A Chinese Ghetto? Immigrant Residential Segregation in 19th Century San Francisco

Hannah Postel (Princeton University)

Foundational theories on segregation and stratification were formed as millions of newcomers arrived in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These migrants settled predominately in cities, and their distinct languages and religious practices sparked worry that they neither could nor would successfully integrate into the American sociocultural fabric. The concept of spatial assimilation was developed to suggest that over time minority groups would residentially – and thereby socially – integrate into the mainstream.

However, these theories have a blind spot. Drawing solely upon European immigrant experiences, seminal studies left out another major group of new arrivals in this period: the Chinese. This omission has been informed by a few major factors: insufficient data, common conceptions of Chinatown isolation, and a sense that including the Chinese in these studies "would have been to mix and thereby confuse two very separate cultures" (Decker 1978, ix). However, the advent of new microdata and an emerging literature on historical race relations both raise questions about and enable empirical evaluation of these assumptions. I employ novel spatial archival data to measure Chinese immigrant residential segregation, focusing on 1880 San Francisco. While the Chinese may well have demonstrated significantly different residential patterns to other immigrant groups, this is an argument for – not against – revising mainstream segregation theory accordingly.

This paper contributes to a growing literature interrogating historical residential clustering with new microdata. Most studies focus on black-white residential patterning,[1] but a few also shed light on immigrant residence patterns. Logan and Zhang (2012) tease apart the first and second waves of mass migration to the United States, noting that most attention has been paid to the latter Italian and Jewish arrivals. Their cross-country analysis of multiple cities shows that the prior group (mainly Irish, German, and British immigrants) demonstrated much lower levels of segregation. Moreover, there is large variation across cities. These differential patterns raise questions about how (and if) residential assimilation theories apply.

A similar question guides this paper. The literature has suggested three major reasons why Chinatowns may have been particularly isolated. First, Chinese immigrants were largely single men who did not conform to typical single-family residential patterns; many lived in group guesthouses near their employers. Second, during this period the community was subject to many racist, exclusionary policies which may have encouraged increased clustering. Finally, the strong persistence of traditionally Chinese social structure and values gave rise to a closely-knit community structure (Chacon 1988).

However, strands of the racial ambiguity and labor market segmentation literatures offer evidence that the social – and thereby residential – position of Chinese residents at the time may

[1] See e.g. Grigoryeva and Ruef (2015); Logan and Martinez (2018).

have been more theoretically ambiguous than assumed. Through the lens of social and economic stratification, the Chinese straddled a color line, defying traditional definitions of race and ethnicity. Fox & Guglielmo's 2012 analysis of the "whiteness" of southern and eastern European immigrants at the time is notably situated in contrast to groups they consider squarely non-white, including the Chinese. They discuss instances where Europeans were conflated with Asians (Mongolians, nonwhite) to bolster immigration restriction claims. Aarim-Heriot (2003) demonstrates the remarkable similarities between the negrophobia and anti-Chinese attitudes of the Reconstruction era.

However, economically the Chinese shared a labor market with low-income whites and recent European immigrants – a fact which contributed to anti-Chinese violence in the 1870s and eventually exclusion of all Chinese immigrants in 1882. The Irish felt most economically challenged by the Chinese presence; with some positing that "opposition to the Chinese offered unity to an otherwise diverse state; … Irish immigrants could cross the barrier separating a stigmatized ethic [sic] group from the stigmatizing majority" (Limerick 1987, 263). And an attempt to hire Mexican workers for the California railroads received so much pushback it failed entirely; the Chinese were considered preferable in this instance (Aarim-Heriot 2003).

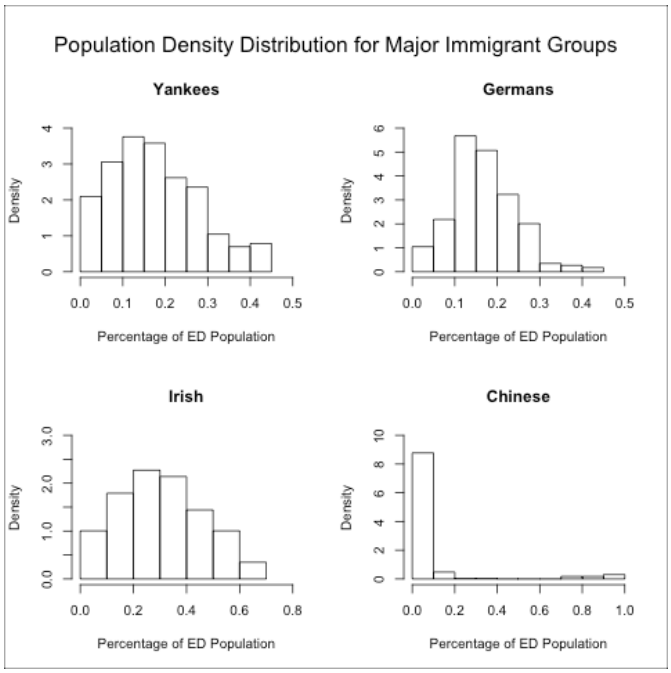
This study attempts to reconcile these potentially disparate trends, through a comparative analysis of immigrant residential patterns in San Francisco in 1880. California was a new state as of 1850; the Gold Rush and growing industry attracted domestic and international migrants alike. This provides an unusual opportunity to observe the "natural state" of how residence patterns in an emergent metropolis evolved from a blank canvas. With networks less present, we can glean clearer insight into how neighborhoods are formed.

Recent releases of U.S. census microdata through the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) has made more granular analyses possible.[2] The Urban Transition Historical GIS Project (UTP) of Brown University geocoded 100% count 1880 census data for 39 major cities, including San Francisco (see Logan et al 2011 for details). The UTP data allow investigations of social trends from the individual to enumeration district level, offering more granular insight into where and how residential clustering occurs. The 1880 time period is revealing not only for its data availability, but also as it precedes the national level Chinese exclusion acts that limited future immigration and forced increased residential clustering (Carter 2013).

Preliminary analysis supports the idea that Chinese immigrants were more segregated than other groups. The below histograms depict this trend graphically, with population distribution densities varying considerably across nativity groups. In terms of scale, in any given enumeration district the share of Yankee (native born with native parents) and German population never exceeds 50%. Some districts show higher levels of Irish clustering, up to about 70% of the total population. The Chinese are the most densely concentrated; in some districts

[2] See Goeken et al (2003) for more information.

over 98% of the population was Chinese. On the other hand, we see the majority of districts with close to no Chinese presence, in contrast to the other groups which are more equally distributed.



However, comparison of classic segregation measures (dissimilarity and exposure indices[3]) at different levels of aggregation paint a more complex picture. Each immigrant group is highly segregated at a building level, an effect that fades slightly when larger units are considered. Turning to social status as a potential driver of residence patterns, we see a large divergence across groups. The mean socioeconomic index for Yankees was 24.8, with the 20-30 range considered to be high (Logan & Zhang 2016). Germans followed at 22.5, Chinese at 18.3, and finally the Irish at 14.4. This lends credence to the hypothesis of economic competition between the latter two groups.

Next steps for this project include a formal locational attainment model to assess the comparative role of group characteristics like ethnicity and individual economic status, an investigation of segregation by industry, and (potential) incorporation of another West Coast city for comparison. In its full form, this paper will bring new archival data to bear on a heretofore qualitative discussion and attempt to resolve conceptual questions about Chinese insularity and the applicability of seminal segregation theory.

[3] See Massey and Denton (1993).

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