

Ephemera Pictures presents

VANISHING CHINATOWN



THE WORLD OF THE
MAY'S PHOTO STUDIO

Producers: *Lydia Tanji & Wylie Wong*
Director/Editor: *Emiko Omori*
Executive Producer: *gayle k. yamada*
Cinematographer: *Michael Chin*
Consultant: *Wendy Slick*

"Heartfelt, beautifully told ..."

— David Henry Hwang, Playwright

"A celebration of the human spirit ..."

— Don Ed Hardy, Artist and Author



www.vanishingchinatown.com



TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR
VANISHING CHINATOWN:
THE WORLD OF THE MAY'S PHOTO STUDIO
A FILM BY EPHEMERA PICTURES

Written for high schools and community colleges by
Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE)
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI), Stanford University

Copyright © 2026
By the Leland Stanford Junior University Board of Trustees

For further information contact:
Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE)
Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI)
Stanford University

<http://spice.stanford.edu>
E-mail: SPICE-sales@stanford.edu

[Facebook](#)

[X](#)

VANISHING CHINATOWN: THE WORLD OF THE MAY'S PHOTO STUDIO

Organizing Questions

- How did the residents of San Francisco's Chinatown choose to portray their values and cultural identity through photographs?
- Before digital media became widespread, what role did photographs play in defining and preserving identity, family, and community?
- What do we lose when we fail to preserve physical media and artifacts?

Summary

The award-winning public television film *Vanishing Chinatown: The World of The May's Photo Studio* explores how much we can learn from the discarded images from a photography studio. After opening in 1923, May's Photo Studio captured the history of residents of San Francisco's Chinatown for nearly 50 years. The collection of photographs tells so many stories that were almost lost: how families separated by an ocean stayed connected; how Chinese immigrants wanted to be remembered; creative resistance to the Chinese Exclusion Act; and the community institutions that developed and flourished in Chinatown, especially Cantonese opera.

The rescued photographs tell the story of Leo and Isabella May Chan Lee, the owners of May's Photo Studio, and their descendants. Their granddaughter, Corinne Chan Takayama, describes how the photographs helped her recall fragments of her childhood and the Chinatown community she grew up in.

This teacher's guide provides the context for students to fully understand what the treasure trove of photographs from May's Photo Studio can teach us about the past and about how media continue to shape our identity and sense of community even today. Before watching the film, students use contemporary media to create a personal narrative and better understand how images shape our legacy.

Students then read a background piece on Chinese immigration to the United States and San Francisco's Chinatown before watching the film and taking notes on its themes. Working in groups, they review posed photographs from the May's Photo Studio collection and compare them to the images they created at the start of the unit.

Students then imagine they lived in the time of May's Photo Studio and create a photograph of how they would have wanted to be photographed at the time. Students then review a playbill and photographs from a performance of Cantonese opera to understand why this art form played such a prominent role in the Chinatown community for decades.

To conclude their exploration of the film, students curate a photographic exhibition on the Chinatown of May's Photo Studio, where they act as docents to explain the importance and value of the photographs to a wider audience.

Objectives	Through the course of this teacher's guide, students will • gain an appreciation for the power and role of photographs in forming and preserving identity, community, and history before the advent of digital media; • reflect upon what posed photographs can tell us about their subjects and how they wanted to be remembered; • gain appreciation for the variety of cultural influences in San Francisco's Chinatown; and • understand the value of preserving physical media and artifacts.
Materials	Film, <i>Vanishing Chinatown: The World of The May's Photo Studio</i>, online at https://www.pbs.org/video/vanishing-chinatown-1rmqri/ Handout 1A, <i>Visual Media and Identity</i>, 30 copies Handout 1B, <i>Reflections on Images and Identity</i>, 30 copies Handout 2A, <i>Background to Vanishing Chinatown</i>, 30 copies Handout 2B, <i>Notes on Vanishing Chinatown</i>, 30 copies Handout 3A, <i>Background to Posed Photographs</i>, 30 copies Handout 3B, <i>Create Your Own Posed Photograph</i>, 30 copies Handout 4A, <i>Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown</i>, 30 copies Handout 4B, <i>Cantonese Opera Photographs</i>, 30 copies Answer Guide 2A, <i>Notes on Vanishing Chinatown</i> Answer Guide 3A, <i>Deciphering Posed Photographs</i> Answer Guide 4A, <i>Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown</i>
Equipment	• Computer with Internet access and an HTML5-supported web browser • Computer projector and screen
Teacher Preparation (Overall)	Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes. 1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts. 2. Preview the film <i>Vanishing Chinatown: The World of The May's Photo Studio</i>, online at https://www.pbs.org/video/vanishing-chinatown-1rmqri/ (running time: 27 minutes). 3. Become familiar with the content of the handouts and answer guides.

4. Set up and test your class computer and projector before starting the lesson.

Time (Overall) Up to seven 50-minute class periods, plus homework between class periods

Part 1: Introduction to Visual Media and Identity

Time One 50-minute class period, plus homework beforehand

Teacher Preparation

1. Set up a shared site or platform where students can easily upload images (Google Slides, PowerPoint, Canva, etc.).
2. Determine which image formats your chosen platform supports (JPEG, PNG, PDF, etc.) and ensure students know how to save their images in one of these image formats.

Procedures Before Day One

1. Inform students that they will be reviewing a unique film called *Vanishing Chinatown* that explores the role of photographs as memory and legacy and how art can capture the history of a vanishing community. Before viewing the film, the class will explore how images shape and inform their identity.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1A, *Visual Media and Identity*, to each student to complete as homework and let them know the due date. Students will need substantial time to complete the handout, so assign it several days before formally starting the unit.

Day One

1. Organize the class into groups of four students.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1B, *Reflections on Images and Identity*, to each student. Allow students the rest of the class period to discuss and complete the handout as a group. If needed, allow students to complete the handout as homework.
3. Remind students to keep these images and their discussion in mind as they watch the film and engage in the other activities in this unit.

Part 2: Understand the Film

Time Two 50-minute class periods, plus homework between class periods

Procedures Day One

1. Organize students into groups of three to four students each.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 2A, *Background to Vanishing Chinatown*, to each student.

3. Allow students 30 minutes to read through the handout and discuss the questions on the last page in their groups.
4. Bring the class back together for the last 10–15 minutes of the class period. Ask a representative from each group to share its responses to the questions at the end of Handout 2A.
5. Before the class period ends, distribute one copy of Handout 2B, *Notes on Vanishing Chinatown*, to each student. Instruct students to watch the film and answer the questions before the next class period.

Before Day Two Students watch the film and complete Handout 2B, *Notes on Vanishing Chinatown*. Tell students to reserve 60–90 minutes to watch the film and complete the handout.

Day Two

1. Use Answer Guide 2A, *Notes on Vanishing Chinatown*, to lead a full-class discussion on the questions in Handout 2B. Allow students to adjust their responses as they see fit.
2. Once the discussion is done, collect Handout 2B from each student for assessment.

Part 3: Investigating Posed Photographs from May's Photo Studio

Time Two 50-minute class periods, plus homework between class periods

Teacher Preparation

1. Determine how to give students access to the 10 posed photographs linked in Handout 3A, *Background to Posed Photographs*. You can provide students direct digital access to Handout 3A or copy the links from the handout and post them on the most convenient platform for your students (Google Docs, Canvas, etc.).
2. Create a slideshow file for the class in your preferred platform (Google Slides, PowerPoint, etc.) for students to upload their assignments in response to Handout 3B.
3. Determine what image formats (JPEG, PNG, PDF, etc.) can be uploaded to your slideshow platform so you can instruct students to use these formats.

Procedures Day One

1. Organize students into groups of three or four students.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 3A, *Background to Posed Photographs*, to each student. Ensure the class can access the digital images of posed photographs mentioned in the handout.
3. Allow 30–45 minutes for students to complete Handout 3A in their groups.
4. Before the class period ends, collect Handout 3A for assessment and distribute one copy of Handout 3B, *Create Your Own Posed Photograph*,

to each student. Instruct students to complete this assignment as homework. Tell students where to upload their final image and which file formats they can use.

Before Day Two Students complete the assignment listed on Handout 3B, *Create Your Own Posed Photograph*.

Day Two

1. Display the completed slideshow with all students' images. Ask each student to come to the front of the class in turn and answer the following questions in two minutes or less:
 - a. What did you want to convey with your posed photograph?
 - b. How do your choices of backdrop, clothing, props, and pose contribute to this goal?
2. With a class of 30 students, this activity will take the entire class period. If you finish earlier, either lead a debrief conversation asking the class what themes they saw across the images, or advance to Part 4 and distribute one copy of Handout 4A, *Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown*, to each student to read as described in the procedures below.

Part 4: The Importance of Cantonese Opera in Chinatown

Time Two 50-minute class periods, plus homework before each class period

Teacher Preparation

1. Determine how to give students access to the 10 photographs of Cantonese opera performances linked in Handout 4A, *Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown*. You can provide students direct digital access to Handout 4A or copy the links from the handout and post them on the most convenient platform for your students (Google Docs, Canvas, etc.).
2. Assign these 10 photographs among the students in your classroom. The procedures below assume groups of three students each. With a class of 30 students, each group of three gets one of the 10 photographs. Adjust the photograph assignments based on the number of students in your classroom and the number of students per group; you may need to assign some photographs to more than one group.
3. Decide whether you prefer students to create the Cantonese opera playbill described in Handout 4B digitally or physically so you can instruct them accordingly.

Procedures Before Day One	Distribute one copy of Handout 4A, <i>Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown</i> , to each student. Instruct students to read through the handout and answer the questions at the end as homework.
Day One	1. Collect Handout 4A, <i>Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown</i>, for assessment. 2. Divide the class into small groups of three students each. 3. Distribute one copy of Handout 4B, <i>Cantonese Opera Photographs</i>, to each student. Allow students the rest of the class period to answer the questions in Part One of Handout 4B and prepare a playbill based on their assigned photograph as described in Part Two. 4. Allow students to complete the two assignments on Handout 4B as homework. Ask students to bring physical copies of their playbill to the next class period. If they prepare digital versions, ask them to send their file to you by the beginning of the next class period. <i>For a more creative option, modify the Part Two instructions to ask students to update the Cantonese opera production for today. What costumes would the performers wear? What musical styles and instruments might be used in the performance? What words and imagery would best publicize the performance?</i>
Before Day Two	Students complete the assignments listed on Handout 4B, <i>Cantonese Opera Photographs</i> .
Day Two	1. Call up each group in turn to display its playbill and explain its interpretation of the photograph and the language to promote the performance. 2. Once all groups have presented, hold a class vote on which playbill was most enticing, then ask them what made the winning playbill their favorite.
Extension	As a capstone, challenge students to create an exhibition on Chinatown per the following instructions: To conclude this unit, work in your small group to curate an exhibition on Chinatown using primary sources from May's Photo Studio. Use whichever media you believe are most appropriate, but be sure to convey: a. What lessons you want your exhibition to convey to the audience b. Which images you would choose c. How you would place and order the images to tell the narrative d. Where the exhibition would be located

Design a program for the exhibition with three to five paragraphs of notes to frame it for the audience.

Once complete, schedule a viewing for students' families, the school community, and / or local historical societies in which students act as docents and explain the exhibition to guests.

Assessment The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this unit:

1. Evaluate student responses to Handout 2B, *Notes on Vanishing Chinatown*, based on Answer Guide 2A, *Notes on Vanishing Chinatown*.
2. Use Answer Guide 3A, *Deciphering Posed Photographs*, to assess student responses to Handout 3A, *Background to Posed Photographs*.
3. Evaluate student responses to Handout 4A, *Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown*, based on Answer Guide 4A, *Background on Cantonese Opera in Chinatown*.
4. Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
 - clearly state their opinions, questions, and / or answers;
 - provide thoughtful answers;
 - exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
 - respect and acknowledge other students' comments; and
 - ask relevant and insightful questions.

VISUAL MEDIA AND IDENTITY

Modern communications technology has made it much cheaper and easier to capture images of ourselves. Formal, posed sessions with professional photographers were the primary way that people could capture an image of themselves before handheld cameras (and later, mobile phones) became more ubiquitous, higher quality, and cheaper. May's Photo Studio was one of the main professional places in San Francisco's Chinatown where people could go for these photographs, so they put a lot of thought into these sessions.

To gain insight into how important photographs were in the 1920s and how much has changed since then, complete the following assignment by the assigned due date.

1. Imagine you could only keep five images of yourself for posterity. Which images would they be? Why would you choose them? Select five images, place these into the presentation format recommended by your teacher, and be ready to explain your choices.

If you like, you can change the background on these images; this is something that people did even back when May's Photo Studio opened in the 1920s.

2. Find or create a single image of everyone you consider family taken within the past year. Add this image to your presentation.

If you don't have one photograph with everyone, combine several using any tool you prefer. As you'll see later in the unit, people have been creating composite family photographs for at least a century!

3. Finally, ask someone you know well who was born before 1970 to select one pre-digital image they would want to preserve for posterity. Find this image and upload it to your presentation.

If the person does not live nearby, ask them to take a picture of their image and send it to you. Make sure they tell you the original medium of each image: was it originally a developed photograph, Polaroid photograph, painting, or some other kind of image?

If no one immediately comes to mind, think through your family members, mentors, neighbors, coaches, and family friends.

REFLECTIONS ON IMAGES AND IDENTITY

Share the images you uploaded in response to Handout 1A with the other members of your group. After everyone has shared, discuss the following questions as a group. Record your responses below.

1. What differences, if any, did you notice in the medium and content of the images selected by your generation vs. people from earlier generations?
2. What do the images you selected say about you? What do the images of older individuals say about them?
3. If you had to flee from your house due to an imminent natural disaster and could only choose one physical image of yourself to take with you, which would it be and why? What one physical image of a loved one would you want to preserve?

4. Preserving developed photographs is notoriously difficult. They can be damaged through humidity, mold, exposure to light, and creases. Developed photographs are also often lost or mistakenly disposed of, as happened with the trove of photographs from May's Photo Studio. Imagine you had lost all the images of your family from before 1980. What impact would that have on your family's sense of its identity and history?

- 10**

BACKGROUND TO *VANISHING CHINATOWN*

Overview of Chinese Immigration to the United States

Chinese-American history has been marked by alternating periods of welcome and rejection and has been shaped by events in both the United States and China. The first Chinese migrants to the United States came from Canton (now called Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province) in the mid-nineteenth century, propelled by “push” factors at home (war, social upheaval, poverty, and natural disasters) and “pull” factors in the United States (gold, higher wages, and the possibility of earning enough to support their families back in China).

These immigrants worked in gold mines and, most consequentially, on the U.S. transcontinental railroad. By 1867, an estimated 10,000–15,000 Chinese immigrants were working on the Central Pacific Railroad, comprising roughly 90 percent of its workforce. Despite their contributions to the American workforce, legal and social acceptance did not follow. Anti-Chinese sentiment crested in the 1870s and 1880s, fueled by economic downturns and political opportunism. A succession of laws progressively narrowed Chinese immigrants’ rights and mobility: the Page Act (1875) restricted the entry of many Chinese women; the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) halted the immigration of Chinese laborers and made naturalization impossible; and the Scott Act (1888) and Geary Act (1892) tightened restrictions. In addition to these legal restrictions, Chinese communities all over the western United States were plagued by expulsions, arson, and lynchings; many rural Chinatowns were destroyed.

At the same time, a handful of court cases carved out limited protections. In *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886) the U.S. Supreme Court held that facially neutral laws applied discriminatorily violated the Fourteenth Amendment; in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) the Court affirmed birthright citizenship. But for the most part, legal restrictions to Chinese migrants continued into the early twentieth century. Angel Island opened in the San Francisco Bay in 1910 to interrogate and detain Asian arrivals; the Immigration Act of 1917 created an “Asiatic Barred Zone;” and the Immigration Act of 1924 instituted national origins quotas that effectively shut the door to immigrants from China.

Congress did not repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act until 1943, when China was a U.S. ally in World War II. But it wasn’t until the Hart–Celler Act of 1965 that large-scale Chinese immigration was legal again. The new wave of Chinese immigrants since 1965 brought a much more diverse group of arrivals representing new professions, languages, and regions of China.

Throughout these decades, Chinese Americans were stereotyped variously as indispensable workers, alien competitors, and Cold War adversaries. These oscillations shaped the strategies by which Chinese-American communities have endured and evolved.

The Importance of San Francisco’s Chinatown

Most of the first Chinese immigrants to the United States arrived in San Francisco, where a Chinatown quickly grew to become the cultural capital and logistical hub of the Chinese community in the United States. Located a short walk from docks and piers and near Portsmouth Square, San Francisco’s early civic center, Chinatown was both a port-of-entry and a place of return for itinerant workers. In the nineteenth century, its population fluctuated with the rhythms of labor demand, ranging from roughly 20,000 to 60,000 as men cycled between railroad fronts, mining districts, farms, and urban job markets. Newcomers were received at the

waterfront by fellow Chinese who guided them to lodging houses, clan associations, temples, and labor brokers.

Chinatown provided a familiar and safe space for Chinese immigrants. Its density offered protection in numbers from larger American society, which was often openly hostile and even violent toward those of Chinese origin. Clan associations organized by surname, district of origin, occupation, or mutual aid arranged for temporary and permanent housing, mediated disputes, extended loans, provided translation, and coordinated charity.

Chinatown's dense concentration of Chinese immigrants also made it a natural center for businesses that served Chinese customers, such as groceries, restaurants, laundries, shops, import-export firms, medical practices, and theaters. The neighborhood also hosted many services to connect immigrants to their families back in Canton through letters, shipments, and remittances.

In addition to commerce and administration, Chinatown brought entertainment and social life typical of Canton to the immigrant community: temples, festivals, language schools, and Cantonese opera. Troupes from China sometimes performed for months, transforming theaters into centers of memory and community.

Few of these functions were known to non-Chinese observers, who played up Chinatown as a zone of vice and curiosity. Outside journalists and photographers focused on the crowded conditions of Chinatown and opium dens, gambling, and prostitution. Arnold Genthe's famous photographs accentuated "otherness," sometimes by cropping out signs of Western modernity. Because English-language accounts dominated public discourse, these outsider depictions shaped national perceptions far more than the sparse written records left by early Chinese migrants themselves. For Chinese residents, however, Chinatown served as a familiar home, administrative center, and place of refuge where they could live within a protective web of language, customs, and associations while navigating the hostile society just outside its borders.

As anti-Chinese sentiment softened in the early twentieth century, the rituals and institutions of Chinatown started to take in some elements of life outside the neighborhood. Clan halls and district associations continued to provide mutual aid and mediate conflicts, and temples, festivals, and rituals such as weddings and funerals preserved Chinese customs. However, Cantonese opera troupes increasingly incorporated styles and costumes from American media, especially as motion pictures became popular. They also started to use Western musical instruments like the violin and saxophone.

Chinese Americans began to dress, dine, and work across cultural lines. Portraits from the early twentieth century show Chinese Americans wearing Western suits beside embroidered gowns while attending mah-jongg (also spelled "mahjong") parties as well as American civic and business meetings. Such juxtapositions demonstrate how Chinese Americans began to integrate into American society without abandoning their cultural heritage.

Perhaps most important for the context of the film, photographs became a core medium for Chinese Americans to preserve how they wanted others to remember them. Studio portraits and their deliberate poses, elegant attire, and painted backdrops served as enduring mementos of self-image and aspiration, keepsakes mailed to relatives, and artifacts displayed at home.

As the most popular professional photography studio in Chinatown, May's Photo Studio's captured the images Chinese Americans wanted to preserve of themselves for posterity. The prints from May's Photo Studio would have been lost to history if not for the keen eye of an

aspiring art dealer, Wylie Wong, who fortuitously recognized the artistic importance of the discarded photographs.

Vanishing Chinatown tells the story of May's Photo Studio, the family that ran the studio, how its photographs trace the development of Chinese-American identity, and what we lose when these mementos are lost or destroyed. It demonstrates the irreplaceable role photographs played in shaping the identity and memory of early generations. In the film, the photographers' granddaughter Corinne comes to understand the context of her family and her childhood through some of the photographs recovered from May's Photo Studio. It's similar to what you may have experienced when viewing photographs of your great-grandparents or other ancestors for the first time.

Pre-Film Questions

In your small groups, draw on what you've read about Chinatown and the role of photographs in capturing memory to answer these questions:

1. What piqued your interest when reading this background? What do you hope to learn from the film?
2. What role did developed photographs play from the 1920s to 1960s? What media play a similar role today?
3. If you came across a box of discarded photographs from Chinatown spanning the 1920s to 1960s, what types of images or groups would you be most excited to see? Why?

NOTES ON *VANISHING CHINATOWN*

1. Set aside 60–90 minutes.
 2. Navigate to <https://www.pbs.org/video/vanishing-chinatown-1rmqri/> (or search for “PBS *Vanishing Chinatown*”) and view the 27-minute film *Vanishing Chinatown: The World of The May’s Photo Studio*.
 3. After viewing the film, answer the questions below. Return to the film as needed to answer these questions. See the end of the handout for a guide to people in the film and key terms.
 4. Prepare to discuss your responses to these questions during the next class period.
-

1. What did the rediscovered photographs reveal to Corinne about her family and ancestry?
2. In what ways does the film highlight the use of one’s name as a marker of identity?
3. What made photographs so important during the time period when May’s Photo Studio was open? Think about how different it was to make, create, and store photographs compared with modern-day visual media.

5. What role did photographs play in shaping family histories for the residents of Chinatown?

Guide to People Mentioned in the Film

Leo Chan Lee: photographer and co-founder of May's Photo Studio in Chinatown. He was born in China in 1894 and immigrated to the United States in 1911 as a revolutionary fleeing China. He originally ran an import-export business, then studied photography under W.W. Swadley and co-founded May's Photo Studio with his wife.

Isabella May Chan Lee: Born in San Francisco in 1889 as one of eight siblings. She co-founded May's Photo Studio with her husband Leo. "May" was her nickname, used by family and friends.

Stanford Chan Lee: only child of May and Leo; he inherited the photography studio after his parents died.

Corinne Chan Takayama: daughter of Stanford Chan Lee; granddaughter of May and Leo.

Key Terms (in alphabetical order)

certificate of residence—photographic identification document Chinese immigrants were required to carry under U.S. exclusion laws. It proved legal entry and was needed for reentry after travel abroad.

Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)—first major U.S. law to ban immigration based on nationality. It prohibited nearly all Chinese laborers from entering the United States and denied citizenship to Chinese residents.

Cantonese opera—traditional form of Chinese musical theater combining singing, acting, martial arts, and elaborate costumes.

flash powder—mixture used in early photography to create a bright burst of light for exposures, producing both smoke and a loud flash.

Gong Gong—Cantonese term for maternal grandfather.

handbill—a small, printed sheet of paper distributed by hand and used to promote local events (in this case, Cantonese opera performances).

mah-jongg (*also spelled mahjong*)—Chinese tile game usually played by four people; popular at social gatherings and community events.

paper sons and daughters—Chinese immigrants who entered the United States using falsified identity papers claiming to be children of Chinese-American citizens, which was one of the only ways to enter the United States during the period of exclusion laws.

Po Po—Cantonese term for maternal grandmother.

USO—United Service Organizations, an organization created in 1941 to provide morale and recreation services to U.S. military personnel during World War II.

YWCA—Young Women's Christian Association, an international nonprofit organization that promotes the spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical welfare of women and girls.

BACKGROUND TO POSED PHOTOGRAPHS

Background

The majority of the photographs recovered from May's Photo Studio were formally posed photographs of members of the Chinatown community. Formal photography sessions were relatively expensive and thus rare, so subjects took the time to dress and pose as they wanted to be remembered.

The backdrops, costumes, and poses from May's Photo Studio reveal how people in Chinatown sought to shape their legacy. Many used painted backdrops to evoke dreamlike visions of China, promoting nostalgia and cultural continuity. Costumes ranged from Western formalwear to Chinese opera attire, signaling dual identities as both modern Americans and proud bearers of tradition. Poses were deliberate and dignified, mirroring middle-class portraiture conventions that asserted respectability and permanence. Together, these artistic choices countered stereotypes by presenting Chinese Americans as elegant, cultured, and self-possessed. The portraits thus became a form of self-authored history, recording not just appearance but aspiration: how people wished to be seen, remembered, and integrated into the American story.

Task

As a group, review these 10 posed photographs from May's Photo Studio.

#	Name and Link
1	Man in front of bridge backdrop
2	Woman standing with peacock feather fan
3	Woman wearing hat with hand on table
4	Woman with heels seated on bench
5	Group shot - young women
6	Group shot - women and children
7	Young woman - copy print
8	Color transparency - couple
9	Portrait of a boy
10	Woman with child on bench

Refer to these photographs as you discuss and respond to the following questions. Look closely at each photograph for clues about how the subject wanted to portray themselves, including props, poses, and clothing.

handout 3a

1. How would you place these photographs on a spectrum of traditional Chinese to mainstream American?
2. What markers seem to indicate that the subjects wanted to show themselves as more Western?
3. What ambitions do these photographs express?
4. What other questions do you have about these photographs and/or their subjects?

CREATE YOUR OWN POSED PHOTOGRAPH

At the beginning of this unit, you assembled five images of yourself that highlighted how you would want others to remember you at this point in your life. Now, imagine that you lived in Chinatown in 1930 and were given this same assignment. Naturally, you would go to May's Photo Studio for a posed photograph.

Given the tools available at the time, what background, costume, pose, and expression would you choose for the occasion? Remember that this posed photograph might be the only keepsake future generations would have to know about you.

Take a current image of yourself (whole body or face) and insert it into a posed photograph from the 1920s that only uses backdrops, clothing, and props from that time. Use whatever tool you wish to recreate the 1920s setting. Make sure you save your image in one of the file formats your teacher specifies.

Your teacher will compile these images into a slideshow that your class will go through during the next class period. Be prepared to answer the following two questions to explain your posed photograph to the class:

- What did you want to convey with your posed photograph?
- How do your choices of backdrop, clothing, props, and pose contribute to this goal?

BACKGROUND ON CANTONESE OPERA IN CHINATOWN

Read the following handout and answer the questions below before the next class period.

Questions

1. What roles did Cantonese opera play for the residents of Chinatown?
 2. What drove the evolution of themes, costumes, and backgrounds in Cantonese opera beginning in the 1920s?
 3. What factors led to the decline in attendance and popularity of Cantonese opera?
 4. In your community, what mediums or forms of entertainment play similar roles to that of Cantonese opera in Chinatown? In what sense do they do so?
-

Introduction

Cantonese opera was one of the most important cultural institutions in San Francisco's Chinatown. Brought by immigrants from the Pearl River Delta region of southern China (then referred to as "Canton") in the mid-nineteenth century, the art form quickly became a cornerstone of community life. Its elaborate costumes, stylized gestures, and soaring vocals linked audiences to the world they had left behind. Beyond entertainment, Cantonese opera was educational, social, political, and emotional. It both preserved Cantonese traditions and fostered a novel Chinese-American identity.

When the first permanent Cantonese opera troupes arrived in California in 1852, Chinese immigrants were already confronting discrimination and violence. Later laws, especially the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, restricted the entry, residence, and citizenship of Chinese immigrants, forcing the community into a few blocks of San Francisco's Chinatown. Within those boundaries, opera houses offered refuge and continuity as well as one of the few forms of family entertainment available before radio, films, and television.

Performances were not just entertainment; they provided a reminder of the rhythms of home and exposure to Chinese language, art, and social order. Plots emphasized values such as filial piety, loyalty, and moral integrity and helped preserve a shared ethical framework for a population displaced and often unwelcome in greater American society.

Opera as a Living Newspaper

Before radio or accessible Chinese-language newspapers, Cantonese opera also served as a kind of news medium. Troupes arriving from Hong Kong or Canton (now Guangzhou) brought not only new plays but also the latest developments from China. Playwrights updated dialogue to reflect wars, revolutions, and scandals, allowing audiences to keep up with events in China. Actors sometimes held small signs identifying the characters they portrayed, allowing audiences with limited familiarity to follow the plot.

In the early twentieth century China was torn by revolution and foreign invasion, so patriotic themes became more prominent. Tales of heroic generals or corrupt officials echoed real-world struggles for survival and reform in China. Benefit performances raised funds for flood relief and wartime aid, transforming the theater into a space of education and mobilization.

Reinforcing Connection to China

Cantonese opera also functioned as cultural memory. Through its music and painted backdrops (often crafted by artists like Hok Muk Min, who also designed scenery for May's Photo Studio), it recreated the landscapes and rituals of southern China. For immigrants who could not return, the stage became a portal to an imagined homeland. At the same time, the opera house forged a new kind of community in America. Audiences from different districts and social classes came together and shared emotion, gossip, and commentary. Watching and discussing performances became a communal ritual that reinforced solidarity within the confines of Chinatown. Theaters were often supported by family associations and benevolent societies, providing employment for musicians, painters, and tailors while circulating money within Chinatown's economy. In this way, opera served not only as art and entertainment but also as a form of social infrastructure that bound Chinatown residents through shared experience and mutual aid.

Connecting Families Across Generations and Oceans

Cantonese opera connected families separated by migration. Letters and newspapers carried news of new plays and famous performers between San Francisco, Vancouver, and Hong Kong. Some troupes even traveled along these routes, bringing messages and remittances from relatives overseas. Within households, opera bridged generations. Parents took children to performances as cultural education, while elders found comfort in familiar sounds. Even after American-born generations shifted to English, the songs and gestures of opera symbolized heritage. The art form distinguished Chinatown as a uniquely Chinese space and provided continuity for a community living between worlds.

Modernization in the Early Twentieth Century

By the 1920s and 1930s, Cantonese opera in San Francisco began to reflect its hybrid surroundings. Performers borrowed elements from Western theater and Hollywood cinema, staging versions of popular contemporary motion pictures such as *Zorro* or *The Thief of Baghdad* alongside classical tales. This fusion reflected both curiosity about American culture and confidence in Chinese creativity.

The May's Photo Studio photographs of these productions capture this shift. Portraits of actors in glittering costumes against imaginative backdrops documented a vibrant artistic exchange between China and America. Rather than relics of the past, these images reveal opera as a living dialogue across cultures that bridged the nostalgic with the modern.

Decline and Legacy

By the mid-twentieth century, the centrality of Cantonese opera in Chinatown life began to fade. The arrival and increasing access of radio, film, and television, along with loosening immigration restrictions, diversified the community's entertainment and social world. Many theaters closed as younger generations embraced American popular culture. By 1959, the *San Francisco Examiner* stated that Chinatown's Great China Theatre (now called the Great Star Theater) was the only active Chinese opera house in the United States.

While no theater today is dedicated exclusively to Cantonese opera, its influence endures. The Great Star Theater still has several Cantonese opera performances each year, and community associations dedicated to producing Cantonese opera and preserving the art form in the United States sponsor performances at festivals and language schools to keep the tradition alive. (See, for example, the Jing Ying Cantonese Opera Institute founded in San Francisco in 1997.) In the past, opera productions raised funds to send famine and flood relief to China, and later

to help China resist the Japanese invasion. Many productions still raise funds for community organizations like Self-Help for the Elderly.

For historians and descendants, Cantonese opera offers a window into how early generations of Chinese immigrants sustained meaning and beauty under exclusion. More than any other art form, Cantonese opera both shaped and reflected the identity of a community that strived to maintain its traditional values and identity as it pursued new dreams in the United States.

Sources

Chinese Historical Society of America. "Collections and Exhibitions on Chinese Performing Arts in San Francisco's Chinatown." Accessed 6 November 2025. <https://chsa.org>

Great Star Theater, "A Century of Cultural Heritage (1925-2025)." Accessed 24 May 2026. <https://www.greatstartheater.org/blog/2025/century-of-cultural-heritage>

Lai, Him Mark. *Becoming Chinese American: A History of Communities and Institutions*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004.

Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Rao, Nancy Yunhwa. *Opera and the City: The Politics of Culture in Chinese American San Francisco*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Yung, Judy. *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

CANTONESE OPERA PHOTOGRAPHS

Part One: Photographs of Cantonese Opera Performances

As a group, review these photographs of Cantonese opera performances recovered from May's Photo Studio, then discuss the questions below. Designate one member of your group to write down your official group answers and turn them in by the next class period.

1. What jumps out to you about these photographs? What themes seem to recur?
2. What aspects of the photographs seem to reflect Chinese society? Which reflect U.S. society?
3. Which of the photographs most intrigues you? Why?
4. What might be lost if Cantonese opera were no longer performed?

#	Name and Link	Context
1	Battle with boats on stage	<i>unknown</i>
2	Republicans fighting warlord soldiers	Dramatization of a military campaign by the Chinese Republicans (Kuomintang)
3	Fallen traitors and girls holding signs	Likely the finale of an opera showing a compilation of patriotic images. Message was probably "If all factions in society unite, China will be victorious."
4	2 women in jail	<i>unknown</i>
5	Assassination attempt on Yuan Shikai by Yuan Ying	Attempt to kill Yuan Shikai, the Qing general who became the first president of the Republic of China and briefly declared himself emperor in December 1915
6	Escape of Sun Yat-Sen and Soong Ching Ling from Canton by ship	Dramatization of the June 1922 Chen Jiongming mutiny, when Sun Yat-Sen took refuge aboard the gunboat <i>Yongfeng</i> and Soong Ching-Ling escaped separately
7	Revolutionaries confront Zhang Mingqi	Shows the famous Second Guangzhou Uprising of April 1911, including Lin Juemin who was famous for the farewell letter to his wife. The white placards pinned to the actors show their names so the audience can follow who's who
8	Man on dragon and bridge flies above a fight on a bridge	The flying figure and dragon represent supernatural elements
9	Stage scene with coffin featuring actors Kwan Ying Lin and Nü Muzhen	<i>unknown</i>
10	Guan Yu in battle	Guan Yu was a Three Kingdoms general venerated as a god of war in Chinatown temples and fraternal halls

Part Two: Playbills

Context: For decades, Cantonese operas were performed almost daily in Chinatown. Theaters and troupes handed out playbills to help persuade audiences to attend performances. The following pages contain a playbill from a 1938 Cantonese opera performance along with its English translation.

handout 4b

Your mission: Now you get to design a playbill for a historical Cantonese opera performance—but using modern tools! Ask your teacher which photograph from Part One is assigned to your group, or if you can choose one of the photographs yourself. Imagine what the troupe was performing in your photograph. What they would have emphasized to attract an audience?

Design a playbill for this Cantonese opera performance in whichever format you think would be best (Canva, Instagram, Photoshop, short video, poster, etc.). Make sure your teacher approves of the format before you start. You will show this to your classmates in the next class period.

Adaptation / Creative Credit

Originally adapted / compiled by Gui Mingyang

Cast List

- Eunuch (court official role) — Leung Bik-lan
- “False Qin King” (impersonated Qin ruler) — Chan Siu-bak

Synopsis

Part Five of a serialized historical opera about the fall of the Qin and the catastrophe symbolized by the burning of the Epang Palace. This installment is the most intense yet, emphasizing large-scale scenes, heightened danger, and spectacle. The story is meant as tragic history rather than light romance.

Tickets / Seating / Prices

Private box seats: \$1.50

Premium front seats: \$1.00

Second-class seating: \$0.75

Third-class seating: \$0.50

Fourth-class seating: \$0.35

Lower prices at the 8:30pm and 9:30pm showtimes.

Upcoming Performances

Heart-and-Liver Gift to a Beauty (Part 1)

Twelvefold Feint

Poem Delivered in Mourning Garb

NOTES ON *VANISHING CHINATOWN*

Student responses should reflect the model responses below.

1. What did the rediscovered photographs reveal to Corinne about her family and ancestry?

The rediscovered photographs of Corinne's grandparents (Isabella May and Leo Chan Lee) from May's Photo Studio gave her a new perspective on her heritage. They showed her grandparents' artistry, passions, ambition, and central role in documenting the lives of Chinese Americans in San Francisco's Chinatown. The photographs helped Corinne recall stories about her grandparents and reinforced her connection to her relatives and the wider Chinatown community. She also learned the vital role her grandparents played in crafting and maintaining a visual record of the vibrancy and impact of Chinese Americans in San Francisco.

2. In what ways does the film highlight the use of one's name as a marker of identity?

The film explains how Leo Chan immigrated by purchasing "paper son" documents under the false surname "Lee." This was one of the few ways Chinese could legally enter the United States during the Chinese Exclusion Era. As a result, Leo's official family records all used the surname "Lee," though his true family name was Chan. This is a reminder of how Chinese immigrants had to navigate the strict exclusion laws to come to the United States.

When Leo's grandchildren reclaimed the name "Chan" as their middle name after marriage, they symbolically restored a lost heritage. In this case, the surname Chan is a reminder of the hardships that the family had to go through to establish themselves in the United States, as well as a reclamation of their true identity. However, the family retained the last name Lee in legal documents and on their tombstones.

3. What made photographs so important during the time period when May's Photo Studio was open? Think about how different it was to make, create, and store photographs compared with modern-day visual media.

During the early to mid-twentieth century, photographs were costly and precious artifacts that served practical, social, and emotional functions. For Chinese Americans living under exclusion laws, photographs served as the only legal proof of identity and citizenship recognized by the U.S. government, so they were essential identification documents.

Beyond formal identification, photographs were a medium of self-representation and pride. Families commissioned portraits to mark milestones, signal respectability, and assert belonging in a society that marginalized them. Many Chinese Americans mailed photographs across the Pacific Ocean, serving as emotional links between separated relatives as well as a visual history of key life events.

4. What do the choices of backdrops, costumes, and poses say about how Chinese Americans wanted to be portrayed and remembered?

The backdrops, costumes, and poses in the May's Photo Studio collection reveal how people in Chinatown sought to shape their personal narrative. Many used painted backdrops to evoke dreamlike visions of China, promoting nostalgia and cultural continuity. Costumes ranged from Western formal wear to imperial Chinese attire, signaling dual identities as both modern Americans and proud bearers of Chinese tradition. Poses were deliberate and dignified, mirroring middle-class portraiture

conventions that asserted respectability and permanence. These artistic choices presented Chinese Americans as elegant, cultured, and self-possessed—very different from the racist stereotypes of the time. The portraits thus became a form of self-authored history, recording not just appearance but aspiration: how people wished to be seen, remembered, and integrated into the American story.

5. What role did photographs play in preserving family histories for the residents of Chinatown?

Photographs served as one of the most enduring vessels of Chinese-American family history, especially when written records were scarce or destroyed (as happened in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake). The portraits from May's Photo Studio captured not only people but also the social worlds—homes, businesses, and celebrations—that defined Chinatown life. As oral histories faded or were fragmented by migration and assimilation, photographs provided continuity, helping later generations like Corinne's to discover and explore their ancestry. Each image links descendants to ancestors they had never met and perhaps know little about.

The recovery of these photographs turned private memories into collective history, proving that photographs could outlast loss, displacement, and even the destruction of archives. The camera preserved the visual evidence of a unique community's self-perception and aspirations and showed how Chinese Americans reconciled their ancestral homeland and their new lives in the United States.

DECIPHERING POSED PHOTOGRAPHS

These responses reflect current-day best guesses of what the posed photographs represent. However, they are not authoritative; other responses might also be accurate.

- How would you place these photographs on a spectrum of traditional Chinese to mainstream American?

The photographs could be ordered roughly as follows:

Most Traditional



Most American

Number and Name of Photograph
#9: Portrait of Boy
#1: Man in front of bridge backdrop
#2: Woman standing with peacock feather fan
#10: Woman with child on bench
#7: Young woman - copy print
#6: Group shot - women and children
#8: Color transparency - couple
#3: Woman wearing hat with hand on table
#5: Group shot - young women
#4: Woman with heels seated on bench

The backdrops in almost all photographs are renditions of Chinese landscapes with pagodas, moon bridges, and willows. These were likely the only (or most common) backdrops at May's Photo Studio. Thus, attire makes all the difference. At the extremes, the woman in #4 is wearing 100% Western clothing while the boy in image #9 is wearing traditional Chinese attire except for his shoes.

The woman in image 3 is a great example of someone in the middle: she's wearing a Western hat and Western shoes along with a fully embroidered Chinese ensemble.

The couple in image #8 show the greatest contrast: the man is dressed in Western clothing (a three-piece suit and necktie) and holding what looks like a Western book, while the woman is wearing a Chinese jacket and trousers.

- What markers seem to indicate that the subjects wanted to show themselves as more Western?
 - The hat that the women in image #3 and image #4 are wearing is called a "cloche hat" and was a popular element of U.S. fashion in the 1920s.*
 - Leather shoes were another indicator of Western clothing; these are visible in images 2 and 10 as well as on the boy in image 9 (who is otherwise in Chinese dress).*
 - The bobbed hair of the young women in image 5 indicate American fashion. The fact that they are all wearing the same light print dresses and have their arms linked indicates they belong to the same American institution, such as a school, church, or club. The eyeglasses that two of them are wearing probably represent evidence of schooling.*
 - The books in images 6 and 8 and the white gloves in images 8 and 9 are props meant to convey Western respectability.*

- *The hand-on-table stance in image 3 and the crossed legs in image 4 are postures borrowed from Western portrait convention.*

3. What ambitions do these photographs express?

- *The man in image 1 seems to want to show himself as a prospering husband to his family and/or wife back in China.*
- *The elaborate gowns in images 2 and 7 may be a way for a family to show their prosperity and attract a husband for their daughters.*
- *Image 5 expresses a group of women belonging to some type of respectable American institution.*
- *Images 6 and 10 portray mothers who are raising and schooling their children properly.*
- *The well-dressed boy in image 9 seems to be an attempt to show family back in China that their child is thriving.*

One common theme from all photographs is the desire to show prosperity through expensive silk and embroidery, jewelry, headwear, and the ability to pay for a professional photography shoot itself.

4. What other questions do you have about these photographs and/or their subjects?

Student responses will vary. Check that students include at least a few questions and that students' questions weren't already answered in the film or previous activities or handouts.

BACKGROUND ON CANTONESE OPERA IN CHINATOWN

Student responses should reflect the model responses below.

1. What roles did Cantonese opera play for the residents of Chinatown?

Cantonese opera played multiple roles for the residents of Chinatown, including:

- *Popular entertainment*
- *A cultural anchor that preserved Chinese language, values, and traditions*
- *Transmission of news, fashion, and cultural trends from China*
- *Safe space for community gatherings and fundraisers*
- *Source of employment and income for local artists*
- *Means to raise funds to send to China for wartime aid, charity, or recovery from natural disasters*

2. What drove the evolution of themes, costumes, and backgrounds in Cantonese opera beginning in the 1920s?

In the 1920s and 1930s, Cantonese opera began to incorporate influences from Western theater and Hollywood films. This change was driven by the growing interest in and access to American popular culture and the community's growing confidence in blending East and West. Artists experimented with new stories, costumes, and visual effects that reflected both Chinese tradition and modern American life. These changes made Cantonese opera a medium of cultural exchange in addition to a means to preserve the past and narrate events in China.

3. What factors led to the decline in attendance and popularity of Cantonese opera?

New entertainment and communications technologies (first radio, then film, and later television) contributed to the decline of Cantonese opera. Also, immigration reform and economic and generational change diversified the community over time. Younger generations of Chinese Americans who were educated in English and influenced by American culture found the language and style of Cantonese opera harder to understand. Without regular audiences, opera lost its central role in community life and many traditional theaters closed. Though still performed today for cultural, fundraising, and educational purposes, Cantonese opera no longer serves as the social and emotional hub it once was in Chinatown.

4. In your community, what mediums or forms of entertainment play similar roles to that of Cantonese opera in Chinatown? In what sense do they do so?

Answers will vary; potential responses include:

- *Streaming shows*
- *Comedy skit troupes*
- *Influencers on social media who share the news in an entertaining way*
- *Late-night comedy shows that mix entertainment with news*
- *Festivals and cultural fairs that mix storytelling, art, and identity*