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Overseas Chinese Archaeology

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Introduction

Since its beginnings in the Western USA in the late 1960s, Overseas Chinese archaeology (or archaeology of the Chinese diaspora) has developed from an uncoordinated collection of primarily descriptive site reports to a rapidly unifying, interdisciplinary, and international field employing sophisticated theoretical approaches in an increasingly contextual and comparative manner. Its significance lies in its potential for addressing themes related to migration, race and ethnicity, cultural persistence and change, and other topics of wider archaeological relevance.

Definition

Overseas Chinese archaeology focuses on material remains associated with individuals and communities of Chinese descent living abroad, typically in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century global population movements. It includes both first generation Chinese immigrants and their naturalized descendants. Studies have been undertaken from a range of theoretical perspectives, and there are currently no dominant research paradigms. To date, research is largely restricted to the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand but could include any country to which Chinese migrated over the past several hundred years or more. Generally excluded are sites not occupied by ethnic Chinese (broadly conceived) but where Chinese-manufactured objects, including coins and export porcelain, have been found. However, the field may encompass the influence of Chinese migrants and material culture on their non-Chinese neighbors and others with whom they interacted.

Field projects have explored a range of urban and rural contexts, site types, and features. They include industries such as logging, mining, dam and road construction, charcoal burning, fish canning, shrimp and abalone harvesting and processing, and market gardening, as well as stores, restaurants, laundries, boarding houses, gambling halls, temples, cemeteries, and cooking features, among others (Fig. 1). Sites are typically identified through historical records or the presence of one or more classes of imported Chinese consumer goods, including ceramic table and storage wares, opium paraphernalia, glass pharmaceutical and beverage bottles, coins, and gaming artifacts. Chinese merchants developed large-scale distribution networks for imported foods and other goods that reached even the most remote labor camps (Fig. 2). Consequently, Chinese sites have been comparatively easy to identify archaeologically, although direct

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Equation of objects with ethnicity remains interpretively problematic and risks overlooking Chinese-occupied sites that lack imported artifacts. While many studies have been explicitly archaeological, others have drawn together a range of archival and archaeological data to develop historical syntheses of individual regions or local communities. Detailed artifact studies have been conducted on Chinese ceramics, opium paraphernalia, coins, and faunal remains, and important work has also been done on standing architecture and in situ collections of objects recovered from such structures.

Historical Background

Overseas Chinese archaeology emerged in the USA in the context of heightened interest in civil rights, social history, multiculturalism, and ethnicity in the 1960s, along with the advent of legally mandated resource management archaeology. Early studies were conducted in the late 1960s and 1970s in the Western USA, including pioneering work on Chinatowns in California, Nevada, Arizona, and Idaho. Other projects were completed on railroad construction camps in California and Texas, a rural Chinese store and an industrial borax works in California, and a salmon cannery in Oregon. Most work was done in a resource management context, in which Chinese sites were not a self-conscious research objective.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Overseas Chinese archaeology developed into a distinct field of study in the Western USA marked by an increase in the volume and diversity of research, including sophisticated resource management studies and an increasing number of graduate theses (Voss & Williams 2008). Onset of this coalescence is marked by the founding of the Asian American Comparative Collection (AACC) at the University of Idaho in 1982 and publication of two comparative studies of ethnicity incorporating research from Chinese sites (McGuire 1982; Schuyler 1980). The first was an edited volume combining chapters on African and Asian American archaeology, while the second used archaeological data to develop a model of ethnic group formation and change rooted in boundary maintenance. The AACC is a research resource for archaeologists housing an extensive comparative collection of Asian artifacts commonly found on overseas sites plus a sizeable reference library (Fig. 3). It is overseen by volunteer curator Priscilla Wegars, who also edits the AACC’s quarterly newsletter.

Throughout this period, most projects continued to be driven by resource management imperatives that included large-scale urban redevelopment projects, although some academic institutions like the Universities of Idaho and Nevada undertook research-oriented excavations. Most studies also focused on descriptive summaries of archaeological findings, including functional artifact typologies. Major resource management projects were undertaken on historic Chinatowns in California, including San Francisco, Sacramento, Oakland, Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Jose, along with Chinatowns in several other states. Work was also done on a range of rural labor camps and related industrial sites across the West but typically on a much smaller scale. Since the 1990s, resource management and academic studies have grown exponentially in quantity and quality, including an expanding volume of published works and a large number of recent graduate theses. These recent developments will be discussed further below.

In Canada, archaeological research on the Chinese diaspora remains limited compared to the USA and is largely restricted to British Columbia and dominated by graduate student research. The most substantial work includes excavations at a Chinese store and society hostel in the gold mining town of Barkerville and an associated regional settlement survey of Chinese mining sites in the broader North Cariboo District (Fig. 4). Another major research project is a comparative study of Chinese and Japanese salmon cannery workers along the lower Fraser River. Substantial studies have also been done at a Chinese mining community and associated cemetery at Wild...
Horse Creek Provincial Historic Site, twentieth century urban cemeteries in Vancouver and Victoria, and the D’Arcy Island Leper Colony in the Gulf Islands. There have also been small-scale urban excavations in Vancouver, Victoria, and Nanaimo (Ross in press).

Research results are largely contained in unpublished reports and theses, although the 1980s and 1990s saw publication of major monographs on Chinatowns in Los Angeles, Riverside and Woodland, California, and Chinatowns (Felton et al. 1984; Great Basin Foundation 1987; Greenwood 1996), along with an edited volume on Overseas Chinese archaeology (Wegars 1993). Wegars’ volume addresses rural and urban contexts, work and leisure, analytical techniques, and comparative and theoretical studies. It ranges from local case studies focusing on archival records, rural dwellings and terraced gardens, ethnic boundary maintenance, and the presence of Chinese women, to comparative analyses of faunal assemblages and pioneering studies of opium paraphernalia and Asian porcelains. It concludes with a survey and critique of the field by Greenwood. These volumes synthesize large quantities of historical and archaeological data, including numerous individual studies of Chinese traditions and material culture. However, chapters are often compartmentalized rather than building toward an integrated picture of Chinese immigrant life.

Although addressing a range of interpretive themes, much early literature adopted an acculturation paradigm and subscribed to linear, mechanical models of cultural persistence and change that assumed a direct correlation between artifacts and culture. Based on the frequency of imported Chinese artifacts, many studies concluded that Chinese maintained their traditional culture, resisted acculturation, and insulated themselves in ethnic enclaves. Such resistance was interpreted as agency and ethnic boundary maintenance on the part of Chinese immigrants. This approach has been subject to internal critiques beginning in the 1980s (Praetzellis et al. 1987; Voss 2005; Wegars 1993). These critiques have also challenged views of Chinese immigrants as internally homogeneous, when they varied widely in terms of language, class, economic status, and cultural traditions. Subsequently, there has been a gradual interpretive shift toward cultural exchange, fluid and dynamic identities, and strategic adaptation and selective accommodation to local Euro-American culture in particular local contexts.

Mary and Adrian Praetzellis were among the first to argue in favor of a contextual approach (Praetzellis et al. 1987). Their innovative research results are largely contained in the broader discipline, largely because much of the literature is confined to unpublished reports and theses and remains underrepresented in peer-reviewed journals. This situation is changing and scholars have begun incorporating it into disciplinary syntheses and critical overviews of Overseas Chinese Archaeology.

Key Issues and Current Debates

Studies of the Chinese diaspora bear on numerous core themes in historical archaeology and represent a valuable counterpoint to more established scholarship on the African and European diasporas (Voss & Williams 2008). Such themes include migration, racialization, identity, cultural persistence and change, capitalist economics and labor relations, gender and sexuality, urbanization, and material consumption, among others. For most of its history, however, Overseas Chinese archaeology has had little impact on the broader discipline, largely because much of the literature is confined to unpublished reports and theses and remains underrepresented in peer-reviewed journals. This situation is changing and scholars have begun incorporating it into disciplinary syntheses and critical overviews of Overseas Chinese Archaeology.
topics like racialization (Orser 2007) and material consumption (Mullins 2011). Asian American archaeology was also spotlighted in a 2004 thematic issue of the SAA Archaeological Record focused on ethnicity.

A 2008 thematic volume of *Historical Archaeology* offers a sampling of the research being done on Chinese sites in the USA, along with an updated bibliography of Overseas Chinese archaeology, a list of international organizations, and an introduction to the AACC (Voss & Williams 2008). The paper by Voss and Allen provides an overview of Overseas Chinese history, historiography, and archaeology and offers critiques of the field and prospects for the future. The volume concludes with critical reflections on the field by Mullins and Yu from an archaeologist’s and a historian’s perspective. Other papers address immigrant responses to anti-Chinese movements; scales of analysis in Overseas Chinese communities; the lives of a solitary Chinese seaweed gatherer, California farm workers, and Chinatown residents in San Bernardino, California and Deadwood, South Dakota; an urban Chinese American cemetery in Portland, Oregon; and a plantation cemetery in Hawaii. A particularly groundbreaking paper is Williams’ gendered approach to interpreting material culture used by the predominantly male overseas Chinese population rooted in multiple, competing discourses of masculinity. His work points to the need for a more explicitly gendered approach to the lives of Chinese migrants.

In his contribution, Mullins cautions that ghosts of linear and universal models of acculturation still haunt the literature along with a somewhat static and bounded (essentialist) view of Chinese culture, despite increasing recognition of ethnic identities as fluid and context dependent. He notes that the popular “accommodation” model of culture change differs markedly from the one adopted by archaeologists of African America, rooted in issues of power and inequalities across the color line. He argues that greater attention to the role of racism and race-based exclusion and inequality is needed in archaeological interpretations of overseas Chinese. Furthermore, the overwhelming focus on migrants’ agency and resistance to dominant ideology risks ignoring structural conditions constraining individual choice. Finally, Mullins cautions against overemphasizing the “strange and unusual” aspects of Chinese culture, including opium pipes, Asian ceramics, and gaming pieces, in ways that reify ethnic distinctions and stereotypes (Fig. 5).

In the same volume, Voss and Allen note that most archaeologists studying Overseas Chinese sites have little or no Chinese language training, and few take advantage of the full range of Chinese documents locally or in the homeland. Furthermore, comparative archaeological studies of nineteenth and twentieth century sites in China are rare or nonexistent. They advocate for an overall approach that counters the lingering tendency to perceive Chinese communities as bounded and insular. Such an approach should focus on the interplay within and between ethnic and racialized populations and explore the role of cultural practices in the ongoing negotiation of fluid communities and identities in particular historical contexts, in the way that Praetzellis et al.’s (1987) and Lydon’s (1999) pioneering research does.

Studies increasingly demonstrate that, although they often lived in segregated communities and maintained aspects of homeland culture, Chinese migrants also combined inherited and adopted objects and practices and developed relationships with their non-Chinese neighbors, while maintaining distinct ethnic identities. Adopted elements include drinking and dining habits, medicinal remedies, smoking, gaming, and clothing (Fig. 6). Sometimes this involved significant changes to traditional cultural practices but also reuse and recontextualization of non-Chinese objects and behaviors in unique ways. In fact, evidence of non-Chinese artifacts and behaviors has been documented archaeologically from the beginning. However, under the acculturation paradigm, it was largely ignored or rationalized as a product mixed assemblages or as limited adaptation born of necessity (Voss 2005).
An important recent development, inspired by Asian American studies, is the emergence of comparative studies within a transnational and diasporic paradigm. This approach recognizes the significance of multiple simultaneous physical and psychological connections and identities migrants maintain between home and host countries and with Overseas Chinese communities elsewhere. In Voss and Williams (2008) and in her dissertation, Kraus-Friedberg adopts a transnational approach to interpreting Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino plantation cemeteries in Hawaii. She argues Chinese migrants constructed unique local identities rooted in both home and host countries by adopting and modifying native Hawaiian burial practices. Likewise, Ross’ (in press) comparative study of Chinese and Japanese salmon cannery workers in British Columbia develops an explicitly diasporic and transnational interpretive approach and demonstrates that migrant identities and consumer habits were influenced by a range of factors at the local, regional, and international levels.

Increasing attention has also been directed to Overseas Chinese cemeteries and funerary rituals, including cultural persistence and transformation, regional origins of particular rituals, the importance of feng shui, the practice of exhuming and returning remains to the homeland, and bioanthropological studies of human remains (Fig. 7). Work has involved excavation, along with analysis of spatial organization and grave markers, emphasizing the retention of Chinese death rituals and the timing and manner with which they were combined with local Euro-American practices (Chung & Wegars 2005).

A major priority of several recent Chinatown projects has been community involvement and collaboration between disciplines and institutions, including universities, museums, cultural organizations, government agencies, and resource management firms. One of the best examples is the Market Street Chinatown Archaeological Project, directed by Barb Voss at Stanford University, focused on analyzing and publishing a collection of artifacts from San Jose’s Chinatown originally excavated in a resource management context in the 1980s.

Another increasingly important component of Overseas Chinese archaeology is self-reflexive studies that critically examine the nature of the field in terms of its objectives, standpoints, and agendas, along with biases, power relationships, and the kinds of research questions scholars are asking (or not asking) (e.g., Wegars 1993; Voss 2005). For example, Fong (2007) explores the role of historic stereotypes of Chinese Americans in the development and current practice of Overseas Chinese archaeology.

Similar disciplinary critiques have been offered in Australasia.

A survey of graduate theses over the past decade indicates a range of current research foci, including acculturation and adaptation, intercultural encounters, material culture preferences, social landscapes and relations, skeletal biology, individual and community identity, globalization, technological change, racialization and discrimination, transnationalism and diaspora, material consumption, and the role of voluntary organizations.

Outside North America, substantial research has been done in Australia and New Zealand. Much pioneering research in Australasia focused on goldfields in heritage management contexts and was more a product of an interest in mining sites and landscapes than an explicit interest in Chinese heritage (Lawrence & Davies 2005). The earliest Overseas Chinese archaeology was conducted by Ritchie (1986) at a series of Chinese mining-related sites on New Zealand’s Otago goldfields from the late 1970s to mid-1980s in conjunction with hydroelectric development. His dissertation and publications contain a wealth of valuable data on Chinese sites and material culture. Likewise, early work in Australia focused on a Chinese market garden on the Palmer River goldfield in northern Queensland. Since Ritchie’s studies, only limited archaeological research has been done on Chinese sites in New Zealand, including a series of regional surveys and large-scale excavations at...
Lawrence Chinese Camp in the Otago region. Mining has remained a prominent focus in Australia, comprising regional surveys and excavation since the 1980s, including Smith’s (2006) work on Chinese regional settlement systems in New South Wales.

However, increasing urban archaeology in the 1990s uncovered sites associated with Chinese immigrants in neighborhoods of Sydney and Melbourne (Lawrence & Davies 2011). Since then, Overseas Chinese archaeology in Australia has become increasingly research oriented and diverse both thematically and in terms of site types investigated, ranging from market gardens to fish-curing sites. Studies have addressed issues of social and economic organization, hierarchical settlement patterns, trade networks, consumption patterns, comparisons between urban and rural life, relations with non-Chinese, and religious beliefs and rituals. Particular classes of Chinese sites and features have been the focus of considerable attention as central places in Chinese physical, social, and ritual landscapes, including temples, cemeteries, and stone ovens used to prepare communal meals. Themes include the role of feng shui in the location and orientation of sites and structures, architectural and stylistic analysis of temples, types and uses of ovens, and the role of all of these features in settlement networks.

As in North America, most early work was done in conjunction with resource management and emphasized descriptive and typological studies of Chinese sites and material culture. Most studies also adopted theoretical frameworks emphasizing acculturation and situational adaptation, largely arguing in favor of cultural persistence. However, there has been increasing realization that objects like Chinese and European ceramics were embedded in complex trade networks, social strategies, and relations of power within and beyond the Chinese community. A number of studies have shown how Chinese combined traditional dining and drinking habits with those of the host society, demonstrating a complex combination of continuity and change. For example, like the Praetzellises in Sacramento, Muir (2008) argues that Chinese in Melbourne used English ceramics consciously as a means of gaining access to opportunities in a white-dominated society, and use of Chinese ceramics had as much to do with obligation and reciprocity as a desire to maintain traditional diet.

A landmark work in the region was Lydon’s (1999) study of Chinese in the Rocks neighborhood of Sydney, replacing acculturation with a model of cultural entanglement and exchange, and of bounded and static ethnicity with multiple fluid and competing identities. Lydon explored the role of material objects in colonial encounters between Chinese immigrants and those of European descent. In her examination of cultural exchanges between these groups, objects and material behaviors comprise a form of communication that draw on elements of both cultures, which she refers to as “pidgin English.”

The fluidity of identity means that inherited and adopted objects and practices can be complementary and immigrants can hold multiple simultaneous identities as both Chinese and Australian. As part of her study, she also offered a detailed overview and critique of the field in North America and Australasia.

Since the 1990s, scholars and heritage organizations in Australia have developed a series of studies of Overseas Chinese heritage resources. These include a thematic survey of Chinese sites in the country that comprised a historical overview, an annotated bibliography and a state-by-state analysis of recorded sites and investigations, plus a national database of sites and a guide for finding and assessing Chinese heritage places (Casey & Ritchie 2003). Unlike the USA, Overseas Chinese archaeology in Australasia has had a significant influence on the larger discipline with respect to themes like race and ethnicity and is discussed in depth in Lawrence and Davies’ (2011) recent overview of historical archaeology in Australia. Likewise, there has long been a close relationship between archaeologists, historians, museum personnel, and community members, including joint conferences and publications. One such conference resulted in a thematic volume of Australasian Historical Archaeology on Overseas Chinese.
archaeology in Australia and New Zealand (Casey & Ritchie 2003). Besides an overview of the field, it includes papers on identifying Chinese alluvial mining and other sites, along with studies of Chinese ceramics, temples, cemeteries, and a summary of Chinese archaeological sites, artifact repositories, and archives in North America and Australasia.

Future Directions

To date, most research on Overseas Chinese sites remains centered on the Western USA and Canada, and similar regionalism exists in Australasia. There is considerable need for expansion into other regions and countries in the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Africa where Chinese migrants settled. There is also need for comparative studies of Chinese communities in a range of contexts and with other Asian and non-Asian diasporas and ethnic groups. Detailed comparisons between North America and Australasia would aid in understanding the relationship between local circumstances and broader international patterns of diasporization. The field would also benefit by including research on the Asian diaspora more broadly, including migrants from Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

Material culture studies have focused primarily on descriptive typologies, and much less attention has been granted to the cultural origins, shifting meanings, and social and economic contexts in which these objects were produced, marketed, and used. More work is also needed on materials analysis like elemental characterization to refine our understanding of the regional origins, manufacturing technologies, datimg, and distribution networks of ceramics, bottles, and other artifacts commonly found archaeologically (Fig. 8).

As the field matures, it is necessary to continue pursuing collaborative studies with local communities, organizations, and institutions, and with scholars in related disciplines, as active participants in research design, methods, interpretation, and dissemination of results. Research must also integrate oral history, archival research using Asian language sources, and recent developments in Asian diaspora studies with the results of archaeological analysis. For the field to maintain contemporary relevance, archaeologists must be increasingly self-reflexive about the assumptions and agendas underlying their research, along with the interests it serves and its implications for living communities. Of particular value would be development of relationships with scholars in China to pursue archaeological and ethnohistorical research on everyday life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such data would provide a more nuanced context for interpreting overseas sites similar to ongoing work in Africa and Ireland, not only as a model of life prior to emigration but to understand changes influencing transnational migrants maintaining ongoing relationships with the homeland.

In the 2008 thematic volume of Historical Archaeology, Voss and Allen argue that Overseas Chinese archaeology is still an emerging field and faces three major challenges to its further development. They include a continued need to (1) shift from descriptive reporting to problem-oriented research that addresses pluralistic, multiethnic sites and issues of power and race, (2) move away from acculturation and develop alternative models of intercultural contact that account for complex relationships between immigrants and the host society, and (3) overcome the Orientalist tendency to draw fundamental, stereotypical distinctions between Eastern and Western culture that homogenize variability. To meet these objectives, the authors call for research that is multistranded, multisited, multilingual, multi-scalar, and multidisciplinary. These five “m’s” encapsulate the future of the field, which is poised to make a major impact in historical archaeology and the broader discipline as a whole.

Cross-References

- African Diaspora Archaeology
- Australasia, Historical Archaeology of
- Canada, Historical Archaeology of
References


Further Reading


Agency, City of San Buenaventura by Greenwood and Associates, Pacific Palisades, CA.


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**Fig. 1** Reconstructed Chinese laundry, Barkerville, British Columbia

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**Fig. 2** Cabinets of imported merchandise in a reconstructed Chinese store, Burnaby Village Museum, British Columbia
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**Fig. 3** Chinese artifacts in the Asian American Comparative Collection, University of Idaho

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**Fig. 4** Chee Kung Tong benevolent society hall, Barkerville, British Columbia
Overseas Chinese Archaeology, Fig. 5 Chinese gaming pieces recovered from a salmon cannery near Vancouver, British Columbia

Overseas Chinese Archaeology, Fig. 6 Chinese and non-Chinese kitchen wares in a reconstructed Chinese home, Barkerville, British Columbia
Overseas Chinese Archaeology, Fig. 7 Chinese cemetery in Hilo, Hawaii

Overseas Chinese Archaeology, Fig. 8 Chinese medicine bottles recovered from a salmon cannery near Vancouver, British Columbia