

Chinese Historical and Cultural Project was founded in 1987, shortly after discovery of the Market Street Chinatown artifacts in 1985. Through a long process, the 400 boxes of artifacts recovered from the Market Street Chinatown were eventually brought to History San José, and then loaned to Stanford University for their archaeology program. We were so pleased because otherwise all those artifacts would still be sitting there, without being seen or touched.

City Beneath the City brings to the forefront that there were Chinese here in early San Jose. There were actually five Chinatowns in San Jose, and today there are none. This exhibition is, in a way, an extension of Chinese Historical and Cultural Project's work to promote education by displaying the culture and the history of the early Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans in Santa Clara Valley. Both at the Chinese American History Museum at History Park and in a travelling exhibit that is displayed in libraries and other public buildings throughout Santa Clara County, we are trying to share our culture and our history and the contributions we have made.

Anita Kwock, Technology Resource Teacher, San Jose Unified School District
President, Chinese Historical and Cultural Project

The French Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau once described urban spaces as “haunted.” More than present-day centers of commerce and industry, our cities must be experienced imaginatively through the stories and legends that metaphorically inhabit them. The streets of a city “offer to store up rich silences and wordless stories,” according to de Certeau. City Beneath the City is not an exhibition of objects from a lost city, but an exhibition of the stories these objects tell – past, present, and future. These relics speak in “rich silences and wordless stories” about the families, neighbors, and friends that once occupied San Jose's Market Street Chinatown.

While the spaces of any gallery or museum are primarily concerned with the objects on display, this exhibition also tells a story of absence. A porcelain leg, broken off from the body of a child's doll, is a poetic reminder of the fragility of childhood and the sting of its loss. The worn handle of a toothbrush conjures the absent body of its owner. Most of all, the exhibition of these objects underscores the absence of marginalized communities from the dominant narratives of Silicon Valley.

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Objects collapse time. Through archaeology, the unreachable past becomes tangible again. In this way, archaeology mitigates the fragility of cultural memory, recovering what we did not even know that we have forgotten. Yet archaeologists become habituated to our roles as mediators between past and present. The systematic, repetitive procedures used to gather evidence and analyze patterns can dull our sensibilities and distance us from the affective qualities of the objects we study.

This year-long collaboration between the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art and the Market Street Chinatown Archaeology Project has profoundly disrupted these archaeological routines. Both artifacts and archaeologists became the objects of artistic scrutiny. We began to notice things we had not seen before: the jagged topography on the edge of a porcelain shard; the shimmering patina on shattered window glass; the latent poetics of a soil sample label.

In this exhibition, Rene Yung explores the tension between the artifacts' pleasing aesthetic qualities and the troubling history that transformed a thriving community into an archaeological site. These objects – simultaneously fragile and durable – echo the struggles of Santa Clara County's early Chinese immigrants, who continued to rebuild their communities despite legal restrictions, racial discrimination, and direct violence. In reflecting on their persistence, we may feel hope in the midst of loss.

This new iteration of City Beneath the City also draws attention to the politics of its location at Stanford University. University co-founder Leland Stanford once described Chinese immigrants as “the dregs of Asia” and sponsored legislation to exclude them from California. Yet paradoxically, many of the residents of the Market Street Chinatown first arrived in California to work for Leland Stanford on the transcontinental railroad and on his many farms and ranches. The art and archaeology of the Market Street Chinatown prompt us to reflect on these and other silences in our own institutional history and practices.

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