Ghosts of the Gold Rush:
Visiting Chinese Camp, California

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Daniel A. Métraux conducts a walking tour of Chinese Camp, California. Once a nineteenth-century mining settlement populated by Chinese immigrants, it is now a ghost town with a fascinating story to tell.

Ghost towns have always fascinated me. They provide windows on the past. Visiting my daughter in the foothills of the Sierras not far from Lake Tahoe, I find many deserted settlements such as Bodie, which dates from the mid-1800s when tens of thousands of prospectors came here searching for gold. When I stumbled across the largely deserted village called Chinese Camp deep in the heart of Gold Rush country in northern California, I decided to do some exploring and research.

Chinese Camp is not a “ghost town” in the classic sense like nearby Bodie. The old Chinese core of the town, Main Street, is almost completely abandoned, but there are a few homes on the periphery as well as a modern elementary school and a functioning post office. A few residents share the town with the many Chinese ghosts that are said to linger there even now. Nevertheless, as a scholar and teacher of Asian history, I was particularly excited by the idea of a Chinese ghost town in California. It was thus with great anticipation that I spent the better part of a day in May 2007 exploring the remains of Chinese Camp (fig. 1).

A return visit in May 2010 permitted deeper insights into the lives of the thousands of Chinese who once sought their fortunes there. The ordinary passerby today would notice only decaying and deserted buildings at the center of town, especially along what was once Main Street. It is not a place of beauty, but if you look at the old iron doors on what used to be Chinese stores, it is possible to travel back in history to a time when the village was humming with several thousand Chinese.

Today any casual motorist driving through Tuolumne County in western California on their way to nearby Yosemite National Park would hardly recognize the clump of abandoned buildings as one of the biggest and most significant early settlements of Chinese in the United States. It was a plac-
eral-mining center settled by Chinese miners in 1849. Much work was done in the 1850s, and the piles of soil and gravel turned over in the search for gold can still be seen in nearly every gulch. The area’s placer-mines are credited with producing $2.5 million in gold. Today the town consists of numerous Gold Rush-era buildings, most of them abandoned. Several ramshackle dwellings on the outskirts of town house the few remaining residents, but there are no Chinese left and one cannot even buy a dish of chow mein. The last of the Chinese left in the 1920s leaving behind one of the most significant Chinese ghost towns in the United States (Pfaelzer 2007, 34).

The late 1840s was a period of growing desperation for many Chinese. Wide-spread starvation accompanied domestic rebellions and further incursions by the West in the wake of the Opium War (1839–42). In 1849 there were only fifty-four Chinese in California. As news of gold spread throughout the world, a steady immigration commenced. It continued through the 1870s and early 1880s, during which time an average of 4,000 Chinese per year immigrated to the United States. By the time the United States halted Chinese immigration in 1882, over 300,000 Chinese had entered the United States, most of them living in California (“Chinese Immigrants”). This increase in the Chinese population, rapid even in comparison with the general increase in population, was largely due to the fact that prior to 1869, when it became possible to travel across the U.S by rail, China was effectively nearer to the shores of California than was the eastern portion of the United States. Another circumstance that contributed to the heavy influx of Chinese was the fact that news of the gold discovery reached

FIGURE 1 Ruins of abandoned stores dot Main Street in Chinese Camp, California.
southeastern China when it was suffering from the poverty and ruin caused the Taiping rebellion of the 1850s and early 1860s (Sheafer 2001, 1).

When news of the California Gold Rush reached Canton in 1848, many thousands of Chinese boarded boats to “Gum Shan,” or “Gold Mountain,” as the United States was known during that era. Many of the Chinese made their way to Tuolumne County to such towns as Sonora, Fiddletown, Bodie, Columbia, Jamestown, and Chinese Camp where they staked their claims and built significant Chinese communities. The vast majority of Chinese were young men looking for a quick strike so that they could return to China, buy a plot of land, and start their own families. The few women who came were mainly prostitutes – virtual slaves – although a few Chinese merchants brought their wives. In large part, this was a man’s world, lonely and isolated amid a surrounding population of hostile Caucasians, but the dream of wealth and memories of the misery of life in China gave the immigrants incentives to stay (“Chinese Immigrants”).

The first settlement in what is now Chinese Camp was named Camp Salvado after a group of Salvadorians who worked as miners, but a group of three dozen Cantonese miners arrived at the camp in 1849 and began prospecting. Who they were, why they came, and where they came from remains a mystery. Some accounts imply that a sea captain abandoned his ship in San Francisco and brought his entire crew with him. Another version has it that the Chinese were employed by a group of English speculators. What is known is that the mining brought in large amounts of gold, which in turn brought thousands of additional miners, including hundreds and later thousands of Chinese. Miners, including Chinese miners, developed a number of towns, but the Chinese largely settled in what became known as “Chinese Camp.”

Facing virulent discrimination in other areas and having just arrived in the country, the Chinese miners gravitated there, feeling safe and comfortable among others of their nationality. There were some Caucasian miners present, but by the mid-1850s the Chinese residents of the settlement vastly outnumbered the Caucasians (Putnam). At first the streets of Chinese camp were solidly settled with store tents, built mostly of pine boughs with canvas stretched over the top and with no better foundation than dirt floors. Others were built of pine boughs topped with brush. The first substantial building was an adobe structure completed in 1851, which served as a store. A Catholic church, St. Xavier, was constructed in 1854, and still stands today — in good shape, but clearly abandoned, sitting forlornly on a hill outside the town. The Chinese later built several distinctively Chinese buildings, including three Joss houses, traditional places for worshipping a variety of indigenous Chinese deities. By 1859 Chinese Camp had settled into what contemporary accounts say was a “law-abiding and respectable community.” At its peak, perhaps 5,000 Chinese resided here. Even as late
as the 1880s, patient Chinese miners were still eking out a living here mining gold (Sheafer 2001, 1–5).

The camp continued to grow. Due to the large number of Chinese inhabitants, it became known as “Chinee,” “Chinese Diggins,” and “Chinese Camp.” When the post office was established on April 18, 1854, the town became officially known as Chinese Camp. The only reminder of its earlier cognomen, Camp Washington, is the road named Washington Street. The town’s location made Chinese Camp the center of transportation for a large area, and several stage and freight lines made daily stops there on their way to other destinations. Today a plaque on the tumble-down and long-deserted Wells Fargo office honors a stage coach driver who connected the town by coach to such distant points as Sacramento, Carson City, and Salt Lake City.

Most of the Chinese who came to California were unskilled and uneducated laborers. Many received assistance from the “Six Companies,” Chinese benevolent associations that helped Chinese survive in an alien environment. The companies contracted for large bodies of laborers and acted as clearing-houses for all sorts of transactions among the Chinese. Four of these “companies” were represented in Chinese Camp.

Life could be rough for the Chinese in the early days. In 1856, Chinese Camp was the site of one of the earliest violent struggles between rival tongs in the gold fields, when members of the Tan Woo Tong faced off against Sam Yap Tong members. About one thousand men scuffled as the two tongs fought for control of the village. Fortunately, casualties were light due to the preferred choice of weapons — swords. When American lawmen finally intervened to halt the bloodshed, there were four dead and several more wounded (Pryor 1999, 199).

When the gold mines in the area petered out after the Gold Rush, many of the Chinese miners moved on, but a few brave Chinese hung on until the last two departed by train for Chinatown in San Francisco in the 1920s. They left behind a remarkably preserved ghost town and, one presumes, the ghosts of many of the lonely Chinese miners who died there, their dreams of returning to China with pockets full of gold permanently thwarted.

Today one can walk the streets of the old town. A few residents live on the outskirts, but most of the buildings standing in the blazing sun are empty save for the ghosts of the original miners who gave life to the town. Main Street is an oddity — it must have been the heart of the Chinese community, but all of the buildings including the old Wells Fargo office stand empty and in a state of virtual collapse. Many decades have passed since anybody lived there; however, a stone and brick post office dating from 1854 still serves the area’s residents and St. Francis Xavier is still maintained by the townspeople.
Fittingly, the town’s modern school is built in the shape of an old Chinese pagoda with a gaily painted Chinese-style roof. It seems that the area’s largely white residents enjoy this quaint reminder of the village’s lively past. Chinese Camp’s one tiny general store and saloon sell large blankets and rugs festooned with Chinese-looking tigers. California has many incredible ghost towns, but Chinese Camp is the only one that reflects the Chinese mining heritage of the 1849 Gold Rush. It is well worth a visit.

Notes

1Placer mining is the mining of alluvial for minerals. It may be done by open-pit mining or by various forms of tunneling into ancient riverbeds.

2The first Chinese who came to America often banded together in mutual support secret societies called tongs. Each tong provided a degree of protection and support for members. There were frequent, often violent showdowns among the tong for power and influence in Chinatowns across the West. These organizations sometimes engaged in activities that flouted the law, notably feuding with other tongs, gambling, and importing women from China to serve as prostitutes.

References
