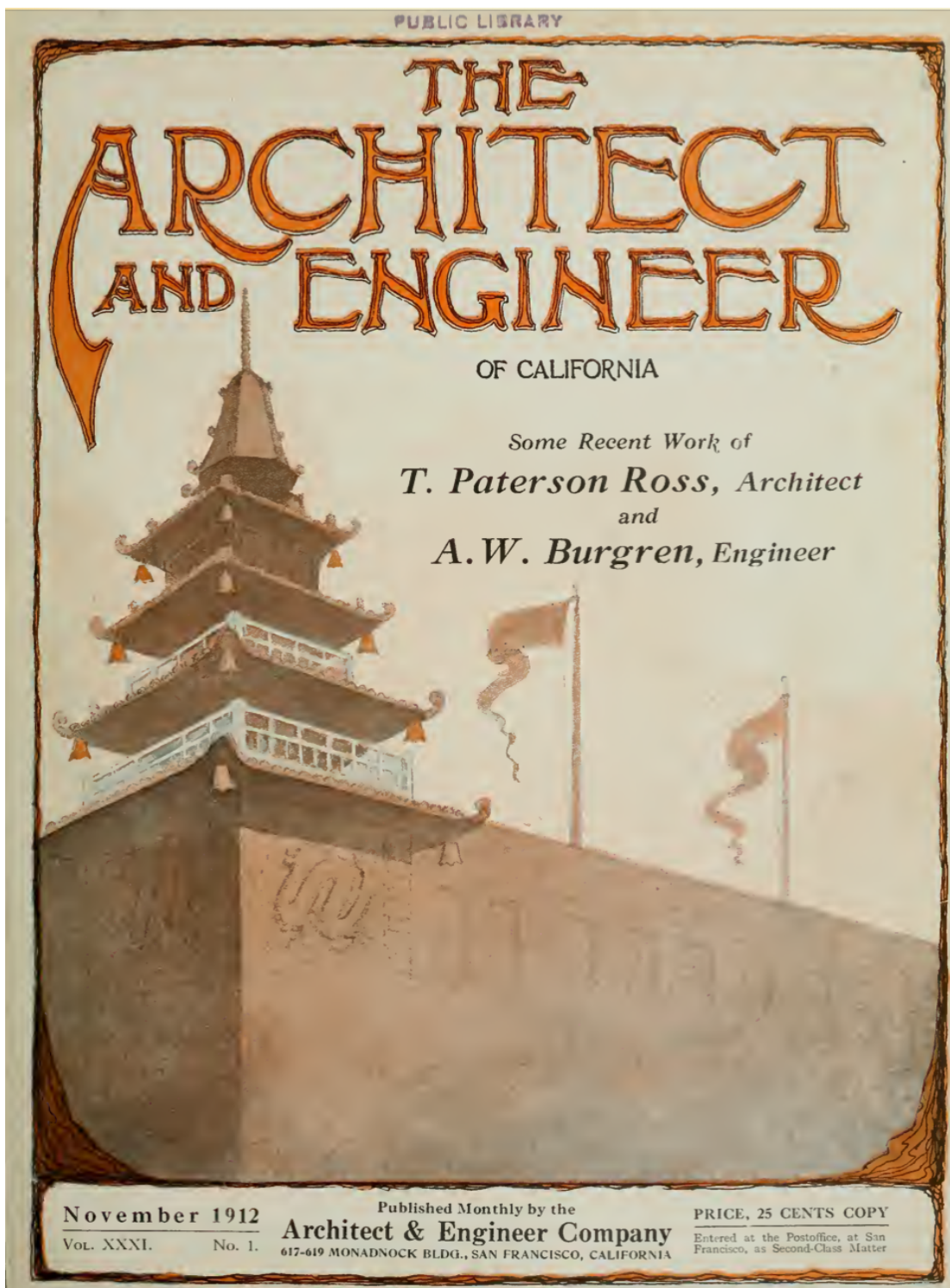
## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*



Sing Chong Building in images, 1908

# Race & Podcast Shownotes

*American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*





# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*



YWCA building by Julia Morgan, 1932



# Race & Podcast Shownotes

## *American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: San Francisco's Chinatown*

