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Clement Street

A transect of change

Chinese are leaving the Chinese city of San Francisco at the very moment that San Francisco has become, spectacularly, America's most important Chinese city, with all the political prestige and potential pitfalls that ascendance implies.

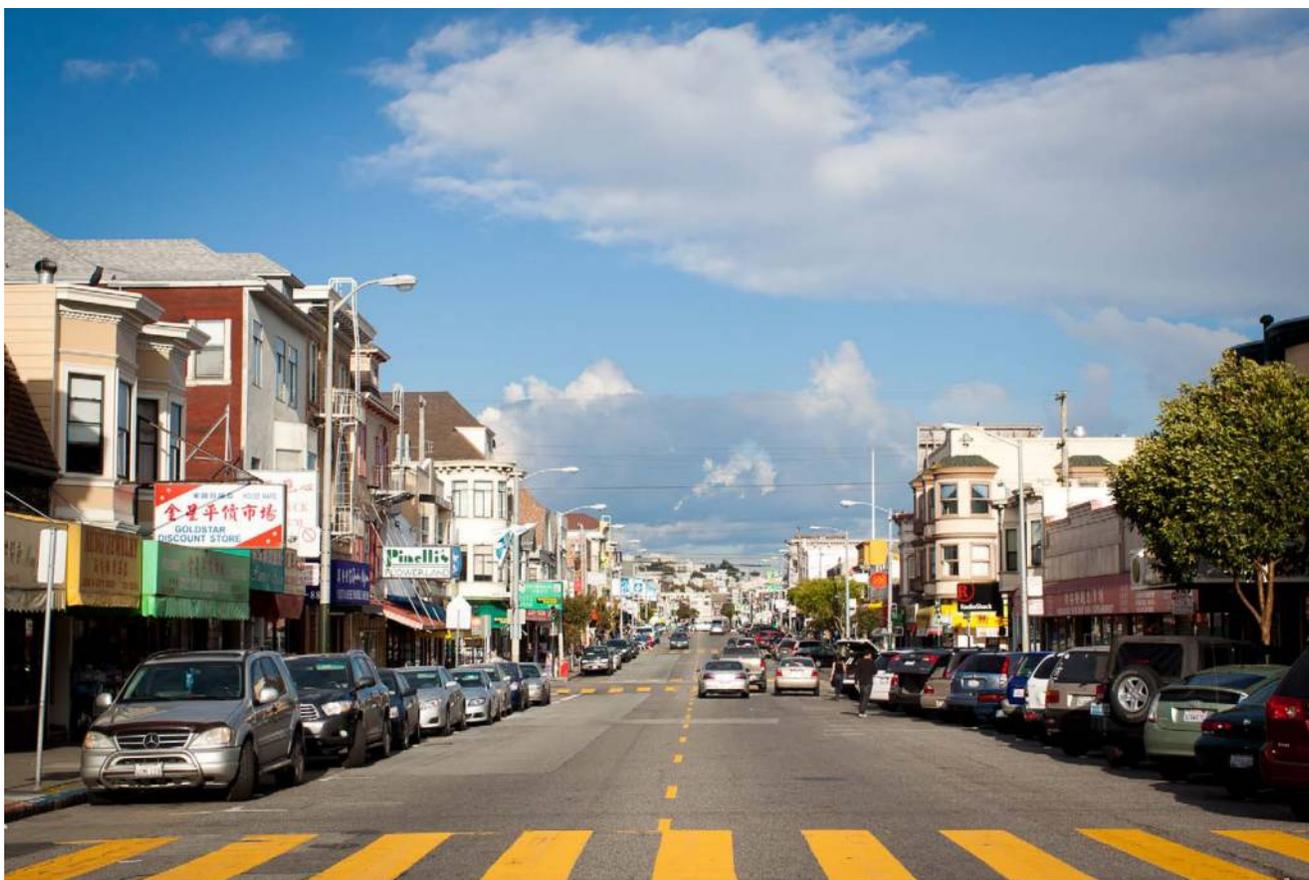
Read ethnically or racially: San Francisco resembles Gold Mountain, the city of Chinese immigrant legend and myth. Read economically: San Francisco is becoming a city of new wealth, no longer a city for the middle class and those poorer, regardless of race—and as the recent FBI investigation of Senator Leland Yee and alleged Chinatown mobster “Shrimp Boy” Chow makes clear, illicit money is no stranger to politics in the new Chinese city.

In stories that the city's natives tell about what is happening, there is always a new landlord or a consortium of landowners scheming to evict long-term tenants from apartments or shops, to make room for tenants who can pay rents that are three or four hundred percent greater. The new landlords are not interested in making San Francisco a more Chinese city. Their interest is in making their buildings into homes for tenants who can pay big money.

The irony is that as Chinese buyers acquire more property in San Francisco, it is often the Chinese American tenants who are taking a hit. In this new Chinese city of San Francisco, also a hipster city, one sees more white young people and fewer small Chinese shops and shopkeepers that cater to working-class Chinese.

Consider Clement Street in the city's middle-class Richmond District. Clement Street is losing its Chinese character, even as the streets are full of the city's Chinese, young and old. A Chinese Vietnamese immigrant, known along Clement Street as “Big Sister,” is planning to close her Quan Bac Restaurant on nearby Geary Street. The good reviews on Yelp are the least of it. The crowds, particularly at lunchtime, happily

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Photograph of Clement Street by Tito Perez.

slurping pho, cannot dissuade her from leaving San Francisco for Daly City. “Too expensive, losing too much money,” she tells a visitor.

From its Gold Rush beginnings, brash San Francisco—wide open to every sort of outsider—has maintained a special admiration for and a deep anxiety toward the Chinese. In the 1850s, San Francisco mayor John Geary could praise Chinese work habits—but it was those same work habits that caused the Irish immigrant nativist Denis Kearney to parade through the Gold Rush city, gathering resentments, when the economy grew bad. His slogan to the rabble band: “The Chinese must go.” When the economy turned robust, Kearney faded away. But just a few years later, the city named Phelan Avenue, which now borders City College, after a notorious anti-Chinese mayor.

Quan Bac’s Big Sister says today that her garbage bill has just doubled. “Now they want to increase the minimum wage to fifteen dollars! Forget it!” She is applying for a job with the city; she hopes that maybe she will find work as

a janitor at the airport. “My sister works at the airport, and she just bought a house in South San Francisco.”

In the frontier city, the Chinese were restricted to Chinatown. They were preyed upon by other immigrant groups, such as the Australian toughs called “Sydney Ducks.” A hundred years later, it became a joke in San Francisco that “Chinatown” was spreading to neighborhoods to the west and the south of downtown. Clement Street in the Richmond district, twenty years ago, became a Chinese street. Now it is becoming less and less Chinese as San Francisco becomes more and more reshaped by mainland Chinese money.

Americans have never quite been able to get a fix on the Chinese. Local nativists knew what they thought of Mexicans, Filipinos, Japanese (during WWII), and Russians. But what about the Chinese example? Were they the model minority (for working so hard) or were they unfair to native-born Americans (by working so hard)—familial and entrepreneurial at the same time?

San Francisco is now the great American Asian city. But the capital city of Asian America is becoming too expensive for many Asians.

In Pacific Books and Arts, a small shop nestled next to the larger, well-known Green Apple Bookstore on Clement, Mr. Li, a small man, a scholar of an almost monk-like disposition, says that soon his store will be closing. This is in itself not news—the Internet has succeeded in making fewer serious readers, and those readers who survive want to buy their books online.

Mr. Li's store pride was its ability to import books from Taiwan. Young people and old people alike came to the store. His store will soon be put out to lease, the sixth storefront in the neighborhood to go dark, even as rents are going up all over the city.

In genteel Pacific Heights drawing rooms, not so long ago, there was talk of a coming takeover of “their” city by Asians generally and the Chinese particularly. “Sampan in the harbor,” genteel people said distastefully (the word “sampan” comes from the original Hokkien term for boats, *sam pan*, meaning three planks). Nowadays, with the dawning of the Chinese century, nothing is so common in San Francisco as the literal marriage of the non-Chinese city with Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants. Doctors marry scientists; a tech millionaire marries another tech millionaire. Facebook billionaire and San Francisco resident Mark Zuckerberg marries longtime sweetheart, Chinese American doctor Priscilla Chan.

At Chapeau, a lively French bistro owned by a Frenchman and his Chinese American wife, there are crowds every night. Up the block at Citikids, a Chinese family-owned store that has sold strollers and every sort of baby-related accessory, is closing. Mothers-in-law, checkbooks in hand, could quiz the salesclerks in Mandarin or Cantonese. But a new generation shops in box stores or online. Soon Ace Hardware will move into the space because Ace Hardware lost its lease up the block.

Today, the city's mayor is Chinese American, as is the head of the Board of Supervisors. Four others on the board are Chinese Americans. The president of the school board is Chinese American. Asian Americans occupy leadership

positions in virtually every level of the city's political family and, with 18 percent of its registered voters, represent the single most important voting bloc in this Democratic city.

In the mid-1980s, as corporate titans such as Bank of America and Standard Oil moved their headquarters out of San Francisco's downtown, city stewards bemoaned the shrinking future. “Carmel by the Bay” was the prediction—a cute parody of a city where tourists would come to buy trinkets at Chinese shops or eat chop suey at Grant Avenue restaurants.

Today, the Chinese American/Asian American political ascendance coincides with the city's ascendance as one of the most desirable places to live on the globe—to which the influx of technology companies and their legions of tech workers attest. It is also now one of the costliest. Rent increases alone outstrip those of any other city in the country—already triple the national average, as of December 2013. And now that the city is the far-northern outpost of Silicon Valley, its income gap is among the widest in the country.

What city leaders in the 1980s could not have predicted is that the very Chinese American merchants and shopkeepers whose neon signs they worried were transforming San Francisco into one big Chinatown are themselves slowly being squeezed out of the new Asian city. City Hall was quick to respond when the face of skyrocketing rent evictions under the Ellis Act became that of 73-year-old Mrs. Gum Gee Lee and her husband, who had lived in the same apartment with their disabled son for over thirty years. City Hall is now pressuring for a new state law that will prevent speculators from buying up apartment buildings, kicking out tenants, and flipping the units for sale. But commercial rents are totally vulnerable to free market forces—there is no rent control for such properties. As the owners and operators of 40 percent of the city's small businesses, Asian Americans are foremost among those taking the hit.

Last year a farmer's market sponsored by the Agricultural Institute of Marin from across the Golden Gate landed on one end of Clement Street. With city approval, the market closed off part of the busy street to cars on Sundays so that a few dozen vendors could introduce sustainable honey, vegan sausages, artisan nondairy cheeses, and organic vegetables to the mix of Chinese meat and produce stores. At one organic produce stand, three organic garlic cloves sold for \$5, basil leaves sold for \$8, and a bunch of organic bananas went for \$11.

Down the street at a Chinese produce store that spills out to the sidewalk, these same items cost a few dollars less. But price differentials did not deter the hip shoppers flocking to the street market to buy. "I'm willing to pay more for organic produce that supports responsible farming practices," explained one customer, incredulous that anyone would ask. Nor, she added, did she feel comfortable buying from an "Asian" store where she didn't know where the food came from.

Further down Clement, new clothing stores and coffee shops with free Wi-Fi vie for customers with the old Chinese bakeries and noodle shops. Last year, a harbinger of the city's laid-back youth culture—a parklet—replaced scarce street parking with outdoor cafe-style seating in front of a new bakery specializing in designer cupcakes.

No new demographic data has emerged to update 2010 Census figures on how the city's population is changing. Public school figures have traditionally failed to capture white population statistics because 25 percent of white

parents send their children to private schools. But one recent trend that the school system *has* spotlighted is a progressive decline in the number of births to Asians and a steady increase in the number of white births. "The percentage of births that were to white mothers living in San Francisco increased substantially between 1980 and 2008—from 29 percent in 1990 to 41 percent in 2008," according to a recent report. "The number of white births has increased more than births from other ethnicities."

Middle- and lower-income Chinese Americans may be responding to the city's affordability crisis by having fewer babies or by moving to the suburbs. But in an equally potent trend for the city's future, overseas Chinese investment activity in San Francisco's real estate is at a fever pitch, according to a *San Francisco Chronicle* report on the Chinese international property website Juwai.com.

"In San Francisco, power is like hot sand," observed a long-time politician in the city. "You can try as hard as you can to hold onto it, but sooner or later it will slip through your fingers." And so it has been for many groups that have come to San Francisco as immigrants. That was the story for the Irish, Italians, and African Americans.

What no one doubts in San Francisco—in either the corridors of power or in the small shops along Clement Street—is that the city is now the great American Asian city. What we are just learning is how economics trumps race or ethnicity. The capital city of Asian America is becoming too expensive for many Asians. **B**