Men of Tang among Fanren
Chinese Self-Representation in Los Angeles, 1860–1895

ABSTRACT Scholars have chronicled the racialization of American Chinese and the trailing consequences for local racial hierarchies and national immigration policy. In this essay, I instead explore how American Chinese understood themselves in terms of race, and how they reckoned other Angelenos’ social identities. This is the first step in a necessary effort to broaden our sense of Chinese immigrants as subjects rather than objects when we address issues of race and history during the nineteenth century. Attempting to piece together an American Chinese racial worldview, this essay tacks back and forth between several bodies of published scholarship and archival research focused on Chinese legal activism and testimony in Los Angeles during the 1870s and 1880s. Immigrants from the Pearl River Delta left a place where boundaries among local groups had become racialized even as most locals held similar, categorically negative, racialized views of European-descended people. American Chinese, like others in the broad Pacific Chinese diaspora, carried with them to North America specific institutions that nurtured the maintenance of a variegated racial landscape. I argue that although American Chinese in Los Angeles remained connected to these racial identities on multiple levels, they nevertheless built economic and social relationships across this racial divide. KEYWORDS: American Chinese, Race, Transnationalism

THE POPULATION of Los Angeles’s Chinese community grew from just twenty-nine to more than twelve hundred between 1861 and 1890. Like American Chinese in other cities along the Pacific coast, Chinese Angelenos participated in vigorous contests regarding space, society, economy, and law with their neighbors. In Los Angeles, they did so within an already polyglot society that included indigenous, Mexican, European, African, and intercultural residents. Los Angeles’s Chinese made their homes in a de facto segregated and densely populated district just east of the main plaza, where they and their landlords subdivided once-sprawling Spanish- and Mexican-era adobe townhomes. Despite an anti-Chinese massacre perpetrated by European and Mexican Americans in 1871, the city’s Chinese population continued to grow rapidly. Indeed, Chinese Angelenos played critical roles in Los Angeles’s social and spatial history during the second half of the nineteenth century—as merchants, cooks, launderers, domestics, sex workers, farmers, parents, and
community builders. However, no research has yet fully captured how Chinese Angelenos understood themselves as agents in this history.²

Scholars have chronicled the racialization of American Chinese and the trailing consequences for local racial hierarchies and national immigration policy.³ The paucity of Chinese voices in the archive means that such works, however excellent, retain Chinese as objects rather than subjects. In this essay, I ask how American Chinese understood themselves in terms of race, and how they reckoned other Angelenos’ social identities. In doing so, I take up historian Madeline Hsu’s call to “place migration and migrants—with their complicated sets of negotiations, multilayered realities, and multidirectional orientations—at the center” of the scholarly agenda.⁴ Piecing together an American Chinese racial worldview presents substantive challenges.⁵ There are few places in which to locate Chinese voices, and when those voices come forth it is almost always in translation, and those translations are often mediated in a manner that strips away the very nuances that would facilitate an analysis of Chinese racial worldviews. In an effort to make some progress, this essay tacks back and forth between several bodies of published scholarship and archival research focused on Chinese legal activism and testimony in Los Angeles during the 1870s and 1880s.

Wanting for ample prima facie evidence of American Chinese subjectivity, I begin with a review of scholarship on race in late imperial China. Since an overwhelming majority of American Chinese hailed from seven counties within the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong, I zero in on that region’s social topography during a tumultuous time of economic crises, civil war, and European imperialism. Although Chinese migrants to the Pacific coast did not directly export complete community structures, the techniques on which they relied for crafting social identity and defining its boundaries traveled with them and influenced the communities migrants made on the farther shore. After triangulating the meaning of race and identity in nineteenth-century Guangdong, I turn to the swiftly expanding body of Chinese diaspora studies to tease out the contours of institutions and communities that stretched across the Pacific Ocean from China and took root everywhere Chinese migrants settled. In nineteenth-century Guangdong, I suggest, racial formation turned in part on ties to place, and transnational institutions allowed migrants to remain entwined with their racial identities, reciprocal obligations, global networks of capital and labor, and more sentimental bonds of home. The remainder of this essay works with those Chinese voices that emerge in the Los Angeles Area Court Records, a sprawling collection of all civil and legal proceedings in the municipal and county courts. This evidence, situated in a transnational, diasporic context, offers a window—nay, an embrasure—through which to view the ways American Chinese understood themselves and others in terms of race and identity in 1870s–1890s Los Angeles.

The arguments in the published scholarship are clear. Immigrants from the Pearl River Delta left a place where boundaries among local groups had become racialized even as many locals had developed similar, categorically negative, racialized views of European-descended people. With equal clarity, extant scholarship indicates that American Chinese, like others in the broader Pacific Chinese diaspora, carried with them to North America specific institutions that nurtured the maintenance of this variegated racial landscape. Perhaps more tantalizingly than conclusively, I argue here that American Chinese in Los Angeles remained connected to these racial identities on multiple levels. Their legal activism alone constitutes
a discursive claim to a standing before the law equal to that of U.S. citizens. Evidence from the legal records also suggests that some Chinese carried racialized views of Europeans with them across the ocean. Nevertheless, American Chinese in Los Angeles built economic and social relationships across this racial divide. As residents, workers, and litigators, Chinese Angelenos negotiated racial boundaries between themselves and others, imprinting their own mark on the city and drawing it socially and spatially into the broader Pacific world. Recovering Chinese racial subjectivity opens new ways forward for studying polyethnic communities, particularly on the Pacific coast.

THE VIEW FROM SZE YUP: BEFORE MIGRATION

Although histories of Chinese immigrants and their encounters with a frequently hostile U.S. society are legion, few have considered how American Chinese understood themselves and others through the prism of race. Doing so requires careful consideration of the extended kinship relationships, practices, and institutions that stretched across the Pacific for multiple generations, tracing and creating migration circuits.6 According to historian Him Mark Lai, somewhere between 90 and 95 percent of immigrants from China to North America’s Pacific coast before 1965 “could trace their roots to the Pearl River Delta and Wuyi in Guangdong Province.”7 An overwhelming majority of American Chinese in Los Angeles hailed from the ethnically Cantonese “Four Counties” (Sze Yup in Cantonese, Siyi in Mandarin) within Guangdong Province. Most of the rest came from the San Yup (Sanyi in Mandarin), or “Three Counties,” which includes the city of Guangzhou (Canton) and is geographically just northwest of Sze Yup. Migrants from San Yup constituted a larger percentage of the merchant, skilled, and educated classes of migrants to North America than their Sze Yup neighbors, who most often had experience as farmers or small-scale merchants. Scholarship on social identity in China, especially the areas encompassing Guangdong, Guangzhou (Canton), and the Pearl River Delta, thus offers a starting point from which to consider the locally specific racial landscape from which most Chinese came to the Pacific coast.

These seven counties in Guangdong Province, like much of the region encompassed by the broader Pearl River Delta, had become an ethnically diverse place and fertile ground for racial formation by the mid-nineteenth century. Historian Frank Dikötter argues that the development of race in China was not “a ‘derivative discourse’ of a more ‘authentic’ form of ‘white racism’” but instead possessed “an internal cohesion which was based on the active reconfiguration of indigenous modes of representation.” Across all groups, discourses of ancestry had special power in race-making projects, and the “cult of patrilineal descent” became ever more popular and hegemonic during the Qing dynasty, especially in southeast China.8 Allegedly “native” Cantonese speakers, claiming Han identities, controlled land, politics, and culture. Since the 1500s, a growing and economically active community of “foreign” Hakka immigrants had settled and made their homes in the region. They faced social, political, and legal marginalization. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), Han Cantonese had to adapt to being officially ruled by non-Han Manchurians, a tension that lasted beyond the empire’s fall. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a surge in the frequency and duration of European forays into
Guangdong—to trade, proselytize, and sow the seeds of colonialism—added a new layer to the milieu in which people negotiated social identity.

Cantonese speakers in Guangdong’s Sze Yup and San Yup had, by the mid-nineteenth century, developed a distinct and complex racial worldview. In formal terms, identity claims bonded firmly to location in space, relationships to work, and the development of households. According to historian Sow Theng-Leong, “a (male) Chinese was identified by his native place, institutionally expressed by household registration, which endowed him and his family with rights and obligations.” Within this framework, “territorial identity was powerfully reinforced by the ideology of kinship and localism,” and outsiders without “legitimate business, such as officeholding or trade, remained” outsiders, “sometimes for generations.” Imperial regulations enforced popular notions, considering outsiders to be “no different from a criminal evading taxes or plotting revolt.” Thus, both law and culture bound together place, ancestry, official administrative standing, and identity.

In addition to these ties to people and place, Sze Yup residents tethered their identities to claims of ancient Han descent, proper Han gender relationships, regional dress, location in the economic order, and a commitment to Confucian education. Fundamentally, Sze Yup residents identified themselves as tangren, people of the Tang culture. They traced their origins in place to the Tang period (AD 618–902) and claimed to be descendants of migrants from shongyuan, the Great Central Plain and the cradle of Chinese civilization. Despite this claim to purity, Cantonese mixed with both the lowland Zhuang and highland Yao whom they displaced, and they certainly did not all descend from the landed aristocracy of the shongyuan. Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century they had more than one thousand years of administrative history on their side and few challenged their claims. Asserting Han ancestry and the privileges that derived therefrom anchored Cantonese speakers’ identities, as did practicing Han gender relationships. Adult males and heads of households worked, married women avoided labor and remained generally secluded from public life, and Han children received a Confucian education to the extent allowable by the family’s economic situation. Attachment to place, Han heritage, and Han gender practices stood together as the core of Cantonese personhood within the Sze Yup and San Yup.

Sze Yup’s tangren also defined themselves in opposition to others with whom they had frequent contact. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the Pearl River Delta’s economic and human diversity expanded rapidly, creating a dynamic and frequently contested social landscape. Migrating Hakka, or guest people, began settling in the region during the 1500s. Accustomed to episodic mass migration after centuries of movement, Hakka tried to avoid prohibitions on landholding and social hostility. They settled in mostly unoccupied valleys and hilly regions farther from the river, and worked at forestry, mining, and non-rice farming. Their success drew a chain migration, and the Hakka community accounted for one-third of the Pearl River Delta’s total population at the end of the seventeenth century. In addition to their choice of economic activity, Hakka family and gender practices distinguished them from their Cantonese neighbors. Hakka emphasized family labor over education, eschewed footbinding, and imposed less stringent boundaries between public and private life. Hakka children and women worked on farms and in mines and Hakka women went to market with Hakka men.
Sze Yup’s and San Yup’s Cantonese drew lines of racial difference between themselves and their Hakka neighbors along axes of ancestry, economic mode, family practices, and gender norms. Cantonese speakers found themselves overwhelmed by the scale and pace of the Hakka migration, and observed that Hakka congregated “like ants and bees.” To counter the impact of this migration, tangren in the Sze Yup and San Yup prevented Hakka from owning land and limited Hakka access to formal administrative recognition, legal standing, and public political participation. Despite these concerns, tangren necessarily engaged in commerce of multiple kinds with Hakka, and such interactions became another node of racial formation. Most Cantonese deemed Hakka labor “to be of no benefit to the local community” since most Hakka worked land owned by absentee landlords.10 Tangren complained about Hakka cultural failings as well as their economic habits. As Leong notes, to local Cantonese, “Hakka immigrants were clearly intruders, alien in speech and outlandish in social and cultural practices.” Moreover, “the sight of Hakka women laboring alongside their menfolk in the fields” and mingling with males in the region’s marketplaces—all the while flaunting their unbound feet—challenged tangren social norms. Proper Cantonese strictly separated the sexes and viewed the presence of Hakka women in the workforce and the public square as a corruption of “the moral tenor of native society.”11 Asymmetries between Hakka and Cantonese thus reinforced the power of attachment to place, legal recognition, gender practices, and economic production as markers of racial difference in the Sze Yup.

National and international developments added further undulation to this already uneven local topography. The articulation of Cantonese and Hakka racial formations took place within the broader context of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The Qing ruling class was Manchu rather than Han—foreign warriors who had conquered China from the north and east (north of what we know today as the Korean peninsula) in the seventeenth century. Throughout the Qing dynasty, the ethnic discourse of Han/non-Han lurked just below the surface. According to historian Mark Elliott, neither Manchus nor Han could afford to invoke the ethnic boundary “too overtly or self-consciously without inviting serious consequences: exile or capital punishment (for the Han), delegitimation and rebellion (for the Manchus).” By the early 1800s, this tension “was more politically charged” than ever.12 When Sze Yup residents asserted their Han origins as tangren, they were asserting their ethnic difference from the Qing rulers. The swift and dramatic increase in contact with Europeans—either directly, through trade and missionary efforts, or indirectly, through stories, print culture, and conflict—created another layer of racialization in the Pearl River Delta.

By the mid-nineteenth century, tangren in the Sze Yup and San Yup had developed strong, negative stereotypes of Europeans and established rigid, racialized boundaries between themselves and Europeans. Frank Dikötter argues that Chinese enmity toward foreigners developed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, whereas Lydia He Liu, a scholar of comparative literature and languages, points to the tense interactions created by British colonial aspirations during and after the Opium Wars as the source of anti-European racial formation.13 While Liu’s argument that colonial encounters provoked definition and racialization is more appealing than Dikötter’s basic contact model, they agree that intense racial antagonism characterized nineteenth-century Sino-European relations, especially at mid-century, when migration from China across the Pacific began in
earnest. Chinese responded to Europeans with both “repulsion and pity,” dismissing them as uneducated brutes, chiding their religion, and characterizing their foodways as savage. Moreover, Chinese took exception to European phenotypes, saying “their complexion was not merely white, it was ‘ash-white’ (huibái), the exteriorization of the demonological forces that drove the foreign devils to undertake their expansion overseas.” As Liu recounts, the British in particular took exception to racial name calling, especially the word yi, which originally meant “foreigner” but later took on (according to the British) the connotation of “barbarian.” British colonial authorities banned the use of yi in the press and in official documents in 1858, following the Opium War. Although successful in suppressing the printed word, yi remained spoken and was, by the 1860s, supplanted by fan gui, or “foreign devil,” about which there could be no semantic quibble. Dikötter notes that Han Chinese by the 1850s described British troops as “white devils” (fan gui) who were “cold and dull as the ashes of frogs,” the “teratological products of death.” Liu argues compellingly that it was the violence British and other Europeans perpetrated, “rather than the exotic appearance of Westerners, that contributed to the rise of epithets fan gui and gui zi [a dialectical variation of the same] among the Cantonese and their spread to the rest of the country after the first Opium War.” Along these many axes, tangren, Hakka, Manchu, and Europeans differentiated themselves, creating a variegated racial landscape by the turn of the nineteenth century.

International developments, bad weather, and overpopulation plunged Guangdong into an intense economic depression during the nineteenth century, which served as the backdrop for an intensification of racial identification and strife. Tensions between Han, Hakka, and Manchu surged. Cantonese–Hakka relations also took a violent turn for the worse. Local practice limited Hakka residential choices, and they frequently lived in segregated villages within counties. This initially seemed a productive relationship, as Hakka labored on previously unworked land and produced consistent harvests. Suffering in economic crisis, however, ordinary Cantonese came to resent the growth and prosperity of these allegedly alien Hakka communities. Meanwhile, those with resources began to assert ancient land claims, claims they pursued in court so they could take ownership of lands Hakka worked and charge rent. Hakka, in turn, resisted this strategy, first in court and then with violence. As the economy contracted, Cantonese landlords (punti) became increasingly rapacious in their dealings with Hakka tenants. A war between punti and Hakka broke out in the mid-nineteenth century, centered in Sze Yup. As many as two hundred thousand people died on each side of the conflict in battles between armed peasants and their landlords’ hired soldiers. The Hakka-Punti War wasn’t the only episode of mass mobilization and bloodshed in the region at mid-century. Tensions between Hakka, Manchu, and Han also produced the Taiping Rebellion just north of Guangdong (led by Hakka and targeting Manchu) and the Red Turban uprising of 1854–1855 (initiated by Cantonese and targeting Manchu). Meanwhile, imperial entanglement with and resentment toward Europeans peaked.

This period of intensified crisis and heightened racial tension in the mid-1800s—changing from covert to overt along the Han-Manchu axis, explicitly overt along the Han-European axis, and violent along the Cantonese–Hakka axis—was the moment at which hundreds of thousands of men from Sze Yup traveled overseas in search of new opportunities for work in
North America and Southeast Asia. Those who came to California between 1850 and 1882 thus arrived with a fairly well-developed sense of identity, and a great deal of experience with racial projects at the social, political, and institutional level. Tangren would have been empowered in Cantonese-Hakka relations and would have felt similarly aggrieved for holding the short end of the stick in Manchu-Han relations. For the few Hakka, the reception they found in California must have seemed like more of the same, if only imposed by a far more objectionable group of Europeans. For tangren arriving in the United States, the rapid reversal of power in racial discourse might have been as jarring as the transnational dislocation, because they experienced the other side of the racial prism.

IDENTITY ON THE GO: TRANSNATIONALISM AND THE CHINESE DIASPORA

The vast majority of Chinese migration west across the Pacific Ocean during the second half of the 1800s originated in the Pearl River Delta, especially among the ethnically Cantonese “Four Counties” (Sze Yup in Cantonese, Siyi in Mandarin) and three Guangzhou-proximate counties referred to as the San Yup (Sanyi in Mandarin). In this region, the same forces—economic, political, and social—that caused fluid social formations also nurtured dynamic commercial habits, including frequent movement and migration. Since the Tang dynasty, people throughout the Pearl River Delta maintained global, cosmopolitan economic ties. By the mid-nineteenth century, migration and diverse economic strategies had become the norm. Contrary to a general perception, one that developed first among contemporaries and later among scholars, the flood of tangren out of the Pearl River Delta should be considered extraordinary in terms of scale but not in terms of form. According to historian Haiming Liu, Chinese understood migration as an opportunity “to maintain or improve their social and economic status at home.” Moreover, Liu argues, Chinese Pacific crossings were “family-oriented, group-sustained, and socially embedded” events tied to kinship and other social relations. When migration as a practice and a strategy gained momentum in certain places it became “a local tradition.”

Perhaps because overseas migration reflected cultural continuity rather than rupture, numerous social and economic institutions stretched across the expanse of the Pacific Ocean to bind American Chinese to one another and to their home communities.

As I argued above, ancestry and location provided critical frameworks within which tangren understood their own identities and through which they compared themselves to others as they molded and nurtured specific racial worldviews. A decade and more of active labor has generated a substantial body of scholarship on the transnational elements of Chinese migration to and residence in North America, including studies of the institutions that made it possible for Chinese crossing the Pacific to remain tied to their families and places of origin.

Two of these institutions, jinshanzhuang (Gold Mountain firms) and huiguan (hometown or native place lodges) afforded American Chinese ample opportunities to remain connected to the people and places their bodies left behind when they crossed the Pacific.

Merchants and traders were among the first immigrants from China to California during the early years of the Gold Rush. This small cadre of businessmen, who alighted in San Francisco and then fanned out into the gold districts, founded what became both
transpacific and transcontinental businesses called *jinshanzhuang*, or Gold Mountain firms. Anchored in Hong Kong, many began as small businesses carrying grocery and other specialty goods between China and the United States. Quickly, however, they expanded to offer postal and financial conduits that allowed their “customers overseas to maintain contact with their families and native places.”22 As the trickle of immigrants from the Sze Yup and San Yup became a human stream crossing the Pacific Ocean—the official record of immigrant Chinese entering the United States through San Francisco rose from 325 in 1849 to 2,716 in 1851 and 20,026 in 1852—the *jinshanzhuang* dramatically increased the scale and scope of their activities. Eating foods from home and exchanging letters and money allowed American Chinese an opportunity to maintain ties to place and kin that defined their identities. However, as Madeline Hsu notes, these trade networks “did more than bring salted fish and rice to Chinese overseas.” They reveal “the flexible nature of the social and cultural resources that Chinese brought to their encounters with Western cultures, the changes in their values and identities as they adapted to a capitalist world economy, and the role of the village and family networks in directing or at least mediating such changes.”23 As their roster of mail, remittance, and banking services grew, the *jinshanzhuang* developed the capacity to connect individual American Chinese to their home communities in villages throughout the Sze Yup and San Yup. More than just goods, letters, and currency flowed through the *jinshanzhuang*, as ideas and values resupplied and replenished migrants, keeping them from emotional, intellectual, and ideological isolation. Along these transpacific sinews the experiences of life abroad could also reverberate back home, where they could be validated in ways that eased adaptation to life in the United States.

To an even greater extent than the *jinshanzhuang*, the *huiguan*, or hometown/native place associations, kept American Chinese connected to one another and to their places of origin. Before any Chinese crossed the Pacific to work in California, individual communities throughout China developed a tradition of *huiguan* to aid travel throughout the empire. Chinese migrants carried their *huiguan* across the Pacific, providing associational lounges, hot meals, private rooms, postal services, Chinese newspapers, and other facilities. The *huiguan* changed slightly in their new context, expanding to serve people from generally contiguous areas in China who spoke the same Cantonese dialects. Merchants formed the first two U.S. *huiguan* in 1851: the *Sam Yup* (San Yup, Three Counties near Canton) and the *See Yup* (Sze Yup, Four Counties in the Pearl River Delta) associations, representing the two largest regions sending Chinese immigrants to the United States. Successful merchants served as *huiguan* leaders, building on economic power to make connections beyond the sometimes-insular Chinese communities. As the number of Chinese in the United States rose, and as migrants came from new places, *huiguan* proliferated. By the early 1860s, six *huiguan* dominated the landscape, including the *Yan Wo Company*, which consisted principally of Hakka immigrants. In 1862, a meeting of the leaders of these six *huiguan* led them to be known collectively as the Chinese Six Companies. This loose, San Francisco–based confederation of merchants ultimately merged as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in 1882.24 Considering the poor state of relations between tangren and Hakka in China, the combination of their *huiguan* into a single organization suggests that sharing the struggle of life in the United States superseded Han–Hakka antagonisms. As the scholarship on
race in late imperial China makes clear, a person’s connection to specific places and familial lines of descent were important building blocks of the tangren racial self-identity. Huiguan attachments allowed American Chinese to maintain a critical link to their personhood in official and informal terms while living abroad.

Huiguan ties fostered a sense of collective local identity, likely shaping Chinese Angelenos’ sense of themselves and their place in Los Angeles. Through the 1860s, the city’s small Chinese community participated primarily in one huiguan, the See Yup Company. Since many Chinese Angelenos lived in the houses of those for whom they worked, the huiguan provided a physical space that remained tied to home. Additionally, the huiguan bound American Chinese to one another. Beyond fostering individual attachments to home, they created a locus of collective identity formation, shaping the ways Chinese located themselves within Los Angeles’s community. As the number of huiguan along the Pacific coast grew, so too did the number of chapters in Los Angeles. By the 1870s, Los Angeles Chinese participated in the Kong Chow Company (successor of the original See Yup Company), the Nin Yung Company (a rival group that seceded from See Yup), and the Sam Yup Association, among others.25

Jinshanzhuang and huiguan likely promoted the maintenance of migrants’ social identities and racial worldviews. The connections these institutions provided to specific places and ancestors meant that the same connections that served as a touchstone for identity formation among Sze Yup residents in China remained central to their experience as transpacific migrants. At the same time, huiguan afforded the opportunity to connect with and share time and space with other migrants. Discussion, friendship, and the exchange of ideas in these contexts likely fomented the refashioning of identities among some Los Angeles Chinese, developments that constitute the advent of an American Chinese identity and community.

TANGREN IN THE LOS ANGELES BORDERLANDS

Even if strong social identities, buttressed by the huiguan and jinshanzhuang, allowed American Chinese to preserve much of their Sze Yup and San Yup lives in Los Angeles, that worldview had to contend with new circumstances. They faced a new life in the borderlands. Most Chinese in Los Angeles occupied a densely populated area near the city’s historic core, limited to the few buildings that European and Mexican Americans would rent to them. The space itself endured ceaseless efforts at regulation and outright destruction: the mob that perpetrated the 1871 anti-Chinese massacre destroyed the Coronel adobe, one of the main buildings housing Chinese Angelenos, and firebugs repeatedly tried and finally succeeded in burning half of the Chinese district in 1887. The Los Angeles City Council joined private citizens in an effort to boot Chinese residents. The council strictly regulated Chinese residential and commercial districts and staged several failed attempts to exclude Chinese from the city’s fire limits. In January 1888, the superintendent of streets bulldozed half of the Chinese district, provoking a major relocation, and the city destroyed Chinatown a second time at the turn of the twentieth century.26

American Chinese surely recognized both the discriminatory public policies and the racializing public discourses deployed to circumscribe their community. Like Los Angeles
landlords and public officials, Cantonese in Sze Yup had spatially restricted Hakka. In China, tangren reviled Hakka as sojourners detached from a fixed place of origin, and used this to substantiate notions of racial difference. In Los Angeles, elite European and Mexican Americans similarly complained that the Chinese were shifty, worked for low wages, and concentrated themselves in closed enclaves. Just as the tangren in Sze Yup held Europeans to be yi or fan gui, European and Mexican American Angelenos regarded immigrant Chinese as barbarian heathens with inappropriate gender norms, work habits, and lifestyles. Aside from the irony of this transnational symmetry, it meant that American Chinese in Los Angeles had to negotiate the kinds of social, spatial, and legal restrictions their compatriots and neighbors had imposed on the Hakka back in China. Chinese Angelenos, therefore, must have understood clearly the practice of de facto segregation and the potential for racial subjugation. Based on their previous experience as architects of an unequal, racialized society back home in China, migrants to Los Angeles should have understood that they had become the individuals struggling for fairness and equality.

Evidence for just how American Chinese confronted the challenge of migrating to a place where they alighted on the wrong side of a racial contest suggests a complex array of choices made by individuals and groups across the class spectrum. Although direct evidence of Chinese racial reckonings—in the form of words spoken or written—remains elusive in Los Angeles’s archives, the court cases considered here reveal a range of relationships that developed between Chinese and other Angelenos. The following analysis of the relationships and racial expression visible among Chinese Angelenos draws from an analysis of 105 court cases between 1871 and 1883. Interpreting the raw evidence the court cases provide and the relationships they reveal does not proceed in as straightforward a fashion as one might like. To be sure, the city’s court records offer one place where Chinese action is legible. Lawsuits filed, criminal charges pressed, and testimony given provide opportunities to hear Chinese voices. In most cases, however, translators mediate these voices. The courts used interpreters when Chinese testified, and the translators seemingly omitted significant diacritical markers of racial identity.

The one case in the present study in which an affidavit written in Chinese survives in tandem with a translated copy reveals this challenge. In the case People of Los Angeles vs. Louis Spinner, a witness named Ah Boy referred to all of the Chinese he wrote about as tangren, and all Americans as fanren. Harkening back to the discussion of language above, fanren translates, literally, as “foreign man,” but in the context of mid-nineteenth century parlance fan carried a weight closer to “barbarian” and often appeared in the phrase fan gui, or “foreign devil.” The official translator, however, interpreted tangren as “Chinamen” and fanren as “American.” In thinking further about whether to judge fanren as a relatively neutral appellation or a likely racial epithet, it seems unlikely that an immigrant to the United States referring to a resident American as a “foreign” man would transpire without added significance. In addition to obscuring Ah Boy’s use of the potentially racialized fanren to refer to non-Chinese (a decision that might have been informed by the prohibition of words like yi in China), the translation also hid the appellation tangren, which carried weight in Guangdong and seemingly for Ah Boy as a way to signify the specific, Han identity of the Chinese to whom he referred. It is also worth noting that Ah Boy was not a merchant or other leader, but an ordinary Chinese laborer.
incarcerated on charges of larceny. All recorded testimony in translation, in every case I saw, similarly used the English words “Chinaman” and “American.” The specificity of the original Chinese verbiage—whenever else it might have been used—is lost. Although only a single example, this document suggests that at least one Chinese immigrant brought the racial animosity toward Europeans from Guangdong to the United States.

Another case with clear racial overtones also turned on speech, in this instance issuing from the mouths of Mexican American teenagers Guillermo Moreno and Ramon Barelas. As Lee Ling and Ah Ying walked up Main Street to look for work on July 30, 1873, Moreno and Barelas shouted, “Where are you going John?” One of the Chinese replied, “Go to hell, you son of a bitch!” and a brawl ensued. In this episode, Ling and Ying resisted the racialized barb, “John,” and the attempted surveillance. Refusing to be subject to the whims of others, they fought to assert their freedoms. The records of the ensuing trial are frustrating—the Mexican American teens did not explain their word choice, the Chinese men did not testify as to why they responded with violence, and no evidence exists as to whether the query was issued in English or Spanish. Yet the silence might be instructive. Perhaps efforts to antagonize and control Chinese movement were so common that they needed no exploration during the trial. Perhaps too, more covertly, European and Mexican Americans understood the use of “John” and the attempted surveillance to be sufficiently confrontational to provoke a violent response. The trial turned on the theft of Ah Ying’s watch, not on the provocation of the two Chinese men or the “legitimacy” of their response. Seemingly, all of the parties and the court agreed that Barelas and Moreno intended to antagonize Ling and Ying and agreed that this antagonism provoked the subsequent assault. Ling and Ying certainly understood that they were the targets of a racial epithet, indicating that they had learned something of the racial landscape and lived in it as active agents willing to contest and police its boundaries. If they, like Ah Boy, held Mexican Americans in contempt as fanren, their response might be understood to be part of a similar if opposite racial project: teaching the Mexican American teens where they belonged in the American Chinese racial world. Either way, Boy in words and Ying and Ling in deeds flatly rejected subordination to whites and Mexicans. Nevertheless, we must bear in mind that such resistance was itself a borderlands adaptation and a new cultural form, as tangren in Sze Yup and San Yup held the upper hand.

Life in the borderlands also meant negotiating new spaces and social relationships, especially as early Chinese settlers likely forged relationships with English- and Spanish-speaking Angelenos. Dolores Dominguez, a Mexican American who did not speak English, testified at an attempted murder trial that he was friends with a few Chinese. Under cross-examination, the defense attorney asked Dominguez what he was doing in the Chinese district. Dominguez said, “The barber is a friend of mine and I just went there to pass the time.” Incredulous, the lawyer hounded him:

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: Is he [your friend] a Chinaman?

DOMINGUEZ: Yes, sir.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: You went to converse with him?

DOMINGUEZ: No sir, just went there for a walk to kill time.
DEFENSE ATTORNEY: Were you shaved while you were there?

DOMINGUEZ: No sir. I am not a Chinaman.

DEFENSE ATTORNEY: However you associate with Chinamen, don’t you. This Chinaman [pointing to complaining witness] was your friend?

DOMINGUEZ: This Chinaman [pointing at complaining witness] is a neighbor of mine and washes my clothes. It is another Chinaman that lives adjoining the barber shop [who is my friend] and I went to the barber shop to pass a little time [with him].

This section of the testimony offers a brisk exchange on the boundaries of language, race, and friendship. Dominguez says he did not go to converse, because he does not speak Chinese, but he did go there to pass time with a friend, articulating both a relationship and clarifying the nature of the friendship. Nevertheless, Dominguez responds that he did not get shaved because he is “not a Chinaman.” Maintaining a queue requires the wearer to shave all around the core of hair that is grown out. Consequently, Chinese barbers did a brisk business. It is thus possible that Dominguez said “I am not a Chinaman” when explaining why his friend did not cut his hair because he had no intention of shaving his hair and leaving a queue. Dominguez might also have been illuminating a boundary that limited the services provided by his friend, the barber, to Chinese customers. Perhaps, despite their friendship, shaving took place within a cultural context to which Dominguez did not have access. Regardless, Dominguez testified that he and his Chinese neighbor could be friends and spend time together even though he could not be his friend’s customer. Such nuances suggest a complicated network of permissible and impermissible behavior across the Mexican American–American Chinese divide.

When asked why he didn’t know the names of many Chinese, Dominguez said, “It is natural for a person to know a person that he sees frequently. I know many Chinamen but don’t know the name of a great many.” The lawyer persisted, asking Dominguez if he knew them because he had “met them on the street.” Dominguez, through his interpreter, replied testily, “I have known them because I have frequently met them, not because I met them upon the street,” implying that he spent time with these men socially. The lawyer remained flummoxed that Dominguez spent social time with Chinese men and that he could tell one from another by sight even though he didn’t know their names. Dominguez said, “I can’t tell the name sir because they are such strange names that I can’t tell them even after hearing them. I know him by the name of John. That is what I always call him.” This answer at last satisfied the lawyer, perhaps because Dominguez finally said something that made sense to him: like almost everyone else, Dominguez lumped all his Chinese acquaintances together as “John.” But Dominguez’s answer reveals something more interesting: whereas being called “John” provoked Lee Ling and Ah Ying to violence, Dominguez could call a man “John” and they considered each other friends. This speaks to the permeability of the boundary separating American Chinese and Mexican and European Americans in Los Angeles. For the cross-examining lawyer, a friendship between Dominguez and a Chinese immigrant was positively unthinkable; so too would it have been a transgression for the Chinese barber to befriend a man designated fanren by others. Even though they had trouble conversing, and even
though he used a derogatory moniker, Dominguez and his (unfortunately unnamed) Chinese friend worked around the social boundaries that otherwise prevented such a relationship.

Ah Boy’s affidavit, Lee Ling and Ah Ying’s assault on two Mexican youths, and Dolores Dominguez’s testimony stake out opposite ends of a continuum of possible relationships between English-, Spanish-, and Chinese-speaking Angelenos. Between these two poles of positive and negative personal associations, court records reveal a variety of economic relationships between American Chinese and other Angelenos. Only those business arrangements that soured ended up in court. Seventeen times between 1873 and 1883 Chinese Angelenos filed civil suit against non-Chinese over failed economic arrangements, demanding redress of property unlawfully lost or payment according to contract for services rendered. Although instances of business gone bad, the evidence in a few cases tells a longer story of productive, regular commerce.

Ah Foulke, Ah Chitte, Ah Sam, Ah Sears, and Ke Fo separately filed suit against Henry Hancock on February 2, 1882. The men, representatives of the Ah Young Company and another unnamed Chinese-owned business, demanded that Hancock make good on debts in excess of $500. In supporting their claims, the American Chinese plaintiffs submitted detailed business records, in Chinese and English, that indicate a steady pace of economic intercourse lasting no less than five years, from early 1877 to the end of 1881. In nearly weekly transactions, Foulke, Chitte, Sam, Sears, and Fo engaged in a trade with Hancock that included various alcoholic beverages (whisky, wine, aguardiente, and port), hogs, ducks, rice, shovels, socks, boots, and Hancock’s famed brea (tar). Quantities and prices ranged from single items costing a few cents to tons of asphaltum valued in the hundreds of dollars. The account ledgers also indicate payment for labor contracting for work including shipping and deliveries, brea removal, and other tasks. In charting the exchange of goods and labor, these records reveal a still wider world of economic exchange between the Chinese litigants, Hancock, and area businessmen, including noted merchants Harris Newmark, Ah Sing, Yuck Wah, and other European Americans and American Chinese. In all, a rather large cadre of American Chinese orchestrated the business of tar extraction and, in turn, all of the development of the city’s urban landscape to which Hancock is known to have contributed.33

Indeed, manuscript census records and other evidence reveal the extent to which Chinese immigrants became entwined in Los Angeles’s economy during the 1870s and 1880s. American Chinese labored throughout Los Angeles in public places like restaurants, hotels, and laundry shops and in the private homes of dozens of European and Mexican Americans as cooks and domestics.34 From this perspective, the ledgers submitted in the suits against Hancock offer only a fractional view of the larger integration of American Chinese into Los Angeles’s economic life during the period.

What then to make of these economic ties, in terms of Chinese subjectivity? At the macro level of structural analysis, participation in the local economy likely required American Chinese to modify their racial worldview. Economic dependence on and requisite subordination to European Americans as clients or bosses in order to make a living would have certainly complicated a view of U.S. residents as fanren. Thinking about these instead as a concatenation of individual relationships, labor relations in Los Angeles meant that many Chinese worked not only for but also in the homes and businesses of European and
Mexican Americans, especially as cooks, domestics, and physical laborers. Many others sold vegetables and wares to households and restaurants from wagons. Consequently, work involved regular contact and exchange, sometimes in public and sometimes in private spaces. While these work relationships did not necessarily translate into social integration, they nevertheless offered opportunities for daily contact between Chinese and non-Chinese in Los Angeles, occasionally in rather intimate settings.

Histories of black domestic work in white homes and black-white economic relationships in the South following the Civil War demonstrate that such regular contact did not necessarily foster positive social relations or racial equality. Nevertheless, scholar Susie Cassel has analyzed the diary of American Chinese Ah Quin, one of the few extensive diaries written in California by a bilingual Chinese that survives from the 1860s and 1870s. Chronicling his connection to those with whom he worked for several decades, Quin’s journal suggests the range of potential interactions and relationships that could develop in the course of domestic employment. Quin’s entries reveal that he had both positive and negative exchanges with white bosses during his time as a cook and domestic. While we might expect mostly negative entries, Cassel shows that Quin instead emphasized moments of fraternity and joviality with his white employers. Quin recorded pleasant conversations, jokes, and gifts exchanged between him, his bosses, and other white men in his orbit. Although Cassel stresses that the general theme of this diary is one of adaptation, Quin’s writings offer one first-person account of the potential for situationally specific friendship and borderlands exchange. The story of macro-level social relations in Los Angeles during the 1870s and 1880s makes clear that friendships did not form in numbers sufficient to prevent the social, political, and spatial marginalization of American Chinese. However, the pervasiveness of face-to-face economic exchange likely introduced an element of dynamism in the ways American Chinese understood themselves and other Angelenos in terms of race and social identity. More work must be done to try to tease out the contours of these exchanges.

Although an up-close review of a decade of court cases and other sources offers tantalizing rather than convincing evidence for American Chinese subjectivity—language and inconsistency mean there are no “smoking guns”—taking a step back and considering the culture of legal activism among American Chinese offers a different and perhaps more enlightening vantage. Analyzing American Chinese legal practices provides another way to listen to Chinese voices speaking about their place in society. In Guangdong, legal activism was a prominent characteristic of public life. Migrants from Sze Yup and San Yup to Los Angeles specifically (and to the Pacific Coast generally) sustained this tradition, using the courts to assert social, legal, and economic claims. Ordinary and elite Chinese frequently used the courts to engage each other and non-Chinese Angelenos in civil and criminal complaints. Between 1873 and 1883, Chinese Angelenos filed more than twenty-two civil suits. When American Chinese turned to the courts, their actions necessarily encompassed certain claims of equality and belonging. As a set of rules and regulations adjudicated and enforced by non-Chinese, the U.S. legal system constituted foreign territory for Chinese litigants. Anticipating fair treatment and protection from the courts when the opposite was so obviously forthcoming from ordinary European and Mexican Americans indicates that Chinese expected the law to filter out social prejudice and treat Chinese participants as equals. While
legal customs in China—where magistrates served outside their home counties and their jurisprudence was expected to stand above local rivalries—might have prefigured American Chinese faith in the courts, the legal system was different in the United States. Active court use, therefore, should be understood in itself as a claim to civil rights and legal equality, and consequently marks a declaration by Chinese litigants of their claim to the rights of citizens, at least in the eyes of the law.

In one of the era’s more interesting legal cases, Los Angeles’s Chinese vegetable peddlers turned to the courts to resist a city policy that targeted their business. Since Los Angeles’s time as a Spanish and then Mexican pueblo, the city government had collected licensing fees from those doing business around town. By the late 1870s, between twenty-seven and thirty Chinese vegetable peddlers paid license fees in the amount of $2 per month for permission to supply Los Angeles’s homes, markets, and restaurants with fresh vegetables from the backs of their wagons. In February 1879, against the backdrop of a growing statewide anti-Chinese movement, the city council raised vegetable-peddling license fees from $2 to $12.50 per month in one fell swoop. One of the peddlers, Lee Bung, purposely ran afoul of the new law, plying his trade without proper paperwork. After citation and arrest, Bung mounted a legal challenge that ultimately went before the state supreme court. Throughout, Bung and his legal team argued that the law was usurious and constituted an unreasonable restraint on trade. Only high-volume liquor stores and merchants with monthly receipts above $10,000 paid equal or higher fees. Bung and others testified that as vegetable peddlers they earned between $8 and $10 per month, less than the fee to operate. Most interestingly, Bung “by his counsel” implied that the policy was racially motivated, as neither the receipts of their businesses nor the relative relationship to other license charges factored into the policy. The state supreme court agreed, declaring the tax unconstitutional as “unreasonable and oppressive,” and setting aside Bung’s conviction. Among the arguments made and the legal issues addressed in the court’s decision were laws about commerce, fine-grained arguments about reasonable taxation, and the responsibility municipalities bear to be fair both to the state and to their own residents. Although proffering sound legal arguments, the entire case rested on one unspoken principle: that American Chinese in Los Angeles had standing before the court despite being foreigners, and that they had the right to the equal treatment and legal protections granted exclusively to citizens of the United States.

In their legal activism, American Chinese insisted on being treated as equals in the eyes of the law, trusted officers of the state court to agree, and demonstrated their sense of racial equality with non-Chinese. One might also speculate that submitting to the authority of the courts required a modification in the estimation of all European and Mexican Americans as barbarians, especially those who worked as lawyers and judges. Granting such debased people the power to make binding decisions, especially in disputes among Chinese, seems unlikely otherwise. By the standards of race in contemporary Guangdong, trusting one’s legal fate to the officers of the U.S. legal system would have been tantamount to leaving ignorant barbarians to direct the future. In the opposite case, it is difficult to imagine that whites would have submitted to a court administered by American Chinese unless the racializing language around Chineseness had changed. Consequently, their frequent resort to the courts suggests that American Chinese accepted Anglo and Mexican officers of the court as at least minimally fit, racially, to hear and judge these cases fairly.
CONCLUSION

Dolores Dominguez could not have been the only Mexican American who frequently mingled with his Chinese neighbors. Indeed, one can easily imagine that the combatants in the “Where are you going, John?” case might have expressed a contempt bred by familiarity rather than anonymity. These two expressions reflect the full range of possible relationships that likely emerged in the densely populated urban space that Chinese and Mexican Angelenos shared. Reckoning the social identity of American Chinese remains challenging; I hope that the approach here offers one way forward. Most immigrants to Los Angeles left Sze Yup with a sense of themselves as tangren—civilized, proper Han Chinese—and already reckoned European Americans as barbarians. These ideas made it across the ocean to at least a limited extent. Some, and perhaps many, migrants from Sze Yup brought their racial worldviews with them to the United States. The jinshanzhuang and huiguan fostered continued attachments to ideas of tangren identity, and ordinary Chinese referred to their compatriots as tangren and to Americans as fanren. However, I find it unlikely that Chinese alone, among all transnational migrants to Los Angeles, preserved their social identities and racial worldviews in a pristine and unmodified form. In Los Angeles and throughout the Cantonese Pacific, evidence of contact, interaction, and borderlands innovations abounds. The boundaries between immigrant Chinese and other Angelenos became at least somewhat porous as Chinese immigrants engaged European and Mexican Americans in commercial and social relationships.

To be sure, as Madeline Hsu reminds us, American Chinese did not necessarily assimilate, nor is assimilation a useful standard for judging how Chinese migrants formed their own subjectivity. Yet as they forged economic opportunity and contested their right to social and economic equality, American Chinese modified both their strategies and ideas from what they had been in Guangdong. In Sze Yup, tangren and Hakka waged a bloody civil war; in California, huiguan representing the two groups ultimately came together in forming the Consolidated Benevolent Association. Back in China, tangren held Hakka in contempt even as they profited from them as landlords and labor overseers. Perhaps a similar exceptionalism allowed American Chinese to exploit economic opportunities—to the point of working for “barbarians”—in order to reap profit. Chinese Angelenos also defended their right to participate in the local economy in court, and resorted to violence when necessary to assert the same equality. Contrasting these tense exchanges, some Chinese developed harmonious work and social relationships with the non-Chinese among whom they lived.

The varied choices these immigrants made and their words and actions in doing so offer an emerging, if hazy, outline of the ways American Chinese maintained and modified their own boundaries marking social identity in Los Angeles. For some migrants, the dim view Chinese held of European Americans in China survived the Pacific crossing intact. The strong sense of self-identity and right to treatment as socially equal people also survived the crossing, as evidenced by the frequency with which American Chinese used Los Angeles’s courts to redress maltreatment. Yet these prima facie examples of a rigid, mutually agreeable segregation do not always withstand closer scrutiny. American Chinese in Los Angeles became deeply entangled in the local economy, as store owners, domestic workers, and
vegetable peddlers. These occupations produced frequent and often close contact with employers and neighbors, proximity that in the case of Manuel Dominguez led to friendship with one particular Chinese Angeleno and a general sense of familiarity with others. In short, while American Chinese in Los Angeles defended the value of their own Chineseness, they opened themselves up to social and economic interactions that would have been scandalous in China.

Admittedly, the evidence thus far is frustratingly scant, consisting of veritable fragments of information. Yet more work must be done to reckon American Chinese as active participants in the racial contests that shaped the histories of cities all along the Pacific coast. Rather than simply understanding the ways that whites and Mexicans negotiated their own identities through the prism of the Chinese they held in such contempt, we must begin to consider the Chinese as participants in these contests. Specifically, it is likely that American Chinese considered those with whom they shared the densely packed urban cores as socially inferior, a fact that must necessarily alter our interpretive calculus.

NOTES
1. A Huntington Library Fellowship supported my research in the Los Angeles Area Court Records collection, and I benefited greatly from the expertise of Peter Blodgett and the late Bill Franks at the Huntington. Colleagues at the Center for the Humanities and Global Asia Merced (GLAM) at the University of California, Merced, commented on earlier versions of this essay. Jayson Beaster-Jones, Eli Jelly-Schapiro, Ignacio Lopez-Calvo, Christina Lux, Kit Meyers, Ma Vang, and Kenichi Yoshida offered especially valuable comments. I am also indebted to William Deverell, David Iglar, Paul Spickard, Christina Torres-Rouff, and the anonymous reviewers at California History for their intellectual guidance and generosity.
5. Anthropologist Audrey Smedley defines a racial worldview as “a cosmological ordering system structured out of the . . . ideologies, distinctions, and selective perceptions that constitute a society’s popular imagery and interpretations of the world.” She argues that “people in all societies comprehend the world through prisms that their cultures and experiences proffer to them” and in turn “impose meanings on new discoveries and experiences that emanate from their own cultural conditioning.” Audrey Smedley, Race in America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1999), 25.
10. Leong, Migration and Ethnicity, 71.
19. For an analysis of the least known of these, the Red Turban Uprising, see Jaeyoon Kim, “The Heaven and Earth Society and the Red Turban Rebellion in Late Qing China,” Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences 3, no. 1 (2009): 1–35.
25. For a detailed discussion of the huiguan in California, see Lai, Becoming Chinese American, chapters 3–4. On the huiguan in Los Angeles, see Zesch, The Chinatown War, and Lou, “The Chinese American Community in Los Angeles.”
27. People vs. Louis Spinner, Los Angeles County Court, Case 1851, November 21, 1879, Los Angeles Area Court Records, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (hereafter LAACR). I am grateful to Dr. John Williams (Colorado College) for his translation and etymological expertise. In addition to its contextualization as close to “barbarian,” the use of the literal term “foreign man” inverts the relationship of “immigrant” Chinese to “local” European Americans. The distinction between tangren and fanren appears anecdotally in other venues. Writing about Chinese herbalists and Chinese medicine in Los Angeles and other Chinese communities along the Pacific Coast, Haiming Liu notes that those serving exclusively Chinese clients were referred to as “Tang Doctors” and those who ministered to white and Latina/o customers as “Tang Fan Doctors.” Haiming Liu, “Chinese Herbalists in the United States,” in Chan, Chinese American Transnationalism, 136–155, quote at p. 137.
29. Writing about Chinese migration to Mexico, Grace Peña Delgado notes that, “in the absence of generational ties on which to draw,” the earliest immigrants “were compelled to create alternative mechanisms to establish connections to their new home and neighbors,” and so their “sense of social belonging and residential permanency was initially tethered to relationships mostly with Mexicans.” Grace Peña Delgado, “Neighbors by
Nature: Relationships, Border Crossings, and Transnational Communities in the Chinese Exclusion Era,
30. *People vs. Ah Lung*, Los Angeles County Court, January 28, 1887, LAACR 1568, testimony of Dolores Dominguez.
31. Michael Godley, “The End of the Queue: Hair as a Symbol in Chinese History,” East Asian History 8 (December 1994): 55–72. One could also imagine that, just as herbalists and sex workers served either exclusively Chinese or exclusively American clients, the same could have been true for barbers.
32. *People vs. Ah Lung*, Los Angeles County Court, January 28, 1887, LAACR 1568, testimony of Dolores Dominguez.
33. *Ah Foulke vs. Henry Hancock*, Los Angeles Superior Court, February 6, 1882, LAACR 1343; *Ah Sam vs. Henry Hancock*, Los Angeles Superior Court, February 6, 1882, LAACR 1344; *Ke Fo vs. Henry Hancock*, Los Angeles Superior Court, February 6, 1882, LAACR 1345; *Ah Sears vs. Henry Hancock*, Los Angeles Superior Court, February 6, 1882, LAACR 1346; *Ah Chitte vs. Henry Hancock*, Los Angeles Superior Court, February 6, 1882, LAACR 1347. The names here, as elsewhere, suggest the possibility of satirical hostility and dehumanization. The expletives uttered when enunciating Ah Foulke and Ah Chitte might give clues as to the intentional mishandling of the plaintiffs’ names, given the nature and target of their legal action. My thinking on this grows from Michelle Arnold, “Legal Dimensions of the Chinese Experience in Los Angeles” (B.A. thesis, History, California Institute of Technology, 2000), especially 79–82. I am grateful to William Deverell for sharing the paper with me and bringing Arnold’s analysis of names to my attention.
34. Of the 221 Chinese who lived on Calle de los Negros—the core of the city’s Chinese residential district—in 1880, 78 worked as “laborers” and another 42 worked as cooks. Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1880).