

How Chinese migrants in Los Angeles Chinatown gained self-reliance



Chinese men holding down a pig in a fenced area in or new Los Angeles Chinatown, circa 1881-1910. Credit: Lisa See Collection, Huntington Digital Library

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States was high, as working-class laborers in the country viewed Chinese workers as a threat. Prior research has found that during that period, approximately 400,000 Chinese migrants came to the U.S., many of whom went to California to build the Transcontinental Railroad. Following the project's completion, competition for jobs grew tougher, and passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the U.S.

But in Los Angeles Chinatown, Chinese migrants established a work-around to the racist policies, forging their own economy through pig raising and pork distribution, according to recent research. The study, featured on the cover of the January 2024 issue of *American Antiquity*, reports on the resilience and self-reliance of Chinese migrants "under structural racism."

"Our research revealed some basic discrepancies between the archaeological data and mainstream historical narratives," says lead author Jiajing Wang, an assistant professor of anthropology at Dartmouth. "What has been recorded in historical narratives was written by the people in power, so the records don't say much about the real-life struggles of early Chinese migrants."

As the study reports, the team knew from their research involving old newspaper archives that white hog farmers in California used barley and wheat, not rice, to feed their pigs. Pork was also sourced from the Midwest; however, in Chicago, pigs were fed corn. At least four Chinese-owned butcher shops had been documented in the area according to co-author Laura Wai Ng's research on Chinese Exclusion Act case files and other archival records. Chinese butchers would enter into partnerships with other workers to qualify as "merchants," which made them exempt from the Chinese Exclusion Act. The historical records also show that the butcher shops provided banking and other services. The team compared their results to what is known about pig husbandry practices in China, especially South China where these immigrants came from, and found that the practices were quite similar.

In South China, pigs were fed leftover food, rice bran—a rice **byproduct**, and rice leaves, as part of their diet. Archival records document that some Chinese individuals were growing rice in northern California in the early 1900s, illustrating that there may have been a network between the Chinese persons who were growing rice and raising pigs.

Earlier research has found that the majority of pig bones found in Los Angeles Chinatown were from the less-prized part of the pig, demonstrating that the more expensive cuts were probably sold outside the area while the cheaper cuts were eaten by the Chinese migrants who were raising the pigs.

"The archaeological data shows that Chinese migrants had been getting their own food, growing rice and raising pigs, and maintaining their traditions, despite the racist environment," says Wang.

"With fresh pork, they had created a self-reliant food system and network that provided jobs, banking, housing, and immigration services to the community," says Ng.

