

**Quarantining Chinatown: How Isolationist
Policy-Making Facilitated The Development
of A Chinese-American Community in San
Francisco**

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In 1901, Joseph J. Kinyoun, founder of the United States' Hygienic Laboratory, detailed his feelings on Chinese-Americans: "We can never expect to accomplish (...) with this race what we intend to do."¹ Kinyoun's statement not only highlights the motives of health officials across the United States to suppress and control the Chinese-American population, but the continued resistance by that same population against discriminatory health policy. As awareness of spreading plagues in America increased during the 19th century, Chinese immigrants were being scapegoated, quarantined, and deported — yet San Francisco's Chinatown, which housed over 45% of California's Chinese population in 1900, was able to develop its infrastructure and culture in the face of these obstacles.² Anti-Chinese sentiment on the basis of epidemiological health stunted the growth of San Francisco's Chinatown, inadvertently causing the formation of insular cultural groups largely developed outside of state government. These cultural groups became the backbone of Chinatown's growth, winning a slew of civic, social, and economic victories for Chinese-Americans throughout the early 20th century.

During the 19th century, the proliferation of diseases in the United States resulted in a systemic scapegoating of Chinese immigrants, representing a turning point in the American perception of the Chinese. Throughout the 1870s - 1890s, outbreaks of diseases like smallpox and syphilis were attributed to the growing Chinese population in San Francisco — most famously, Dr. Hugh Toland attributed "nine-tenths" of all syphilis cases in white men to Chinese prostitutes.³ Political cartoons like the "Three Graces," published in an 1882 edition of *The Wasp*, depicted "graces," or spirits, that hovered above Chinatown: leprosy, smallpox, and

¹ J. J. Kinyoun, M.D., quoted in W. H. Kellogg, M.D., "The Pathology and Bacteriology of Bubonic Plague," *Transactions of the Medical Society of California*, XXXI (California, 1901), 79.

² Melba E. Falck Reyes and Héctor Palacios, *El Japonés Que Conquistó Guadalajara: La Historia de Juan de Páez En La Guadalajara Del Siglo XVII* (Guadalajara, Jalisco, México: Universidad de Guadalajara: Biblioteca Pública del Estado de Jalisco Juan José Arreola, 2009), 43-56.

³ California Legislature, Special Committee on Chinese Immigration, *Chinese Immigration*, p. 103.

malaria.⁴ Such illustrations represented a growing belief that Chinese-Americans were the origin points for diseases that plagued San Francisco, and were therefore responsible for them as well. Furthermore, in response to an 1876 outbreak of smallpox, Dr. John Meares, the city health officer, claimed that the disease stemmed from “unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen” who had a “willful and diabolical disregard of our sanitary laws.”⁵ This attribution of Chinese residents in San Francisco as not only responsible for disease outbreaks, but intentionally skirting government health codes, would further build anti-Chinese sentiment in San Francisco by villainizing their moral characters.

Eventually, such a sentiment would extend beyond Chinese individuals, but to their livelihoods as well. The Workingmen’s Party, a national organization of laborers, held a particular antagonism towards Chinese laborers, as Chinese labor was considerably cheaper than white labor, and therefore facilitated workplace competition for white people. Following the 1879 mayoral election of the Workingmen’s candidate, Isaac Kallloch, the party published a report describing Chinese-manufactured products as “infected” because they were produced in “the filthiest holes imaginable.”⁶ In this way, workplaces in Chinatown, as well as their products, were pinpointed as breeding grounds for infection. Following the development of anti-Chinese sentiment on the basis of epidemiological misconceptions, there would be government-mandated efforts to destroy San Francisco’s Chinatown entirely: in 1900, city officials barricaded Chinatown, then campaigned for it to be burned to the ground.⁷ Such political pressures stifled

⁴ George F. Keller, “San Francisco’s Three Graces” (cartoon), May 26, 1882, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

⁵ San Francisco Board of Health, *Annual Report of the Board of Health of the City and County of San Francisco* (San Francisco, 1876–77), 14.

⁶ Workingmen’s Party, Memorial on Chinatown by an Investigating Committee of the Anti-Chinese Council, in Workingmen’s Party of California, *Chinatown Declared a Nuisance !* (San Francisco, 1880), 12-13.

⁷ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: a narrative history*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 139.

Chinatown's economic and cultural growth, not only presenting a series of obstacles unique to Chinese immigrants, but also prompting a community solution.

The shift against Chinese-Americans stunted the development of San Francisco's Chinatown because it destabilized businesses, displaced people, and limited the resources available to them. Fearing plagues originating from Asia, Californian health officials consistently isolated Chinatown from the rest of San Francisco. In 1899, in response to a potential plague in Hong Kong, health officials shut down Chinese-owned businesses and ordered all Chinese people who wanted to exit the city to submit for inoculation first — the shutdown lasted for one year.⁸ Such indiscriminate shutdowns on the basis of race denied Chinese-Americans the opportunity for financial stability and growth — even after shutdowns were lifted, white Californians remained wary of Chinese businesses. By economically hampering Chinese businesses, health officials also isolated them from their white counterparts, both as business partners and clients.

Furthermore, both in 1878 and 1883, authorities moved lepers living in Chinatown to the Twenty-Sixth street Lazaretto, under an 1876 amendment to the general police law that made it “unlawful for persons afflicted with leprosy to live in ordinary intercourse with the population of the state.”⁹ While the law did not explicitly name Chinese individuals as a target, it should be noted that according to an 1884 San Francisco Municipal Report, “Mongolian lepers” were intentionally separated from other sick people, and made up around 88% of the Twenty-Sixth street Lazaretto.¹⁰ Even if Chinese people agreed to follow foreign medicinal practices and procedures, they were often shut out of sanitation institutions altogether. Several years before

⁸ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: a narrative history*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 138.

⁹ Joan B. Traumer et. al., “The Chinese As Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905.” *California History* 57, no. 1 (1978): 75, doi: 10.2307/25157817

¹⁰ San Francisco Board of Supervisors, *San Francisco Municipal Reports for the Fiscal Year 1884-1885*, (San Francisco: 1885), 234.

1881, the Board of Health passed a resolution that closed the City and County Hospital to Chinese patients and instead assigned them to a separate building on the Twenty-Sixth Street hospital lot.¹¹ By entirely removing Chinese residents diagnosed with leprosy, as well as racially segregating them from white patients, Chinese people were rendered unable to receive the same level of municipal care as whites. A Chinatown frequently financially disrupted by the Board of Health and limited in access to resources like healthcare was difficult to develop economically as it was stifled by the state and city governments. Thus, Chinese-Americans organized themselves and took development into their own hands, forming groups outside of hostile government regulations.

As a result of the active suppression of healthcare and access to financial stability for Chinese Americans in the name of epidemiological health, localized organizations were formed to provide those resources and fight the discriminatory laws imposed by the San Francisco Board of Health. Associations modeled after secret societies in opposition to the Qing Empire, called the *tong*, provided basic legal, educational, and health services to Chinese immigrants, like helping them find jobs and pooling economic resources. Out of groups like the *tong*, the Chinese Six Companies were formed, who ruled over six district associations and provided much support to the development of Chinatown. The Chinese Six Companies lent money to Chinese workers, settled disputes, opened a Chinese-language school, maintained a census of residents in Chinatown, and helped send money back to the home villages of Chinese workers. Additionally, the Six Companies were vital to the cultural development of Chinatown, supporting joss temples and traditional Chinese funerals.¹² These socioeconomic and cultural developments, occurring outside the oppressive legislature of San Francisco health officials, symbolized a

¹¹ San Francisco Hospital Committee, *Mongolian Leprosy and Elephantiasis*, "Report of the Hospital Committee on Mongolian Leprosy," (San Francisco: 1885), 234.

¹² Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 86-87.

Chinese-American population improving their community via a return to tradition and culture-based unification.

Despite the benefits enabled by the organization of the Chinatown population, the evolution of the neighborhood's infrastructure was an uphill battle. In April of 1901, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors sought to build a hospital in Chinatown to address the occurrence of bubonic plague — the city auditor immediately declared such an appropriation of funds illegal, and thus the construction never occurred.¹³ Realizing the lack of access to healthcare, Chinese-Americans again turned to localized organizations for help. The result was the Tung Wah Dispensary, which employed both Western-trained physicians and Chinese herbalists and was entirely funded by the Six Companies.¹⁴ Securing access to healthcare that meshed traditional herbalism with Western medical practices signaled an alternative to the city-funded Twenty-Sixth street lot — in the dispensary, patients were cared for by members of their own community. Moreover, the Six Companies won a series of legal battles against the San Francisco Board of Health: In 1900, attorneys won the right for non-licensed Chinese physicians to attend autopsies, ended a city-mandated quarantine on Chinatown, and obtained a restraining order on the U.S. Marine Hospital following its ban on interstate travel for Asiatics.¹⁵ The success of the Six Companies in derestricting the autonomy of Chinese Americans exemplifies a causation between harsh restrictions on the Chinese and the development of local associations — winning civil liberties was evidently a priority for the organizations. The formation of a more unified cultural front in Chinatown meant that Chinese-Americans were not only able to organize

¹³ U.S. Government Printing Office, *A history of plague in the United States*, by Vernon B. Link, No. 392, Washington, D.C: 1955.

¹⁴ Joan B. Traumer et. al., "The Chinese As Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905." *California History* 57, no. 1 (1978): 85, doi: 10.2307/25157817

¹⁵ Ibid

a support system for one another despite oppressive policy, but actively win legal cases against anti-Chinese discrimination.

Attempts to suppress the civil rights and protections of Chinese-Americans during the 19th century by state health officials stifled the socioeconomic development of San Francisco's Chinatown. In pinpointing Chinese immigrants as directly responsible for outbreaks of plague in San Francisco, health officials built up the group as villainous and inherently diseased. Coupled with anti-Chinese labor sentiment, quarantines on both individuals and the whole of the community were imposed, as well as indiscriminate business shutdowns and travel bans. Yet the isolationism supplanted upon the community of Chinatown ultimately promoted the development of a structured, organized system of local associations that not only worked to offset existing suppression through a system of economic and cultural support, but actively fought discriminatory legal policy. Anti-Chinese sentiment and pressures against their very presence in America forced the Chinese to form a community culturally separated from a white Californian ideal; but as a result, Chinatown was able to expand apart from the rest of San Francisco for decades to come.

Appendix A



Keller, George F. *San Francisco's Three Graces*. Illustration. San Francisco: *The Wasp*, May 26, 1882. From Ohio State University, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum. <https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/immigration/images/san-franciscos-three-graces> (accessed 4/3/22).

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