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Lingering Presence: (T)racing Chinese Community in the Borderlands

By
Reia Li

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of
Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology



POMONA COLLEGE
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Abstract: By the mid-1900s, although there were only around 700 Chinese people in Tucson, Arizona, there were over 100 Chinese-owned markets. These small grocery stores were located in Mexican American barrios and served mainly Mexican, Indigenous, and Black people. Starting from these stores and moving to other spaces important to the Chinese community, this work explores race as a spatial process and space as a racialized project. Drawing on anthropology, geography, and Asian/American studies, this thesis (t)races the transformations of Chinese homes, grocery stores, and suburban spaces throughout the 20th century, examining the racial meanings that these places both emerged from and created. This research attends to the relationship between broader structural forces and everyday people's lives, arguing that Chinese people created forms of multiracial connection and reciprocity despite the racial hierarchies perpetuated by settler colonization and suburbanization. By interrogating the complexities of racial formation in the American Southwest, a region undertheorized in Asian/American studies and which can only be understood through a multiracial lens, this research contributes to the emerging field of Asian/American geography. Ultimately, this thesis challenges dominant narratives of "assimilation" by calling attention to the lingering presence of Chinese communities in Tucson.

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I am one small thread in the beautiful tapestry of people supporting me.

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Introduction

It was the 1980s, and Scott Chan was in a club in Los Angeles during the heart of the disco era.

Scott was in college and visiting his extended family in Long Beach for Christmas when one of his older cousins called him and asked if he could take her niece, who was often by herself, out to a club to dance. He sighed and agreed, already anticipating the awkwardness.

Scott was born in Tucson in 1958, the youngest of three siblings. His family has lived in Tucson since the early 1900s. The Chinese Exclusion Acts were in full swing when his grandfather came from China, forcing him to immigrate illegally through Mexico. He worked as a cook for the Chinese workers constructing the Southern Pacific railroad. He then settled in Tucson, returned to China to find a wife, and opened a bakery. Scott's grandmother did all the baking at the bakery, which later transformed into a grocery store. They had 10 kids. The only boy of the 10, Philip Don Wah, continued in the grocery business—in the 1950s, he opened El Cortez Market, which later became Tucson's first and only Chinese-Mexican deli, according to Philip Wah Don's son, Philip Jr. The rest of the family helped out, but pursued their own careers separate from the store. When Scott was a senior in high school, he worked at El Cortez Market on Sundays, but for the most part, he lived a suburban teenager's life filled with sports and school.

When the day came, Scott drove to the girl's home to pick her up.

Scott: And she lives in, like Chinatown in Los Angeles. And I remember distinctly, picking her up, she has the rice cooker on her counter [*laughs*]. I don't know why I remember that.

Scott's cousin asked if he could take her friend as well, who was also Asian. Scott agreed and they picked her up too.

Scott: So we go into this bar. It's all like, you know, fog on the floor and you know, silver everything. It's real disco-ey, right. They almost didn't let me in because all I had was a shirt and pullover sweater on, but it was like a fancy place. It was almost like coat and tie. So I was like [*regretfully, to the bouncer*] "Well, I don't have a coat." So they let us in, and it was a cover charge of 20 bucks. Holy cow! I was like, this is expensive. So I paid for her friend and her. And we go in—and I always tell my friends this story all the time—so we walk in, we go into—I mean we're not there five minutes. And I look around and I'm thinking to myself, Oh my God. I am the only white person in here. Everybody else was Asian [*laughs*]. I remember just deeply thinking [*gasps*] I'm the only

white person here! Everybody else is Asian. But then I thought, Oh my god, *I'm Asian!* They think I'm one of them.

They think I'm one of them. Scott's story captures what cultural geographer Wendy Cheng refers to as a moment of "regional racial formation" (Cheng 2013, 10). Scott's childhood in the '70s Tucson led him to view himself as white, but in that instance in the nightclub, the racial meanings that Scott had learned in Tucson collided with an entirely different set of racial meanings—that of being an Asian/American in Los Angeles. What led to this encounter? How and why did Scott's childhood in Tucson lead him to view himself as white?

Exploring the specific factors that influenced the racial formation of Scott, and others of his generation growing up in Tucson, is one of the main goals of this research. Following Cheng and others who attend to the particularities of place in understanding race, I ask: How did Chinese people in Tucson fit into the racial system of the borderlands? How does the specific historical and spatial context of the city impact people's experiences of their Chinese identity? In order to answer these questions, I jump back much earlier than Scott's childhood, to the late 1800s and early 1900s, when Tucson's Chinese community was just beginning to form. I trace the history of the Chinese community through different spaces in order to elaborate on how racial identification in Tucson has changed over time.

Although small in number, there has been a strong Chinese community in Tucson for decades. The first Chinese immigrants were recorded by the census in Tucson in 1880 ("Timelines" n.d.). Many early Chinese immigrants, mostly men, worked on the Southern Pacific Railroad, which passed through Southern Arizona. The Chinese community grew over time, forming political, social, and economic organizations like the local chapter of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and a Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Chinese people relied on the support of this community to do business. As Linda Kae Don remembers, Chinese grocers banded together to form a co-op to get discounts by ordering large quantities of merchandise. They built community spaces—the Chinese Evangelical Church was constructed in 1926 and housed Tucson's first Chinese school ("Timelines" n.d.). People went dancing together, attended each other's weddings and funerals, celebrated Chinese holidays together, and relied on each other for mutual aid—for example, Melvin Lee, one of my interlocutors, told me that his father borrowed money from a community pool when trying to open his first grocery store.

By the first half of the 20th century, small grocery stores had become the main business of the Chinese community for reasons that are discussed in the following section. Because the numbers of Chinese people remained relatively low, these grocery stores were often on the corner of Mexican American barrios, or neighborhoods, and served mainly Mexican, Tohono O'odham, and Black people.

This multiraciality emerged out of the multiple waves of colonialism done onto the land and its people. Because of this, it is impossible to understand the history of Chinese people in Tucson without understanding their relationship to what Julian Lim (2017) calls the “multiracial borderlands.” Lim shows how the border and the borderlands have always been implicated in projects of racialization, arguing that the U.S-Mexico border delineated both a racial and spatial boundary. In the 1880s to 1930s, both the U.S. and Mexico systematically transformed messy, contested spaces and people into clearly delineated boundaries and races through immigration law, starting from the Chinese Exclusion Act. This project of “‘mastering’ the racial landscape of the borderlands” began “the difficult process of disentangling the diverse threads of the multiracial borderlands” (4).

Thus, I follow these threads to Tucson, weaving a portrait of the reciprocity, connection, and tension between the diverse peoples of the multiracial borderlands. By critically engaging in how the multiracial borderlands structured the experience of Chinese people in Tucson, my research differs from a simple historical accounting of their presence. As Lim puts it: “The goal, all the while, is not simply to document that black and Chinese pioneers were ‘there’ too, but rather to illuminate the tensions, contingencies, and complexity at play in borderland communities” (9).

It is important to note that my focus on the multiracial context of Tucson is different from a liberal celebration of diversity. Tucson’s layered history has been depoliticized and presented as a reason for tourism (Otero 2010, 131). Furthermore, examining Chinese people in Tucson without an attention to the settler colonial context of the city risks falling into a “masculinist Asian American heroic tradition” that “reifies the erasure and forgetting of Indigenous presence” (Amin-Hong 2023, 412). This specific masculinist tradition is exemplified by Chinese American attempts to claim Americanness or attachment to land through the use of Chinese labor in building the railroads, which were built on Indigenous land and facilitated American imperial expansion (411).

Rather, I consider the multiracial borderlands with a specific focus on how settler colonialism both helped define and enforce racial difference. Tucson’s multiracial context is such that considering race through the primary lens of Black-white relation is not sufficient. Iyko Day argues that the overlapping forms of exclusion that Asians in both the U.S. and Canada faced reveal that Asian racialization is dependent on settler colonialism (Day 2016, 23). Specifically, Asian/Americans are racialized as “exclusive and excludable alien labor forces” (24). My analysis intervenes in this conversation by theorizing from Arizona, which was and remains somewhat on the periphery of the U.S., as the land only became a state in 1912. Chinese people in Tucson, I argue, created relationships that exceeded colonial relations, even as they were bound up in and benefited from settler colonial structures.

However, I want to note that I don't see my research as contributing to the work of material decolonization in any meaningful way. As Tuck and Yang remind us, decolonization is not a metaphor and can only be accomplished through material and structural change (Tuck and Yang 2012). I don't make these analyses to release myself, my interlocutors, or my research from complicity in the settler project in Tucson; we have benefitted and continue to benefit from the privileges and violence of American citizenship. I center my analyses around the place called "Tucson," which, by designating this city as separate from the surrounding desert, itself reflects a colonial history and relationship to land. However, ultimately, I hope to contribute to an unsettling of the ideologies that naturalize Tucson's land as white and settler colonial. I take up Mishuana Goeman's question : "What are the relationships set forth during colonialism that continue to mark us today?" (Goeman 2013, 4).

I locate my work in the emerging field of Asian/American geography, which insists that race cannot be understood without an analysis of space because "space and scale are the registers through which race is lived, expressed, articulated, and produced" (Cheng and Shabazz 2015). For example, Scott Kurashige (2010) traces the struggles for political representation, housing, and jobs in the Black and Japanese American neighborhoods in Los Angeles pre- and post-WWII. In triangulating his analysis, he moves beyond a Black-white binary of race relations to show how whites played Black and Japanese people against each other (4). Similarly, Wendy Cheng (2013) examines the West San Gabriel Valley, a suburban region of LA County that is predominantly Asian and Latino, arguing that despite the absence of a significant white population, white supremacy still structures the relations between the two groups. Both of these works show how attending to the particularities of a place opens up new understandings of how race functions on a material level, particularly in multiracial communities.

My analysis adds to Asian/American geographies by considering a city and region that is undertheorized in the field, and in Asian/American studies more broadly. The presence of Chinese people in Tucson is much less obvious than in the historical centers of Asian/American life in the West, such as LA and San Francisco. It is easy to overlook the city, and the Southwest more broadly, because they call for frameworks beyond those built on cities with a concentrated, relatively homogeneous Chinese American population. Here I am thinking of work centered around Chinatown (Anderson 1987, Shah 2001) or, more recently, the suburban Chinese "ethnoburb" (W. Li 1998).

Many of the physical places Chinese people built are gone now—most of the grocery stores are closed, sold, or demolished. In the 1960s, the city bulldozed the neighborhood that was the center of Chinese businesses and residences as part of an "urban renewal" campaign. People like Scott, generations removed from their immigrant ancestors, speak of a tight-knit Chinese community as a thing of the past. Perhaps reflecting this, local historical accounts of Chinese history tend to focus on the late 1800s and early 1900s, stopping in the mid 20th century (Fong

1980, Yang 2011, Ho and Bronson 2018). The implication is that the Chinese community, stripped of the space that made it visible, is no longer interesting. And yet, I argue, traces remain of this history, both in how Chinese people understand their own identities and in the spatial ordering of Tucson. Hence the title of this thesis, “Lingering Presence: (T)racing Chinese Community in the Borderlands.” The parenthesis around the T in T(racing) highlights my sustained focus on racialization as I investigate the past, present, and linkages between the two of the Chinese community in Tucson.

This thesis is split into five different sections, each centered around a specific place and scale. Geographer Neil Smith’s (1992) call to “jump scales” organizes my research, both abstractly and literally (66). Smith analyzed different scales—from the body to the nation state—arguing that these scales are socially constructed. Each section considers how its place is socially constructed by looking at the racial meanings that are mapped onto the place as well as and emerge from it. As an analytical tool, I think of scale as a movement between places, a zooming in and out, that allows me preserve the specificity and particularity of place while also connecting that place to broader historical forces.

The first section, **Tucson**, introduces the history of the city as part of the multiracial borderlands and considers its settler colonial context. Next, **Meyer Street**, describes an area where many Chinese stores and homes were concentrated and explains why a framing of “Chinatown” fails to capture the multiracial nature of this area.

The third section, **the Grocery Store**, opens with an ethnographic portrait of New Empire Food Market, a grocery store that is still open after sixty years. This section examines the grocery store as simultaneously a multiracial and racialized space in the first half of the 20th century in Tucson. It ends with a discussion on the multiracial reciprocity that sustained these stores.

The fourth section, **the Homestead**, reflects on how Chinese people were positioned within American settler colonialism in the borderlands, arguing that although they remained excluded from the full benefits of white citizenship, they were still able to benefit from structures of settler colonial land dispossession. Finally, **Suburbia** tracks the movement of some Chinese people into the suburbs and how access to white institutions required assimilation into a white, heteropatriarchal nuclear family ideal. In this section, I write against a linear narrative of assimilation, showing how traces of Chinese identity remain, albeit in an individualized, domestic(ated) form.

Methodology and Positionality

Because this is an anthropology thesis based on ethnography, interviews form the basis for my analysis, which is supplemented with historical research and scholarly sources. I draw from analysis of the discursive construction of Asian/Americans in the racial landscape of the U.S. and North America (Kim 1999, Day 2016), but my focus remains on how ordinary people “make sense of race and place in their everyday lives” (Cheng 2013, 10).

I interviewed 15 second- and third-generation Chinese Americans from Tucson, all of whom were connected to the legacy of Chinese immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century. Because my thesis also aims to add to the historical archive around the Chinese community in Tucson, I asked for and received consent from each of my interlocutors to use their real names and identifying details. These interviews took place over Zoom, on the phone, and in-person. My interlocutors span different generations, and, accordingly, reference different relationships to the Chinese community in Tucson. My youngest interlocutor is in their 40s, my oldest, 92 years old. Throughout the thesis, I follow the anthropological practice of referring to these people as my “participants” or “interlocutors” because these words emphasize that our conversations were dialogues we both participated in, rather than “one-sidedly informative” (Mittermaier 2022, 23). I also avoid the practice of italicizing non-English words, since these words are no more exotic or strange than their English counterparts.

Although I was born and raised in Tucson, I occupy a very different positionality than Scott and my other interlocutors. My father grew up in China and met my white American mom as an exchange student in the 1980s. He came to the U.S. to pursue his doctorate, making him part of the post-1965 wave of highly-skilled immigrants. They settled in Tucson with my baby brother when he got a job as a professor at the University of Arizona. A few years later, they had me—the only one of my family to be born in Tucson. I grew up used to the desert landscape, where saguaros tower over the few, scraggly trees, and you can see all the way to the mountains from almost anywhere in the city. I didn’t realize how unique of a place Tucson is until I left to attend Pomona College in Claremont, California.

Although I didn’t realize it at the time, the seed of this research my freshman year, which was online. The spring of that year, I visited Pomona for the first time with my parents to see the campus where I’d spend my next three years. On the second day of our visit, we drove to LA for dinner.

I still remember that drive, speeding toward the city, breathless from being so close to big-city glamor. And I remember the shock of seeing the first billboard in Chinese characters, then the buildings and signs. I’d never seen Chinese space not quartered in a designated “Chinatown” or in China.

It is that moment of shock, of surprise, confusion, and delight that served as the basis for this inquiry, a moment similar to what Scott experienced. In fact, thinking about our similar sense of surprise hinted to me that maybe there were broader forces related to my upbringing in Tucson that influenced both of us. Why was I so surprised? What about growing up in Tucson had primed me to expect that public and private space is white and American? Was Tucson always like that? And what are the possibilities for imagining space otherwise?

Tucson

The word “Tucson” comes from a Spanish version of the O’odham word S-cuk Şon, a 17th-century Tohono O’odham village at the base of one of two large hills, west of the Santa Cruz River, present-day downtown, and I-10 (Ludden 2023). This hill is known by many names—it is called Sentinel Peak, which references its use as a military lookout point during the Civil War (“Sentinel Peak” n.d.). It is also now called “A Mountain” for the giant “A” made out of whitewashed rocks constructed near its peak, a tribute to the University of Arizona. This hill is but one small example of the changing meanings that get mapped onto the land, and also how Tucson’s layers of colonial history become naturalized through the landscape.



The hills overlooking the original center of Tohono O’odham life. Viewed from west of Tumamoc Hill. Photo taken by author.

It is necessary to begin with a brief history of the land that is now called Tucson in order to contextualize the presence of Chinese people there. The area is part of the homelands of the

Tohono O’odham people, which stretch from present-day central Arizona south to Sonora, Mexico, and end at the Gulf of California (“History and Culture” n.d.). The land was occupied by Spanish settlers beginning in the late 17th and early 18th century. In 1775, the Spanish army built a military fort called the Presidio San Agustín del Tucsón—this is commonly cited as the “beginning” of the city. When Mexico achieved independence in 1821, the land briefly became part of the Mexican state of Sonora (Sheridan 1986, 2). The Mexican-American War forced Mexico to cede parts of modern-day Arizona to the U.S.; Tucson was part of the land that the U.S. bought a few years after the war, in the 1854 Gadsden purchase (“Milestones” n.d.).

For the next half-century, Arizona remained a territory, a classification of land under U.S. empire that is non-sovereign (i.e, the federal government retains ultimate authority). Arizona was a territory for so long in part because of anti-Mexican racism—politicians like Senator Albert Beveridge, who was Chairman of the Senate Committee on Territories, denounced Mexicans as undeserving of American citizenship (Otero 2010, 46). During this time, the number of Anglo American settlers slowly increased. Despite their small numerical presence, wealth began to be concentrated in the hands of these settlers, who bought property and became merchants (42). Otero notes how the arrival of the railroad further disrupted established economic patterns linking Tucson with Sonora (43). In 1912, Arizona became the 48th state and in 1920, Anglo Americans outnumbered Mexican Americans for the first time (4).

Anglo settlement changed the city. Historian Thomas Sheridan documents the establishment of a racial hierarchy in Tucson by tracing the gradual “institutionalized subordination” of the tucsonenses, Tucson’s Mexican community who built much of the city and established schools, theaters, and businesses (Sheridan 1986). Historian Lydia Otero, a tucsonense herself, analyzed how Anglo American ideologies of modernization and suburbanization were used to transform Tucson’s landscape (Otero 2010). For example, Otero notes how Anglo American settlers that arrived in the late 19th century pushed tucsonenses away from the presidio area and proceeded to change the layout of the city—rather than being organized around a central plaza, in the Mexican and Spanish style, Anglo-settled areas became a grid of 90 degree angles that persists to this day (16).

In addition to changing the physical landscape, U.S. colonial rule affected the racial landscape in Tucson and the borderlands. Linda Kae Don was born in 1955 and grew up working in her family’s grocery store on the south side of Tucson. Her father immigrated from China when he was nine. Her mother was a white woman from the East Coast who had moved to Tucson with her then-husband and son to try and get a fresh start; however, their relationship didn’t work out and they split up.

Linda: When things started to get bad between [my mother] and her husband and she needed work, she worked for a few hours at [my father’s] store. And then that marriage

ended. She went back East to be with her family because she needed help with her son and all. But that didn't really work so well for her. She just felt very alienated. And then my dad had stayed in touch with her. And he said, Well, if you come back out here, you know I can help you with a job and help get you situated and move into an apartment, that kind of thing. And so she did. And then once they started dating, her family really had—back East—really had mixed feelings because this was not too far past World War II. And during that period, anybody who looked Asian was, you know, thought to be probably Japanese. And you know, so there was a lot of discrimination and all and my mom's family really didn't want her to marry my dad. Because they said they had seen examples of how hard it was for this one Japanese American family that lived in their small town. But anyway, my mom decided that if she was going to do this, it'd have to be out here. So that's what she did.

They got married in 1953, when interracial marriage was still illegal in Arizona.

“So they drove into New Mexico, to Lordsburg, and were married at a justice of peace there,” Linda said. “I think it takes us a lot of moral courage, you know, to kind of buck the trends of, of an era—not only the trends, but the laws of an era.”

The law that Linda is referencing is an anti-miscegenation law that was established in 1864, during Arizona Territory's very first legislative session (Acosta 2010, 13). The law prohibited marriage between whites and non-whites; marriage between nonwhites was allowed. In 1896, the anti-miscegenation law was upheld by the Arizona Supreme Court in a case involving a white Union army captain's marriage to a Pima woman, as Salvador Acosta describes (65). The court ruled that their marriage was invalid and their daughter thus had no legal claim to her father's estate, which passed to his white family. This case upheld Arizona Territory law over tribal laws and customs, an early example of the dismantling of tribal sovereignty. The case reveals how prohibition on interracial marriage was ultimately a way to facilitate white accumulation of land and property.

Linda's account of her parent's marriage references this racializing process. It shows how, despite the presence of laws defining and enforcing racial lines, Arizona was seen as a place with more freedom than “back East,” where racial codes were stricter. I noticed Linda's use of the phrase “out here” to describe Tucson, which contains the feeling of relative freedom that the multiracial borderlands provided.

Thus, it is into these multiracial borderlands that the first Chinese people arrived in Tucson in the 1880s. Kathleen Chan, Scott's sister, was born the same year as Linda, in 1955. She has a round face and thick black hair which she says is a legacy from her father, whose hair is full and dark at age 101. Kathleen, who goes by Kathy, laughs frequently and is fond of

peppering her speech with phrases like “This is terrible” or “I hate to even bring this up” before launching into a story, usually in which she said something about Chinese people she viewed as stereotypical. This habit made the conversation feel almost confessional, like we were two women gossiping at a slumber party. Kathy told me that there isn't a family consensus on how her grandfather arrived in the United States. She narrated stories told to her about his arrival against a backdrop of Chinese Exclusion.

“He said he was born here and his papers got burned up in a San Francisco fire, which everybody says,” Kathy said. “But he wasn't born here.”

She said that he probably came up through Mexico.

“There's lots of stories how they did inside of wagons,” she said. “100 years ago, horse and buggy wagons, and they put blanks, blank wood on top. They were underneath and a lot of them got in that way.”

Some of my participants traced a similar ancestral route through Mexico. Others said that their parents or grandparents immigrated through San Francisco and made their way to Tucson through family connections. As mentioned previously, the earliest Chinese community formed as a result of the railroad that passed through Tucson. After completing construction, or simply in search of better employment, some of these railroad workers settled in Tucson. Fong (1980) tells the story of some of these workers: “Before the Southern Pacific had reached Gila Bend, Arizona, for instance, three men who shared the family name Wong left the work gangs and came to Tucson. They arrived in the late 1870s and established the O.K. Restaurant on the southeast corner of Church Plaza and Mesilla Street. A laundry basket was used instead of a cash register and meals were seventy-five cents each” (234).



Kathy Chan in front of her grandmother's house. Photo taken by author.

By the 20th century, grocery stores came to be the dominant business of Chinese people in Tucson. Near the end of the 1800s, many Chinese people worked as “truck farmers” who would grow vegetables and then sell them from the back of their truck (Yang 2010). Chinese merchants, who Yang notes were often relatives of the farmers, opened grocery stores to sell produce from the gardens (33). This period was also the beginning of Chinese exclusion. Although the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act outlawed the immigration of Chinese laborers, it still permitted Chinese merchants and students to come to the US. Furthermore, a Supreme Court Case in 1900 called *United States vs. Mrs. Gue Lim* established that Chinese merchants could bring their wives and children to the US, while laborers couldn’t (R. Li 2023a). The grocery stores, then, were a way to become a merchant and support a family.

Howard Eng had another take on the prevalence of the small, family-owned grocery store (which also often included a butcher shop). Howard, whose parents owned a grocery store, is currently writing a book about Tucson’s Chinese history. He told me that most of the Chinese people in Tucson came from a city in Guangdong province in Southern China called Toisan (Taishan in Mandarin). They came from an agricultural background, he said.

“For being a grocer, you don’t need to be versed in English, you don’t have to be versed in terms of the culture,” Howard said. “It was a good occupation for someone who had limited education.”

By 1949, there were 710 Chinese people in Tucson and more than 100 Chinese-owned markets (R. Li 2023a). So where were these stores?

Meyer Street

When I explain what I’m researching to my peers and professors in Southern California, the conversation inevitably ends up at Chinatown.

What is Tucson’s Chinatown like?, they ask me, the question presupposing the existence of one. I find myself struggling to explain—no, we don’t have one now, and whether or not Tucson ever had one is a matter of framing, of interpretation.

What do you mean by Chinatown? I want to ask, and *Why is that the sole framework through which we understand Chinese and, more broadly, Asian/American place-making?*

This section engages those questions by looking at a key area where a lot of Chinese-owned grocery stores, organizations, and residences were in the early and mid 1900s. Simply framing this area using “Chinatown” misses the multiracial interactions that allowed these stores to flourish. However, despite this, Chinatown still has value for my interlocutors because it

allowed them to claim a connection to an area that would later be destroyed in a 1960s urban renewal project.

Perhaps I have fallen into the Chinatown trap myself by opening with this framing; perhaps I should have started this section with what this area *is* (or more accurately, *was*), rather than what it is not. But what it *was* is complicated. Different people refer to this place in different ways, and I examine the discursive function of each of those terms, including, yes, “Chinatown.”

I understand the urge to approach Tucson’s community through the lens of Chinatown. The idea of the space of Chinatown is important to the history of the Chinese diaspora in North America. Cultural geographer Kay Anderson (1987) argues that the space of Chinatown itself contributed to how Chinese people were racialized. Rather than being a-priori “ghettos,” Chinatowns are a white European idea that “reflected the race definition process, but also informed and institutionalized it, providing a context and justification for its reproduction” (594). In other words, racialization and racism didn’t just help quarantine Chinese people in a specific place; this specific place also affected the stereotypes that white society pushed onto Chinese people. For instance, the presence of gambling and opium in Chinatowns led to Chinese people being racialized as morally suspicious. Similarly, Nayan Shah (2001) examined San Francisco’s Chinatown at the turn of the century to show how public health discourse framed the living conditions that were a result of poverty and discrimination as evidence that Chinese people were inherently diseased and deviant.

However, it is difficult to map these theories of Chinatown directly on Tucson because of Tucson’s specific colonial and multiracial history. Chinese people in Tucson were never legally excluded in the same way as in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other large cities on the West Coast. In fact, a petition to force the Chinese into their own “quarter” was rejected by Tucson’s City Council in 1893 (Fong 1980). The city attorney found the petition unconstitutional, ruling that Chinese people could stay where they were and continue to conduct business (“Timelines” n.d.). Thus, Tucson never had a formally racially-segregated Chinatown.

So why, then, do some of my interlocutors use the term? Or more specifically, what did using the framing of “Chinatown” allow them to communicate?

I met Howard Eng for the first time at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center, where he serves on the Board of Directors. Howard, who I mentioned above, is a retired pharmacist and professor of public health, and currently working on a book about Chinese-owned grocery stores in Tucson. He greeted me and led me into the kitchen, which was bustling with volunteers busy making food for an upcoming event. He asked me if I was hungry, and before I responded, asked a woman to prepare a plate of dumplings for me. She handed me and Howard each a Styrofoam

plate and a plastic water bottle, and he took me into one of the classrooms where Chinese school is held on the weekends.

Howard was born in 1949. His parents started out with a “truck grocery store” that they drove to Eloy and onto the Tohono O’odham reservation. When Howard was a kid, they decided to settle down with a storefront and opened a grocery, which they ran from 1960 until 1987. When describing the history of the Chinese community in Tucson, he split it into an “early Chinatown” and a “second Chinatown.”

Howard: “The early Chinatown occurred on the end of Pennington [Street]. There was a number of young Chinese men that came. They settled in these rundown adobe buildings.”

Adobe refers to sun-dried earth, often compacted into bricks, which served as a building material for people in desert climates around the world (Mauricio et al. 2021). He explained that the group of buildings included a joss house, a term that came to refer to a Chinese temple. The joss house had a shrine. The area also had a grocery store, a laundry, and a restaurant, Howard said.

Half of that area “disappeared” when the women’s club decided to build a new building. Then, in 1916, the city decided to build a new city hall and “they took the rest of Chinatown,” as Howard put it.

In this narrative, we see the first instance of the term Chinatown giving meaning to an area that was destroyed.

“And so Chinatown moved to Meyer, Main, Jackson, and Broadway,” Howard concluded, referring to four streets that bounded this “second Chinatown.” Historian Sandy Chan describes this as “part of a slow movement of the Chinese and the Mexican community south of Congress [St.] into the area now known as Barrio Viejo” (“Timelines” n.d.).

The area now called Barrio Viejo, literally “old neighborhood” in Spanish, is one of the oldest areas of Tucson and became the home of tucsonenses when they were displaced from the city’s center after the arrival of Anglo-American settlers in the late 1800s (Otero 2010, 16). This area has known many names—it has also been called Barrio Libre (“Barrio Viejo” n.d.). Otero notes, though, that the conceptualization of this area as a single barrio was a result of urban renewal: “Although urban renewal documents often refer to this area as a single barrio, namely Barrio Libre, the eighty acres that were bulldozed encompassed a complicated geographical amalgam of several barrios and la calle [the street], which tucsonenses claimed as their downtown” (14).

Looking at this area's Mexican residents' relationship to place reveals some of the tensions between their own and outsiders' framings of the space. Otero quotes a tucsonense who remembers this not through the broad framing of an entire barrio, but through specific place names.

"I never heard it called Barrio Viejo," she said. "They referred to specific places: Suey's [Market], Del Monte Market, and La Calle Meyer or La Calle Convento. Each place had its own specific name" (22).

Suey's Market and Del Monte Market were both Chinese-owned grocery stores that were operating as early as the 1940s, according to an exhibit at the Tucson Chinese Cultural Center. By referencing this area through place names, this resident shows how the families that lived there had specific relationships to the space based on the people who were there. Calling it Barrio Viejo indicates a hierarchical naming of place—for the people who lived there, it was not the old barrio or the free barrio, it was simply home. Furthermore, Chinese-owned markets were one of the factors marking this multiracial area as a place.

For Chinese residents at the time, this area was also centered around a specific place—the Ying On Compound, which was bought in 1911 by Hop Sing Tong, one of the first Chinese companies incorporated in Tucson ("The Question" n.d.). The Ying On Compound housed social and political organizations like the Kuomintang and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which held its first meeting in 1926 and was responsible for forming the first Chinese church and language school. Ying On also served as a living place; many elderly Chinese men lived there. In 1930, of the 38 people living there according to the census, 36 were men, aged 2 to 82 ("The Question" n.d.). As Josie Gin Morgan put it to me, Ying On was a "bachelor's area."

Melvin Lee confirmed Josie's characterization by describing Ying On as a place for his dad and his (male) buddies to socialize.

"My dad was really active in the Chinese community. He belonged to a club called Ying On," Melvin said. "That's where he went. Played mahjong with his buddies, talked politics and business."

Scott Chan, whose words opened this thesis, had a similar recollection.

"We would take my grandfather and drop him off down there to visit with friends or whatever. And then they would go back and pick him up later. So there was actually a kind of a Chinatown or a Chinese area," Scott said.

Both of these quotes characterize the Ying On compound as a place for men, which references its history. However, I noticed the ambivalence with which Scott described the area, as “a kind of Chinatown or Chinese area.” Similarly, Josie Gin Morgan called the area around the Ying On compound “a Chinatown in a way.” Both of these phrasings indicate an awareness that the concept of Chinatown doesn’t quite overlay neatly onto Tucson. However, the concept of Chinatown must have some sort of discursive function for them to still reference it, albeit with a sense of doubt.

Looking at the urban renewal campaign of the 1960s provides a possible explanation for the utility of the idea of Chinatown.

In 1966, Tucson voters approved the Pueblo Center Redevelopment Project, which leveled all of the buildings in the area I’ve just described to build a massive convention center. This was a racial project, as it targeted the most densely populated 80 acres in Arizona that were home to Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans (Otero 2010, 2). Otero traces how the project facilitated the development of “new historical narratives to reinforce claims of Anglo dominance and exceptionalism” (10). Specifically, Otero locates the urban renewal project as part of a white “pioneer fantasy” that ignores the thriving Mexican community that was there before Anglo settlement (155). The urban renewal project was part of a concerted effort to rebuild Tucson’s downtown around the suburban idea of the shopping mall (56). Painting the area as either lacking commercial activity and in need of “revitalization,” or as a space of lawlessness and danger, proponents of the urban renewal project actively ignored the thriving communities of color there.

One of my interlocutors, Anna Don Chan, actually served on the board put together by Roy P. Drachman, a realtor, shopping center developer, and tourism promoter who advocated fiercely for the urban renewal project.

“In retrospect, I think I was just a yes man...They really didn’t ask me for anything in particular. I didn’t even live in that area. But they wanted a lot of yeses to say, ‘Let’s go ahead with this community center,’” Anna said. “I never thought about the people that we were displacing at the time.”

Kiki Lee Strauss is a third-generation Chinese American—both her parents were the children of Chinese immigrants. Both sides had grocery stores; her father was fluent in Spanish because he grew up in a store on Meyer Street, part of the area that got destroyed by urban renewal. Her dad, though, was able to go to the University of Arizona and opened a small pharmacy.

Kiki: Some really early memories of mine—my dad would kind of drive us down there and say, ‘Well, this was where your grandparents had this, where we had this store.’ And there was actually a structure there. But then, I want to say when they built the convention center [*pause*] At that stage, which was I think, when I was like in early high school, maybe middle school, that whole area changed and the building got razed.

Kiki’s retelling includes the suburban movement of driving “down there.” Despite the fact that Kiki’s family had moved to the suburbs and no longer lived in this area, it still held symbolic value because of its history as a place of Chinese community. This is what “Chinatown” allows my interlocutors to communicate—that there was an area with visible, marked Chinese space. Chinatown in this context does not mean a racially homogenous or legally segregated place. Rather, marking this area as “a kind of Chinatown” or a “Chinese area,” as Josie and Scott put it, respectively, marks it as a place meaningful to the Chinese community. It helps people like me, who never knew a version of Tucson with this place, to understand the dimensions of what was lost in urban renewal. “An area in the center of Tucson where a lot of Chinese people lived and opened grocery stores” doesn’t have the same unifying ring to it as Chinatown. Chinatown lays claim to space, albeit a claim that is built through interrelations with other Chinese people, Mexican, Indigenous, and Black people.

The greater context of housing segregation in Tucson also reveals the utility of the word Chinatown. Although there was no legally segregated Chinatown, Tucson was not free from racist segregation. Geographers at the University of Arizona recently mapped all the neighborhoods with racist language prohibiting people of color from living there, beginning in the early 1900s (Jurjevich et al. 2023). As private agreements between property owners, these racist covenants were ruled “unenforceable” by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1948. Allen Lew recounted how even as a child, he was aware of the boundaries for where Chinese people could live.

“I remember growing up, anything past Wilmot Road, they would not sell to Chinese,” he said. Wilmot Road is on the east side of town. Kathy Chan had a similar story when her grandmother tried to buy a house.

“And somebody at night came and in black spray paint, put ‘No chinks here.’ They couldn’t buy that—they didn’t buy the house,” Kathy said. “Instead what they did was—they built a beautiful house, on the corner of Water [St.] and Vine [St.]”

So even though Chinatown was not a legal designation, it allows my interlocutors to refer to an area without racist housing policies where Chinese people lived with diverse neighbors. And now I turn to a more detailed examination of the grocery store and how it facilitated these multiracial interrelations.

The Grocery Store



New Empire Food Market. Photo taken by author.

Stepping into New Empire Food Market feels like stepping back in time. The store has a dark wood floor that creaks as you walk on it. Its wooden, teal-painted shelves, lined with shelf-stable cans and sauces, barely go up to chest-height, meaning you can see across the whole space. The refrigerators in the back are things of wonder—they look like small, fortified windows, their white enamel complimented by elaborate steel hatches.

At the very front of the store is a wooden counter containing cigarette boxes, colorful liquor bottles, and candy. There are also four huge pickle jars, two filled with pickles suspended in brine, and two filled with saladitos, dried salted plums. Depending on the day and time, either Melvin Lee or his mother, Anne Mee Wong, who is in her 80s, sit at this counter and greet customers as they walk in. The store smells of wood, dust, and a hint of a sweet, heady fragrance—incense, maybe.

Melvin’s family has been operating this store since the 1960s. Melvin’s father, Tun Lim Lee, was born in Guangdong Province in China, but left when he was 14, according to his obituary in the local paper (Duarte 2017). He made his way to Tucson from San Francisco because he had relatives there.

“He didn’t get past junior high school,” Melvin said. “Then he started working the stores.”

Melvin’s father passed away in 2017, but the Lee family continues to own and operate the store, despite offers from the nearby University of Arizona to buy it. “We just want to hold on to it, for my dad’s sake,” Melvin said, making me wonder if the vintage look of the store was partly an homage to his father. He looked up at the ceiling. “My dad worked really hard. He raised five kids out of the store.”

It was a cloudy, overcast day when I visited Empire Foods. As I talked to Melvin, the door would occasionally swing open with a customer, bringing the scent of rain hitting asphalt. A man in a beanie came in, looking for tape. Two college kids in hoodies wandered in and bought coffee. Several people bought liquor. Some of the customers seemed to be regulars—Melvin chatted with them as he rang up their purchases. As Melvin talked to one man, I overheard something that I thought was interesting.

“Did he say something about like Chino...?” I asked Melvin.



Melvin Lee at New Empire Food Market, which his family has been running for over 60 years. Photo taken by author.

“Chino market? That’s what his kid says,” Melvin said. He chuckled. “It’s funny you caught that.”

This brief snippet that I overheard shows how these small, family-owned markets are simultaneously multiracial and racialized spaces. Chino, which means Chinese in Spanish, was a common way to refer to the hundreds of markets that used to populate Tucson’s neighborhoods, which, during the heyday of the markets, were majority Mexican, Indigenous, and Black.

One reporter, who I reached out to hoping for a connection to a source, told me, unprompted, that “when we were growing up, my grandparents lived in an old Barrio and we used to buy candy at the ‘Old Chino’ store on the corner.”

Alisha Vasquez, a fifth-generation Tucsonan, put it another way: “Every Mexican American family has one or two [markets] that they would go to.”

The hundreds of stores were concentrated in Tucson’s central and south sides because that’s where customers were. Linda Kae Don’s family’s store was one of these, located at the corner of south Sixth Street and Bilby.

Linda: The neighborhood surrounding us was largely, probably you’d say, low-income. We served a lot of Hispanic customers and people from the nearby reservation, because we were just probably a couple miles from the border with the reservation. And so we, the types of things that we carried in our store and the types of services we provided like cashing checks and that kind of thing really fit with the needs of the community. And I think that was true for many Chinese grocery stores back in that time.

Linda’s experience is not unique—the literature surrounding the grocery stores in Tucson and multiple of my interlocutors emphasized how the stores were part of multiracial communities. Linda’s family’s store was her father’s second—he’d grown up in the back of his own father’s store in Florence, AZ. The Gila River runs through Florence and served as the former northern border of Mexico before the 1854 Gadsden Purchase. Because of his childhood there, Linda’s father spoke fluent Spanish. This multilinguality was a common occurrence among the people I interviewed whose parents were either born in Tucson or immigrated there when young.

As Kathy Chan said, “Because my mom was born in Arizona, she was very, almost Hispanic. She spoke Spanish before she spoke English. She spoke Chinese first and then Spanish. And then when she went to school when she was six she learned English.”

Howard Eng, whom I interviewed for a news article on the history of these grocery stores, said his father, who ran their family's grocery for almost 30 years, spoke some Tohono O'odham in addition to English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and a bit of Spanish (R. Li 2023a).

Linda's family grocery store, like many others, also ran on a credit system. Linda described how many customers could only pay for their groceries on payday, so they kept a ledger in the register keeping track of each family's tab. Alisha Vasquez, the fifth-generation Tucsonan who is also the director of Tucson's Mexican American Heritage and History Museum, remembered that her grandfather told her stories about going to the Chinese-owned grocery store on the corner to pay off his family's bill.

"Like every Friday, you would have kids going down to pay off the bill at the Chinese markets. And that's when they would get piloncillo, the little candies," she said.

As Linda spoke to me, she chuckled to herself. She said she had just realized "how amazing some of that stuff was and how it built community because it was built on interactions among people, neighbors. Whole neighborhoods and parts of the Tucson community."

By continually referencing the interactions facilitated by the store, these interviews conceive of the space of the grocery store as the "product of interrelations," rather than simply a physical structure (Goeman 2013, 6). The stores allowed for "coexistence and codependence" among Chinese, Mexican, Black, and Tohono O'odham people, to borrow a phrase from Shaolu Yu's study of Chinese-run grocery stores in the antebellum South (Yu 2022, 101). Linda and Alisha's words show how the intimate, everyday interactions among her parents and their customers were built through the economic function of the store, but also exceeded it, resulting in webs of connection and trust. Credit only works when owners know their customers and trusted them to come back. This is reciprocity as anthropologist Marcel Mauss described it—based not on charity, but on mutual interdependence (Mauss 2016). I highlight this not to romanticize the past, but to unsettle the economic landscape of today, where large, multinational corporations have anonymized and depersonalized commerce. As my interlocutors show, the "economy" was not always like that.

Coexistence and codependence, it is important to note, do not necessarily mean racial harmony. Although the stores were places where different communities interacted, it's worth noting that broader community relations between Chinese people and other groups resists a narrative of easy, uncomplicated solidarity.

In 1878, Arizona Territory passed a law forbidding Chinese people from working in mines, predating the same stipulation in the 1882 Exclusion Act ("Timelines" n.d.). By 1886, there were anti-Chinese leagues in Tombstone, Flagstaff, and other cities in Arizona. According

to the same document, “Bisbee even passed an ordinance forbidding Chinese from staying overnight and Chinese were hung in effigy on the road entering the city” (“Tucson Chinese Collection” n.d., 3). What was happening in Arizona was just one part of a larger mobilization of anti-Chinese discourse among labor movements. Colleen Lye (2005) argues that Asian exclusion has been at the heart of labor movements since the 1890s. The figure of the alien Asian “coolie” helped to whiten European immigrants like the Irish and provided an enemy for this emergent white working-class to organize against, in the name of challenging monopoly power (7).

Examining Arizona reveals the added complexity of tensions between Mexican and Chinese working-class people that ultimately upheld white dominance (Sheridan 1986). Sheridan writes that Chinese people “occupied the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, even more despised than the recently conquered Indians” (84). He cites a Spanish-language newspaper that described Chinese people in 1892 as “the most pernicious and degraded race on the globe,” and in 1894 as “a fungus that lives in isolation, sucking the sap of the other plants” (Sheridan 1986, 84). Sheridan points out that no meaningful pro-labor movement emerged in Southern Arizona in the late 1800s, arguing that the Mexican middle and working classes protested the use of Chinese labor, rather than challenge the economic systems where racialized bodies labored under white leadership (85).

These are just some of the racialized tensions occurring in the borderlands during this time. But what about the relationship between Chinese people and settler colonialism? The following section dives deeper into this topic.

One final note: Linda Kae Don remembers how her father used to do deliveries on the Tohono O’odham reservation for the families who had difficulty making it to the store.

“Especially the elders,” she said. “He really had this concern for them.”

So when we discuss this story, we must keep in mind the settler colonial structures that Chinese people were benefiting from—the very fact of the reservation—while also seeing how the grocery store was a space of intimate, human connection among different groups. This is not a resolvable tension.

The Homestead



Anna Don Chan at her home. Photo taken by author.

Anna Don Chan invited me to her spacious home in midtown Tucson. Wearing a bright blue turtleneck, she sat with me on her couch and told me stories about her 92 years of life, her eyes twinkling.

Anna was born in 1931 in Washington. Her father was a traveling Chinese herbalist who'd immigrated to the U.S. as a student; she grew up moving from town to town for his business (the story of her family is detailed in Tamara Venit-Shelton's *Herbs and Roots: A History of Chinese Doctors in the American Medical Marketplace*). Her family moved to Tucson when she was nine years old.

“When we got to Tucson, it was 1940. The war broke out. Herbs couldn't come to Tucson anymore—he couldn't get any herbs from China. My brothers went into the service,” Anna said.

She laughed. “Because we moved so often, I never thought I would stay here for 85 years!”

Anna was fascinating to speak with because she contained a wealth of knowledge about other members in the Chinese community in addition to her own family's history. Her first husband's father, Don Toy, immigrated illegally to Arizona through Mexico, served in WWI, went back to China to find a wife, and then settled back in Tucson to open a grocery store.

Anna described how Don Toy built a ranch in Avra Valley, which is on the far northwest outskirts of Tucson. During the week, Don's wife and three kids stayed at the ranch, while Don Toy stayed in Tucson and ran the grocery store. The kids went to "a little one room schoolhouse" in Avra Valley. On weekends, the family switched places.

Don was able to build this ranch because of federal legislation. As Anna explains it: "The US government said if you wanted to homestead you could homestead out in Avra Valley—you know what homesteading is? They'd give you—he had a section of land. The US government is going to give you a section of land which is 640 acres. All you had to do was settle there, build a house, get water, dig a well and build a house and then that property would be yours."

The Desert Land Act of 1877 allocated federal funds for the irrigation of public lands in the West ("Desert Land Entries" n.d.). The act was an amendment to the 1862 Homestead Act, which was the first in a series of laws that "accelerated the settlement of the western territory" by granting land allotments to citizens with the condition that settlers live on and "improve" the land ("Homestead Act" 2021). The Desert Land Act and others like it split large swaths of Indigenous land into small plots owned by white settlers. As Matthew Henry writes, citing Nick Estes, the Desert Land Act "was implemented to encourage assimilation (as a precondition for citizenship) through private property ownership and a thinly veiled attempt to disintegrate traditional Indigenous land use practices while redistributing native lands to white settlers" (Henry 2022, 33).

Don's story is somewhat of an anomaly—Anna said that she didn't know of any other Chinese person in Tucson who was able to homestead. Despite the uniqueness of his situation, his experience is a fascinating look at questions of race, colonialism, and citizenship in the early 20th century. In Anna's recounting of her father-in-law's ranch, it becomes clear that Chinese people were able to benefit from laws set up mainly to aid white settlers in dispossessing Native people of their land. However, I want to add a layer of complexity: that of the question of Don's citizenship.

In the 1910s, Don came to the U.S. illegally through Mexico in the false bottom of a wagon, Anna said. During this period, Chinese immigrants were not allowed to nationalize as U.S. citizens, a law that would continue until Franklin D. Roosevelt repealed the Exclusion Acts in 1943. In fact, U.S. citizens (women in particular) who married an "alien ineligible for

citizenship” could potentially lose their own citizenship, as a case study of the first Chinese man to naturalize after the Exclusion Acts reveals (“Edward Bing” 2020). Thus, Don did what a lot of other Chinese people did at the time: he claimed that he was a citizen, saying that his papers got burned in the fires caused by the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. I want to note here that the Exclusion Acts were not simply about restricting the movement of Chinese people into the country. They also created and enforced an entire racial group by constructing “Chinese immigrants not only as racially undesirable but also as racially distinct” (Lim 2017, 97).

In 1914, WWI broke out, and Don enlisted. He was sent to France, where he fought in three different “skirmishes,” as Anna put it. Fighting in the war became further verification of Don’s citizenship.

“He had proved his citizenship because he had gone over to fight in the war and came back,” she said.

The very fact that he had to “prove” his citizenship references how his racial identity made him a nonnormative citizen. It is significant that he helped prove it through war—he became a veteran and soldier, one of the nation’s “ideal citizens” (Abu El-Haj 2022). When he returned, he applied for a homestead. The U.S. has a history of giving veterans land for their service. The Homestead Act of 1862 specifically targeted soldiers, exempting them from an age requirement and allowing them to acquire land in a shorter period of time (Marcell 2018). In Don’s history we see how citizenship, war, and settler colonialism overlap.

My overall point here is not to simply describe Chinese people as settlers, although they were. Rather, my focus here is on the settler colonial structures themselves. The U.S. government was able to create settler colonial structures that, although they depended on the racialized construction of the white citizen, were still able to benefit those who fell outside of this category.

Returning a final time to the space of the homestead, I want to examine its role as a community space. Anna remembered going herself to Don’s family ranch for celebrations on the Fourth of July to celebrate his birthday.

Anna: So Tony, my husband, would say they’d butcher a cow and they’d dig this big pit. And then start a fire, put the cow in there. And then the next day it would be ready for a barbecue...They were still doing it when we came in 1940. I remember—driving out there. I mean, Avra Valley was just, it was a dirt road out there. But there were all the Tucson Chinese playing mahjong. The kids were playing on the horses.

In this anecdote, the homestead functions as a space for an individual and their family. Although Don invites the broader Tucson Chinese community to celebrate together, it is notable that he has to invite them—this is an early example of the separation of space into work and home, which I will discuss more in the next section. The homestead is where his family lives and recreates, and the grocery store in town is where they work.

Examining the space of the homestead is useful in that it highlights some key features of the grocery store. Although the grocery stores were also the product of settler colonialism, as they were built on Native land, they both depended on and facilitated community interactions in a way that the homestead did not.

Suburbia

“You’ll find that this generation, they didn’t marry Chinese. Like my sons, all of them didn’t marry Chinese,” Anna said. “Because there wasn’t a strong community by that time.”

Anna, as the oldest of my interlocutors, has watched the dynamics of the Chinese community change over the course of her lifetime. I could tell that Anna was mourning the loss of a “strong community” during the post-WWII period when her sons were growing up. What happened? Where did the community go?

Anna’s question links up to another question I had, a question that opens this thesis. Why do some, but not all, of my participants describe themselves as white? This is most vividly exemplified by the story that Scott Chan, Kathy’s brother, told about going to a club in LA full of Asian/Americans and feeling like the only white person there. Scott’s sentiment was echoed by other people I spoke with, particularly those who were connected to a grocery store only tangentially or through their family history. I want to note that I am less interested in measuring how culturally Chinese my second and third-generation interlocutors are. What I am more interested in is how they came to view themselves as *racially* white.

The hegemonic reading of this sentiment is an assimilation narrative that naturalizes the progression of the children of immigrants in America—over time, they lose cultural connections to the “motherland” and become, simply, American, with all its racial overtones of whiteness. What this narrative ignores is how the specific social and material context of the U.S. at the time of migration influences the ability and incentive for migrants to “assimilate” into whiteness. Anna Tsing, for instance, analyzes mushroom-picking camps of Southeast Asian refugees in Oregon who have come to the U.S. since the mid-1980s, arguing these refugees arrived in the aftermath of the dismantling of social welfare systems and the accompanying pressure to assimilate into white American values (Tsing 2015). As Tsing puts it: “In contrast to earlier immigrants, they need not study to become American from inside out” (106). Similarly, Susan

Koshy examines the changing place of Chinese people in the racial hierarchy of the Mississippi Delta in the early to mid 1900s (Koshy 2001). Koshy writes: “Access to white privilege required a decisive shift in established black-Chinese relations. This shift was facilitated when wives and children joined the grocers, and the benefits of access to white institutions rose proportionately for members of a settlement-oriented community” (177). What Koshy and Tsing’s work makes visible is that place, time, and specific histories of migration affect how Asian immigrants are positioned/position themselves in relation to racial structures in the U.S.

By articulating some of the changing structural forces acting on the Chinese community during the decades post-WWII, I challenge the idea that immigrant assimilation into whiteness is natural and inevitable. Key to my analysis is suburbanization, and the institutions associated with it: schools, homes, and the heteropatriarchal nuclear family. Building on critical race studies scholar Cheryl Harris’s concept of denial, I argue that access to the suburbs requires a denial of Chinese racial and cultural identity. This denial, although superficially a sign of “progress” towards white acceptance, is simply another in a series of denials of Chinese people, starting from the original denial of entry and the ability to become a citizen. However, despite the structural pressure to assimilate into white institutions, Chinese culture and community lingered, albeit in a different form. Pushed into the private space of the home, Chineseness for my interlocutors flourished through the gendered labor of women, mothers, and grandmothers.

A first important marker of the changes in Tucson was the construction of Amphitheater High School, Tucson’s second high school, in 1939. Amphi reflects the beginning of settlement outside of the concentrated downtown area, which had been served by Tucson High since the school opened in 1906. An Arizona Daily Star news article about the history of the Amphitheater school district describes the area as going from “ranching country to city suburb” (Welty 2012). This school as a place of whiteness came up in multiple of my interviews, despite the presence of a significant number of Hispanic students. Anna offered a perspective on the impact of this school, which she noticed with her three sons.

Anna: Harry Gin, for instance, he lived a half a mile from me. He had two daughters and I kept asking my sons: Why don’t you date these girls? [*Answering her own question:*] It depends on where you go to school. They went to Amphi [High School]....There weren’t any other Chinese kids, girls, that went to Amphi.

Scott Chan clarified: “[Amphi] was predominantly like half Caucasian, half Hispanic, very few African Americans in the ‘70s that went to Amphi.”

Scott’s sister Kathy remembered that when she was there, Amphi only had four Asians in the whole school. “One was me. One was my brother. One was my cousin and one was my mother’s friend. That’s all there was,” she said.

Although the school literally has the presence of people of differently racialized bodies, it is not like the multiracial space of the grocery store, which facilitated connection and reciprocity between people of color. Rather, it marked students as individuals in a system that facilitated white American values. What is significant here is not necessarily the low numbers of Chinese people in this school—Tucson’s Chinese population always represented a very small portion of the total population. Rather, what jumps out is this new sense of isolation present in Kathy and Scott’s (and Anna’s, through her observations of her sons) testimonies. Kathy addressed this directly by comparing her experience to that of her father and aunt.

“So in the early ‘40s or late ‘30s...there were a lot of [Asians] and they only went to one school [Tucson High] and so they didn’t have to integrate with the Caucasians,” Kathy said. “As opposed to the time period you’re looking at for me, we were spread out all over.”

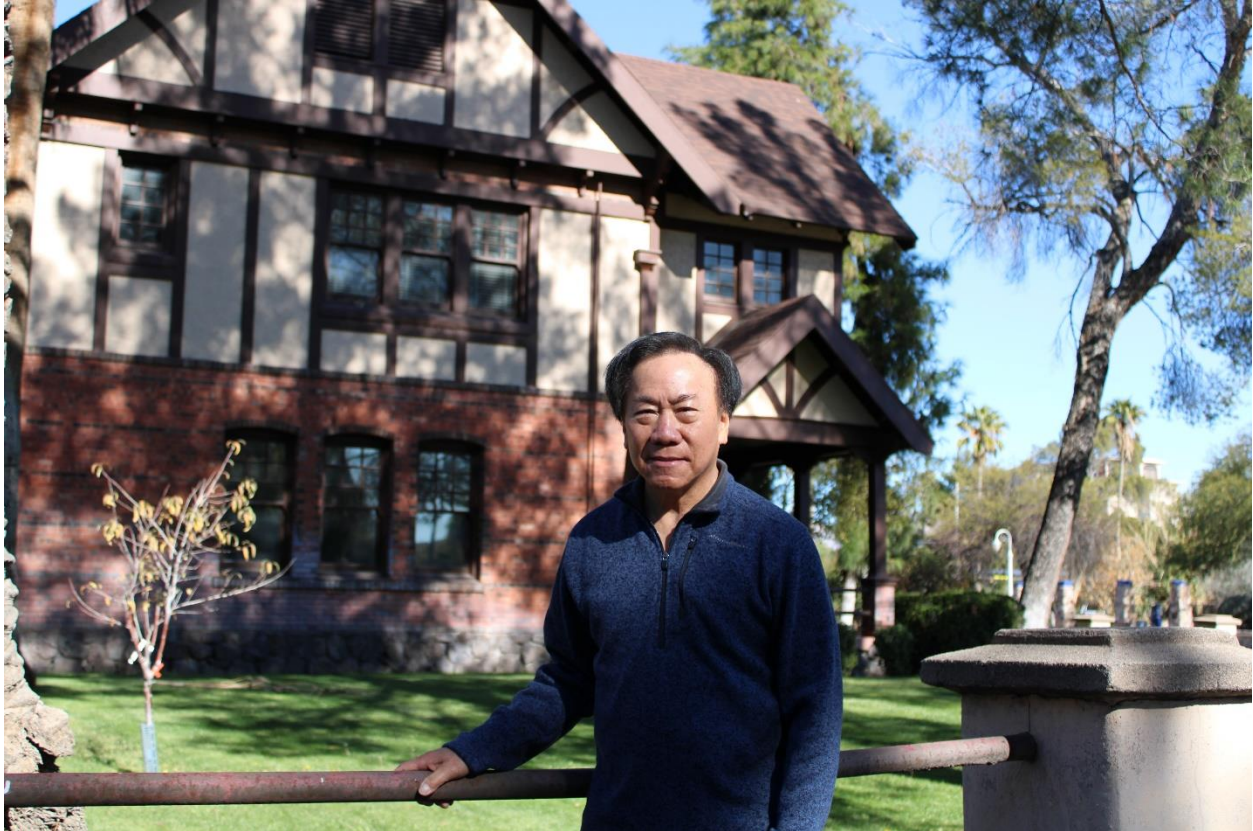
Kathy’s experiences indicate a changing spatial structure: that of the suburbs. As Kathy put it later, “It was hard for us growing up because Asians were spread out all over town.” The phrase “spread out all over,” which she used repeatedly throughout our conversation, contains a sense of movement that references both her present and also a past she is aware of but not a part of—when Asians were not, in fact, spread out all over town.

Allen Lew’s experience helps understand the gradual change in space that occurred in Tucson. Allen’s parents immigrated from China to the US in the 1930s and had him in 1947.

Allen: Well, all of us, like my wife—we were all born here in Tucson...We always all lived in the downtown area because all the stores were there...So my whole life, it was always near the downtown.

Allen never uses the word “Chinatown” to describe where he grew up. Rather, he uses “downtown” and “center of town.” On one level, this phrasing seems to indicate his manifold connections to where he grew up—the grocery stores, his education, the presence of this “we” in which he ensconces himself. Being in the center of town, he was in the center of his community. But on another level, his specific word choice seems to reference the creation of urban/suburban space. In contrast to Allen’s phrasing, Otero notes how tucsonenses called this area “la calle” (street) instead of “el centro” (the center) because it made no sense for them to distinguish between downtown, where one went to shop, and not-downtown, where one lived. Rather, Otero writes: “Residents stepped out of their homes and found themselves in the midst of retail activity” (Otero 2010, 28). This would have been Allen’s experience as well; however, he specifically uses the word “downtown,” which has a similar resonance as “el centro.”

I interpret the reason for this as the fact that Allen is telling me this story from his perspective as an adult, when he has already moved out of the center. Allen currently lives in a house in the foothills of the Tucson mountains west of the city. Thus, in indicating that he lived in “the center of town,” his story hints at the splitting of space into a center and periphery that occurred during his lifetime.



Allen Lew outside his childhood home in downtown Tucson, which now houses a law firm. Photo taken by author.

As a kid growing up in the ‘50s and ‘60s, Allen would be surrounded by the beginning of post-WWII suburbanization. In the 1950s, for example, Interstate-10 was built through Tucson, a process that destroyed Mexican neighborhoods on the west side of the city (Otero 2019, 10). Then in the ‘60s came the urban renewal project, which was chronicled in the “Meyer St.” section. What both of these projects show is how the creation of suburbia was an active, violent process. By displacing people of color or building infrastructure through their neighborhoods, racism was built into the development of suburban space. Thus, the suburbs, instead of being simply a neutral space, both reflected and produced a version of family and the community that was gendered, raced, and classed, which becomes apparent in Scott’s response to my question of what it meant to be “Americanized.”

Scott: By American I mean, like, you know, just like, you know, like, I remember the house that I eventually grew up in on Tyndell [St]. I mean, we had everything everybody else

had. And I guess maybe my thought was that other Asian families didn't have that... We just had a lot of things growing up. Like I'd go to my friend's house, and we had nicer things and my friends, my Caucasian friends, so I just I don't know, I just, that's kind of maybe what I mean by American dream.

Scott's answer links Americanness to property. In this case, icons of suburbia are what make him feel American: the home, and then, as a later example, "a big wooden console with the TV in the middle." Here, whiteness is not about skin color. It is about ownership of property and land (Harris 1993). Understanding this is important because it denaturalizes the idea that all Chinese people, just by being Chinese, were able to access whiteness and property. The racialization of Chinese people in Tucson as "white" during this period, and in America more broadly, was historically-specific and socially-constructed.

For those who had to deny their Chinese identity in the suburbs, or were the children of parents who did, access to whiteness came at a cost. Jonathan Lee was born in 1955 in Tucson. A biochemist by trade with an immaculately trimmed goatee, Jonathan is a third-generation Chinese American, just like his sister, Kiki Lee Strauss, who was introduced earlier. However, for Jonathan himself, "growing up in my mom and dad's house, it was the sense of non-ethnicity that was striking."

"They did not teach us or encourage us to speak Chinese. I think—it was the '60s. I think they were just trying to blend in and be Barbie and Ken as best they could. It just wasn't—it wasn't cool being ethnic in the early '60s," he said.

By comparing his parents to Ken and Barbie, Jonathan taps into a racialized, classed image—the dolls are white, heterosexual, and follow patriarchal gender norms. He suggests that his parents made a concerted effort to be associated with whiteness. This metaphor takes on a deeper significance in the context of national changes in the racialization of Chinese people that were happening during the Cold War period (Cheng 2006). Central to the process of Chinese people moving "out of Chinatown and into the suburbs," Cindy I-Fen Cheng argues, are Chinese women, who were able to enter the U.S. as wives of American soldiers due to an amendment to the 1945 War Brides Act (1078). These women helped re-characterize Chinese communities as fitting into the heterosexual suburban family ideal, as opposed to the "deviant" bachelor communities of the inner city: "As wife and mother, she made possible the cultural citizenship of the Chinese" (1080). Combining Cheng's analysis with Koshy's call to pay attention to the ability of minorities to access white institutions reveals how the suburbs function as a white institution. In order to gain access to the space of the suburbs, Chinese people had to fit into a heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear family ideal. Even this, however, is not enough to guarantee acceptance, as Cheng illustrates with the example of a Chinese family in San Francisco who

submitted their ability to live in a suburb to a neighborhood vote; despite attempts to frame themselves as a typical American family, they were denied entrance (Cheng 2006, 1083).

The framework of denial haunts Jonathan's anecdote. Cheryl Harris (1993) structures her analysis of the phenomenon of Black people "passing" for white around the idea of denial. Codifying whiteness into law, Harris argues, "devalue[d] those who were not white by coercing them to deny their identity in order to survive" (1744). Jonathan describes his experience at home as a lack of Chineseness, rather than the positive addition of whiteness or even of Americanness. "Non-ethnicity" calls attention to a haunting absence of Chinese identity in the home. This language of denial contains a sense of grief, mourning what was lost, even as Jonathan acknowledges what his parents needed to do in order to survive.

This sense of grief and estrangement becomes more apparent when contrasted to other narratives. Josephine (Josie) Gin Morgan was born in 1957, two years after Kathy. She grew up on the west side of the city and attended Pueblo High School, a school southwest of downtown and historically Hispanic/Latino, for reasons explained above. Today, Pueblo's student body is 89% Hispanic/Latino ("Pueblo" n.d.). In contrast to the experiences of those in the suburbs on the north side of Tucson, Josie did not have access to white suburban institutions such as the home and the school. She thus lacked the attendant pressure to assimilate. Her relationship to the Chinese community was very different—she described her memories of the "very tight community" that she experienced as a child tagging along with her three older brothers.

Josie: They were in high school in the '70s, so the rest of us were underaged. We'd just tag along. We were the little brothers, little sisters... We were going out at night, 20, 30 of us. We would play volleyball and have 50 people on each side. It was crazy, but it was so wholesome. After everybody finished working at the grocery stores and studied and did all that, then we would typically get together like after 10 o'clock at night... They all owned hot cars. Back then there was drag racing—and there's another clan of Gins, we're all from the same village, but a different lineage—and everybody would have these really hot cars and they would do drag racing.

Despite these fond memories, Josie also narrated an "ugliness" during her adolescence that left her feeling ambivalent and resentful toward the Chinese community. Her father died when she was six, so her mom grew up a widow. When she would ask for help from other families, they told her to go back to China.

"My mom was raising kids by herself," Josie said. "And the idea of not having a nuclear family, you know, there was a lot of stigma."



Josie Gin Morgan, right, at home with her mother, seated, and her child, Jacqueline Larriva. Photo taken by author.

The “ugliness” escalated to the point that Josie received an anonymous letter in Chinese the week before one of her brothers got married. Josie asked a friend from Hong Kong to read it to her and discovered it was “really slanderous to my mom.”

Josie: That was actually the time where I didn't want my identity to be Chinese because I said, Wow, this community can be really vengeful. And, and so for a long time I did step away. I ended up marrying a Hispanic man and kinda turned my back on my culture saying, It is so judgmental. It is so unfriendly to single women. It is so gender-biased.

It was only later in her life that Josie would resolve this conflict for herself, when she returned to university in her 30s to complete her undergraduate degree. Josie graduated from Pueblo at 16 and went to the U of A, but she quickly realized that her “west-side high school didn't prepare me for college.”

Josie: So I got put on probation, got disqualified, got kicked out of the university. I couldn't tell my mom. So I pretended I wasn't in school. I pretended I was at U of A, but really taking classes at Pima College. It took me 14 years to go back to school. During that break, I became a master florist. So I worked in flower shops. I was making \$5 an hour under the table, and I was raising a 7-year-old daughter. And, I remember thinking, you know, knowing people who graduated, and I said, I can do that.

When I went back to school, I did all the things right. Versus when I was incoming the first time, I did everything wrong. One of my good friends knew I was struggling. He knew the issues and identity that I was really having a problem with, that I either felt I had to embrace it with all its ugliness, or I had to step away.

And he said, “You know, Josie, you could pick different parts of your culture that you like and don't like.”

And I, I don't know why, it's common sense, but I sat there and went, “Wow.” That was just it. It turned on a light bulb. Because there was so much ugliness during my adolescence.

Even though she expresses a desire to deny her Chinese identity, her denial is not the denial required to assimilate into legal whiteness. Rather, it comes from the painful connections which bind her to the people that have both loved and hurt her. She learned to disidentify with her cultural identity. Disidentification, a term coined by queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, describes a method for marginalized subjects to negotiate a mainstream culture that often either excludes or stereotypes them (Muñoz 1999). Instead of fully identifying with or opposing their own culture, a disidentificatory gaze allows for a “recycling and rethinking encoded meaning” (31). In Josie's case, she realizes she can disidentify with the misogynistic aspects of Chinese culture while still holding on to the aspects that build her up. This complex grappling with identity is only possible because she is still positioned firmly within non-whiteness.

I'd like to end with a discussion of how the denied culture continues to linger on in the space of the home. For those who were able to move into the suburbs, the home became the only place where they experienced a sense of connection to their Chinese identity. Kathy recalled celebrating Chinese holidays at her grandmother's house, the same house that her grandmother built after someone spray-painted “No Chinks” on the side of a different house she was planning to buy.

“We had *huge* parties of relatives. It would just be our relatives, so if you can imagine a huge living room and a huge family room filled with banquet tables full of people. And they were all your relatives. And we had our own banquet tables and our own fold up chairs. We had so many, we had like probably 80,” Kathy told me. “But you know, we were lucky because that's what we had.”

Kathy's words complicate the notion of the home. For her, it was also a space where Chineseness could flourish, rather than just a place through which whiteness is reproduced. Instead of seeing this as a contradiction with what Scott and Jonathan have said, I see it as two

sides of the same coin. The home is a barrier—it divides public from private space. In this private space, the practice of Chinese culture becomes legitimate in a way that it no longer is in public. The home, in Neil Smith’s analysis, is a site of identity formation because it shields individuals from the public gaze (69). The identity being formed in Kathy’s grandmother’s home is a specific, gendered version of what was previously expressed in the public spaces of the grocery store or Chinese community centers. Chineseness has come to be a personal characteristic to be expressed in private, relying on the domestic labor of Kathy’s mother and grandmother. Quintana’s (2015) analysis of the similar cultural labor done by Mexican and Chinese women in LA shows how the intimacy and connection created by women through domestic labor was nonetheless “rooted in a larger neighborhood community that extended beyond the walls of their unit.” These private, domestic(ated) expressions of Chineseness, although structured by the limiting space of the home, also challenged the idea of an individualized, suburban house by serving as a community and cultural space.

A moment that I had with Kiki Lee Strauss really struck me. She repeatedly expressed not feeling very connected to being Asian or Chinese. As she put it, she didn’t “associate with being Asian that often,” especially since she’d moved to Colorado with her husband Tom, who is white. And yet, when her daughter recently had a child, Kiki needed to decide what she wanted her first grandchild to call her.

“I eventually did decide to be called Popo. I’m not sure. I don’t know—” she paused, “It felt right.”

In this moment, despite feeling little connection to being Chinese, Kiki chose to be called the Cantonese word for grandmother. This word reaches back into her family history, referencing the generations before her, the grocery store owners and their children, and what they had to do to survive. Premised on the intimate relationship of grandmother and grandchild, Popo is a trace of being otherwise that lingers underneath Kiki’s identification with white suburbia.

Conclusion

Too often we think of race as essential, static, and unchanging. But as this thesis shows, it is not so—race is historically and spatially specific. By showing how structures such as settler colonialism, racism, and suburbanization have formulated racial meanings in my hometown of Tucson, Arizona, I hope to reveal the constructed nature of what we often take for granted. This is important to understand not simply as an intellectual exercise, but also as a reminder that racial categorization, which ultimately upholds white supremacy, can change. What can be made can also be unmade, or challenged, or made differently.

This is not to imply that individuals can simply choose to be free from how they are racialized. As Harris (1993) points out in her analysis of “passing” in Black communities: “The danger of analyzing these issues only in terms of the choices of the groups or of their racism is that it erases the power of the social structure to engender these conflicts by linking the distribution of resources and the allocation of rights to racial identities” (180). Throughout this research, I have combined an analysis of my interlocutors’ relationship to their Chinese identity with an accounting of the broader structural forces flowing through and shaping the borderlands. And yet, I have also shown how my interlocutors relate stories of multiracial relationships that exceed settler-colonial relations, indicating that the process of creating racial meaning is also subject to the agency of everyday people.

Another key point I hope to emphasize with this research is that Tucson’s Chinese history is still alive and present, reverberating through the mediums of space and people. Take, for example, the Chinese Chorizo Festival, an annual celebration begun in 2022. Feng-Feng Yeh, a Tucson-born Taiwanese American fashion designer turned chef, is the creator of the festival, and I’ve profiled her for different news sources (Li 2023b, Li 2023c). The festival is a month-long series of events centered around Chinese chorizo, a version of the Mexican sausage that Chinese grocers would make to sell to their Mexican and Indigenous customer base.

Philip Don Jr., Kathy and Scott’s cousin, still uses his father’s recipe to make chorizo, which his family’s store began selling in the ‘70s when they converted the grocery into a deli to save costs. His father made chorizo using the meat that customers didn’t buy, adding spices and chili powder, and blending it with red wine.

The Chinese Chorizo Festival is just one part of the larger Chinese Chorizo Project, which aims to raise awareness about “the history of Chinese and Mexican immigrant solidarity,” Feng-Feng told me for one of the articles I wrote about her. She is currently working on a 15-foot mosaic sculpture of two sausage links, which symbolize the “two outcast communities” who formed a “symbiotic alliance” (“Mshb Sculpture” n.d.). In promoting the Chinese Chorizo Project, Feng-Feng emphasizes the solidarity and connection between Chinese and Mexican people, situating her project in the historical multiracial borderlands. The Chinese Chorizo Project is a racial project—it intervenes in a classification system where races are separate and distinct, which, as I’ve shown, is a system the U.S. government actively constructed through immigration laws and Chinese exclusion. Instead, the Chinese Chorizo Project remakes racial meaning from below, highlighting the shared past and futures of the Chinese and Mexican communities, and spotlighting the reciprocity and care that sustained the everyday people of Tucson.

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