

# Incense and Candlesticks

Fire Ritual in Household and Small Scale Religious  
Practices at the Market Street Chinatown, San Jose

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Religion is often said to be integral to the lives and to the civilization of the Chinese culture. To understand their culture necessitates an understanding of their religion and its rituals. This generalization is often extended to the study of Overseas Chinese communities both in the United States and across the world. However, a significant aspect of that religion is often overlooked in this context, that of domestic religion and ritual. Such small scale religious practices are the foundation of the Chinese Religion, but have never before been explored in the archaeological record of Overseas Chinese sites. This is likely due to problems with the visibility of such rituals in the archaeological record. Using the collections from the archaeological excavations of the Market Street Chinatown of San Jose, California, a profile of the domestic altar will be established that can be used to identify small scale religion in the archaeological record. This profile will be the foundation for further research into the domestic religion of Chinese Overseas sites, and its significance in the lives of its adherents.

Studying such small scale religious practices at the Market Street Chinatown is very important for a number of reasons. First, the Market Street Chinatown was a mixed overseas Chinese community, consisting of both bachelor workers and families. This provides a level of comparison within the Chinatown itself, helping to determine whether such practices occurred among communities of male laborers, within family units, or both. Second, the Market Street site was occupied relatively early in the Chinese migrations to the United States, roughly 1860 to its destruction in 1887 (Young Yu 2001). The religious practices of early Chinese immigrants who would have still been subject to the political control of religion under the last emperors in China can thus be explored. Third, the fact that the Market Street site was suddenly destroyed in an arson fire in 1887 increases the chances of finding ceremonial objects in archaeological contexts, objects which would have normally been curated and passed down from one generation to the

next. These factors make it possible to study domestic and small scale religion at the Market Street Chinatown of San Jose, as well as providing an important historical frame-of-reference in which these practices can be interpreted.

### Historical Background

Chinese Religion, as it existed in the Late Imperial Period, was a combination of many different influences, both religious and philosophical. Chinese Religion is the result of thousands of years of history in which the religious practices of the Chinese people encountered numerous influences, including Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, shamanism, geomancy, cults to local gods and ancestor worship (Chee-Beng 2006 and Nyitray 2006). These religions and philosophies are generally not practiced individually, but together form a rich mosaic of traditional beliefs and practices. However, the multi-faceted nature of Chinese Religion prevents a strict definition of a specific set of beliefs or practices that are indicative of Chinese Religion in all periods and regions. The relationships between the various components of this religion are constantly being negotiated and renegotiated by its practitioners. In this sense, Chinese Religion is dynamic and susceptible to new influences, with different meanings for its practitioners, as fact which did not change when practitioners moved to new lands. As evidenced in later Chinatowns in the United States and elsewhere, the traditional religion of the Chinese immigrants was simultaneously practiced with Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Jochim 2006). The traditional beliefs and practices of Chinese Religion are intimately bound up in the history and the existence of the Chinese civilization and people, whether those in mainland China or overseas.

In its traditional form, Chinese Religion is heavily based on practice and participation in ritual. Practitioners are less concerned with the demonstration of proper theological beliefs, than

they are with the proper enactment of ritual and worship (Chee-Beng 2006). Worship often took the form of ritual offerings, known as *paai* rites, to honor various supernatural beings, including gods, spirits, ghosts and ancestors. Such offerings might take the form of “incense, food, and paper representations of money, clothing, and other wealth goods” (Anderson and Lawton 1987: 29). These offerings, in the case of incense and paper, were burned at an altar, thereby becoming “wealth goods in the spirit world,” while food was symbolically eaten by the gods or ancestors and then consumed by the worshipers themselves (Anderson and Lawton 1987: 29). In some contexts, these offerings were made on a daily basis, though they were more often reserved for holidays and other important events. While many of the traditions and specifics of rituals have no doubt changed greatly over the years, Gong (2005) provides an introduction to the various rituals that are still practiced among Chinese-Americans today.

The practice of ancestor worship is an extremely important aspect of Chinese Religion, one that dates back to the Late Neolithic Period in China. The concept behind ancestor worship was that the dead had to be provided for just as the living, their needs for food and clothing had to be met through offerings given by their descendents (Feuchtwang 1974). In return for fulfilling their needs, it was presumed that the ancestors would look out for the living and bring them luck. No real power, comparable to that possessed by the gods, was assigned to the ancestors, but the angry or hungry ghost could bring bad luck or curses on its living descendents (Wolf 1974). Offerings to the ancestors could be made in large lineage halls, where all the ancestors of a particular clan were worshipped together, as well as in private temples and at the family altar.

While virtually every community, even the smallest of villages, had its own temple devoted to the worship of the gods, Chinese Religion very often included a domestic component,

rituals conducted in private businesses or in homes. Small altars were commonly found in both homes and businesses, where worship was conducted to honor gods, ghosts and ancestors (Chee-Beng 2006). Altars were generally placed in the main room or guest room of the house, where it could be viewed by all who entered the house. The domestic altar was the smallest unit of religious worship, connected to the local temple and to the main temple or clan hall through incense. Processions where the temple incense burner was carried through the community were believed to reconnect each of the household incense burners to the community temple. The frequency of offerings made at the domestic altar varied greatly, from daily to only on very special occasions like festivals and the death-day of the ancestors (Feuchtwang 1974 and Wolf 1974). The maintenance of the family altar and offerings to the ancestors was a source of order in the world view of the Late Imperial Period. Such domestic worship was integral to Chinese Religion, as it represented the lowest rung on the hierarchy of religious ritual and practice.

A variety of gods were worshipped at the domestic altar along side the ancestors of the family. One god that was commonly worshipped in the domestic sphere was the Stove or Kitchen God. This god was only worshipped at the household level. An image of this god was kept above the household stove year-round, and represented the community of the household. During the Chinese New Year's celebrations, the image of the Stove God was ritually burned on the altar and believed to travel to heaven to act as a witness to the actions of the family during the last year (Wolf 1974 and Gong 2005). Ancestor worship, honoring the line of the male head of the household, was also conducted at the domestic altar. The obligations to the family and to the ancestors were some of the most sacred obligations in Chinese Religion, including funerary rites and the observance of death-day (Jochim 2006).

Ritual and worship at the domestic altar was primarily family based in the Late Imperial Period, and often associated with women. Women were the primary guardians of the family altar and it was their responsibility to care for the offerings of their husband's ancestors (Zhou 2003). Participation in domestic ritual typically did not begin until marriage for both men and women, when they set up their own home and altar (Chee-Beng 2006). Women were effectively excluded from religion until after their marriage. During the Late Imperial Period, there was resurgence in the emphasis placed on the domestic altar and the role of women in domestic ritual and religion, a trend meant to keep women within the domestic sphere and prevent them from worshipping in temples (Zhou 2003).

Studies of domestic and small scale religious practices in the context of Chinese overseas communities are relatively rare, yet they are extremely important for understanding the lives and culture of the people who left China during the Late Imperial Period. A few articles touch on religious life in Chinese communities of Southeast Asia, including some attention paid to the specifics of domestic ritual (Chee-Beng 2006), but those studies of religion in North American Chinese communities deal almost entirely with the religion practiced in the community temple or Joss House, rarely discussing any ritual other than community wide festivals and even more rarely using archaeological evidence to understand religion and worship. Domestic and small scale religion certainly did exist in the Chinese overseas communities of America. Shrines in homes and in businesses were recorded in the Riverside Chinatown, California in 1889 (Anderson and Lawton 1987), but no mention was made of the rituals that were practiced at these shrines. Given this lack of study in the past, studying the archaeological indicators of domestic and small scale religious practice becomes all the more important.

## Ceremonial Objects of Chinese Domestic Religion

The role of fire in Chinese ritual was critical, for without it the gods and ancestors could never receive the offerings of humans. Incense was burned. Paper was burned. Offerings were burned to provide for the needs of the gods, the ghosts and the ancestors. Smoke rising from the altar was viewed as symbolic of a messenger or connection between the spirit world and the real world, and the ashes from previous offerings were viewed as sacred (Chang 2006).

Unfortunately, fire rituals are virtually invisible archaeologically, or at least difficult to distinguish from other actions of everyday life. Fire ensures that few if any of the objects offered to the gods survive. Yet such fire rituals are one of, if not the primary form of religious practice and worship in Chinese Religion. In order to study these rituals, scholars often must rely on historical and ethnographic records to determine what types of offerings might have been given in ritual. The practice of specific rituals and offerings are nearly impossible to study archaeologically, however, it is possible to study the ceremonial objects that were used to make such offerings. By studying the objects that might have been used to support fire for rituals, it is possible to open a window onto the patterns of religious practice and worship in archaeological contexts.

The classes of objects most often found on altars dedicated to Chinese religious practices include candleholders, an incense burner (sometimes called an ash holder or sand pot), and a stand for the incense burner. This basic assemblage is fairly standard for altars in general, whether in a temple or in a home. A third object, a dish-style oil lamp, may also have been used in religious ritual. Fairly simple versions of these



Candleholders, incense burner and incense stand from the Los Angeles Chinatown

Image courtesy of Greenwood 1996

ceremonial objects have been identified in the archaeological assemblages of some California Chinatowns including the Los Angeles Chinatown and the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose. These objects, candleholders, incense burners, incense stands and oil lamp dishes, will be the focus of this study, as potential indicators of the presence of household altars and domestic religious practices.

The candleholders, incense burners and stands display a remarkable level of regularity in their form, size and fabric, both within and between the sites where they were found. These



85-31/25/5 Top of  
candleholder

pieces are made of a tan or buff stoneware and covered with an uneven, sometimes mottled looking glaze. The candleholders were made in two parts, totaling 14.5 to 15 cm in height. The term candleholder is a bit of a misnomer, because there is no place to fit a stick candle as one would expect. The top of the candleholders terminates in a concave dish, which likely supported a lamp dish as will be discussed below. The incense

burners are cylindrical in form with three small feet on the base, which match the three feet and three indentations in the stand for the incense burner. This tripod form is intimately tied to Chinese ritual practice, and tripod incense burners are known from as early as the Shang Dynasty. Together the incense burner and its stand are approximately 13 cm tall and 10 to 11 cm in diameter (Greenwood 1996).

According to the original artifact catalog (ARS various dates, *Archaeological Field Specimen Inventory Record*), examples of candleholders of this type and of these incense holders were found in the excavations at the Market Street Chinatown, however, only three examples of the candleholders were found in the collections for examination in this project. All of the candleholders matched the description from the Los Angeles Chinatown excavations, in size and

fabric type. The one incense burner listed in the catalog was not found in the collection, but its description indicated that it could be classified as belonging to the type described above (ARS 1987-1988, Feature #7).



85-31/18/26, 85-31/18/86 and  
85-31/25/5

Dish-style oil lamp resting on  
top of candleholder

The last artifact type that may have been associated with household and small scale religion is the dish-style oil lamp. These lamps were found archaeologically in several of the California Chinatowns. In form, they closely resemble condiment dishes without a footring. These lamps are generally about 7 to 8.5 cm in diameter at the rim, with a base of 2.5 cm. The oil lamp dishes are made of porcelaneous stoneware and glazed only on the concave side, with blue-on-white decoration, similar in all the

examples. Many of the examples found both at the Market Street site and in the publications of other Chinatowns display evidence of burning and wick residue that would be consistent with use as an oil lamp (Greenwood 1996 and Baxter et al. 2002). It is likely that these dishes were placed on top of the candleholders described previously and provided the fire necessary for domestic ritual, though a more utilitarian function, merely to provide light, cannot be ruled out.



85-31/18/26, 85-31/18/86

Base of oil lamp with  
evidence of burning

The incredible consistency seen in all four of these artifact types, candleholders, incense burners, incense stands and oil lamp dishes, suggests that there was some level of standardization in their production or conception. But without any information as to the production, importation or distribution of these objects, it is difficult to determine just what form that standardization might have taken. All appear to be from China, based on decorative motifs and glaze style. Perhaps they were mass produced in a single factory and imported to American Chinatowns, or

they may have been produced in several different factories to specific standards. Perhaps the products of only one source were imported to the United States, accounting for the similarities found in archaeological Chinatowns. Unfortunately, without records of production or importation, it is difficult to say much beyond the fact that these ceremonial objects all appear to follow the same basic design.



Temple altar from Joss House in Rock Springs, Wyoming

Image courtesy of  
<http://www.sweetwatermuseum.org/exhibit.htm>

A basic comparison of these objects with those found in with temple altars of the same period demonstrates the simplicity and plainness of the stoneware ceremonial objects. They are very obviously of the same character as the bronze or gold altar pieces, but far less elaborate and costly. The similarities between the basic forms and the grouping of objects suggests that the ceramic versions were used in the same basic rituals, offerings of incense and other gifts to the gods and ancestors, however, in a less formalized setting. This is consistent with the hypothesis that they were used in household altars and similar settings. However, it is still possible that such Spartan versions were also used in the temple along side metal and gilded incense burners and candlesticks.

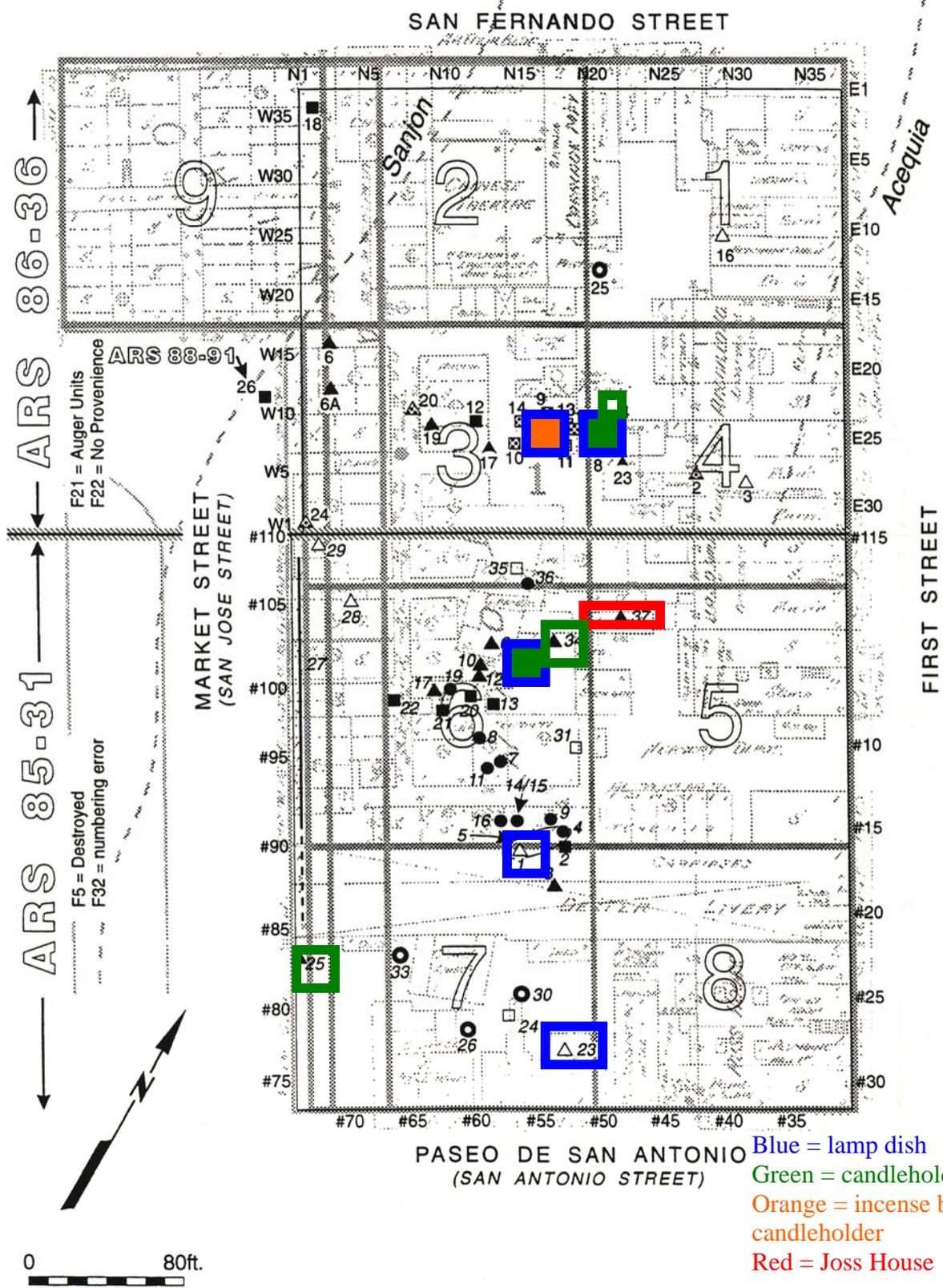
## Methodology

A two pronged approach will be taken to determine the whether the ceramic ceremonial objects were used in temple or domestic contexts. First, the context in which these objects were found at the Market Street Chinatown will be established, based on the proximity of these finds to the temple, on the character of the buildings in the immediate vicinity of the finds, and on the nature of the artifacts found in association with the ceremonial objects. Second, their context in the Market Street excavations will be compared with that of other California Chinatowns where

such objects have been found archaeologically, to determine if there are patterns in the distribution of these ceremonial vessels between several sites.

The circumstances of the Market Street excavations limit the assignment of artifacts to the archaeological feature from which they were excavated. The locations of these features were mapped on to a period map of the Chinatown, and the features where ceramic ceremonial objects were found will be mapped so that their proximity to the community temple or Joss House can be determined. Next the character of the buildings, according to the 1884 Sanborn map of the Chinatown, in the vicinity of these finds will be determined. Since the correspondence between the Sanborn map and the map of the features is not precise, a second criterion will be used to determine the context of each of the features, the nature of the artifacts found in conjunction with the ceremonial objects.

Once the context of the ceremonial objects in the Market Street Chinatown has been established, similar analyses will be performed for three other Chinatowns in which similar ceramic candleholders, incense burners and lamp dishes were found, the Los Angeles Chinatown, the Woolen Mills Chinatown of San Jose, and a dump site from a San Francisco Chinatown. All date to roughly the same period as the Market Street Chinatown, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and all are from urban contexts. Comparison of the patterns of ceremonial objects found in these sites with the distribution of ceremonial artifacts at the Market Street site will provide an important frame of reference for understanding the uses and meanings of these classes of artifacts. The different character of each of these sites will also provide depth to the interpretation of the ceramic ceremonial objects in Overseas Chinese communities and their meanings for the study of domestic and small scale religion.



Map of archaeological features in the Market Street Chinatown, with ceramic ceremonial objects indicated in relation to the Joss House.

Image based on Sanborn Insurance Co. (1884)

## Analysis

### **Market Street Chinatown**

A total of 15 examples of ceremonial objects, of the types described above, were listed in the initial artifact catalogs from the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose and assignable to definite archaeological contexts, 6 candleholders, one incense burner, 6 lamp dishes and 2 more possible lamp dishes. Of these artifacts, originally noted by excavators and catalogers, only 7 were found in the collection for examination during this project, 5 objects from the excavation area designated 85-31 and 2 from 86-36. The other 8 objects were sufficiently described in the artifact catalog to classify them as ceramic ceremonial objects of same type as those found elsewhere in the site and at other Overseas Chinese sites. An additional 3 candleholders were found in the initial surface survey of the area, but were not included in this study because of their lack of association with specific locations.

A map of the distribution of the ceramic ceremonial objects excavated from the Market Street site shows no clear pattern. Of the eight features where such objects were found, only two, 85-31 Feature 18 and 85-13 Feature 34, were located in the immediate vicinity of the Joss House or temple, indicated on the map in red. The rest are spread throughout the area of the site. Since the vast majority of the features where ceramic ceremonial objects were found were classified by the excavators as trash or refuse deposits, it is necessary to consider where the Joss House might have been dumping their trash, and thus where ceremonial objects associated with temple ritual would most likely be found. Presumably, they would have used the trash pit or other deposit closest to the temple itself, rather than carrying trash longer distances. Feature 37 appears to be the closest trash context to the Joss House, but its exact association with the Joss House is

unknown (its placement within the walls of the Joss House on the map may suggest that it predates the construction of the temple). With the exception of Feature 34, all of the features with ceremonial objects were located such that at least one other trash lens was closer in proximity to the Joss House, and thus more likely to have been used by the temple.

Unfortunately, given the difficulties with establishing a direct correspondence between the archaeological features and individual or groups of buildings at Market Street, proximity to the Joss House is not enough evidence to conclude whether the ceremonial objects were associated with temple rituals and worship or not. In order to get a better idea of the context of the ceramic ceremonial objects, the buildings surrounding the features and the general content of the features will be discussed individually.

The context and content of 85-31 Features 1, 23, and 25 are very similar so they will be discussed together. Each of the features was originally classified as a trash lens or pit by the ARS excavators, areas used for informal dumping (Roop and Flynn 1993). Each of these features sits in close proximity to both the Dexter Livery and tenement housing, according to the Sanborn map. This suggests that Features 1, 23, and 25 were associated with the bachelor laborers who most likely lived in the tenement buildings and/or worked in the livery. This is corroborated by the general character of the artifact assemblages from these three features, all of which include basic domestic refuse and other artifacts associated with the bachelor community, e.g. clay pipe stems (ARS, 1987: Feature #1, Feature #23 and Feature #25). The three ceramic ceremonial objects found in these features (two lamp dishes and one candleholder) were probably associated with the domestic/commercial sphere of the bachelor workers residing in tenements.

Within Feature 18 of 85-31, both a lamp and a candleholder were found by excavators. Feature 18 was identified as a wood-lined pit, a formal trash pit (Roop and Flynn 1993). It is

possible that this feature, the closest to the Joss House save one, was associated with the temple and may have been used for the refuse from the temple. The location directly behind buildings of the commercial district in Chinatown requires an analysis of the contents of the feature to determine nature of this feature. The sheer size of the feature, the largest from 85-31, suggests that this formal pit may have been used by several different groups as a dumping area. One interesting aspect of the feature was the existence of a large deposit of ash in one area of the excavations, the same level where at least one of the ceremonial objects was found (Roop and Flynn 1993 and ARS, 1987: Feature #18). It is important to note that one the major products of religious ritual was ash, and thus one of the primary waste products of a temple. Since ash created by offerings was considered sacred, the ash was only disposed of once a year in most traditional Chinese temples (Feuchtwang 1974), and thus would probably be reflected as a large concentration of ash in the archaeological record. Given its proximity to the Joss House, and the presence of a large ash concentration, it is possible that Feature 18 was associated with the Joss House in the Market Street Chinatown.

Like Feature 18, 85-31 Feature 34 is also a trash pit in close proximity to the Joss House, in fact it is the closest feature in which ceramic ceremonial vessels were found during excavation. A single candleholder was found in this feature, along with other Chinese ceramics and medicine bottles, however, few food remains were found in this feature (Roop and Flynn 1993). This suggests that this trash pit may have been utilized by a non-domestic context, perhaps commercial. There was no evidence to suggest any sort of association between this feature and the Joss House.

The features containing the ceramic ceremonial objects in the 86-36 project area were all within the primary cluster of features in the lower half of the area. In 86-36 Feature 1 a single

candleholder was found. Classified as an “oyster shell deposit,” thousands of oyster shells were found on top of a layer of ash. It was in this layer of ash that the candleholder was found (ARS, 86-36 Feature List). The fact that this feature is further from the Joss House itself and is in close proximity to the area known as the pig roasting pit, suggest that the ash deposit in this feature may not have been the result of temple ritual, but the result of large scale food production. However, the possibility that the candleholder found in Feature 1 was once associated with the temple cannot be completely ruled out.

Feature 5 of 86-36 was the feature with the largest number of ceramic ceremonial objects, four lamp dishes and one candleholder. Like Feature 18 in 85-31, Feature 5 was a formal wood-lined pit used as a midden by the community of the Market Street Chinatown (ARS, 86-36 Feature List). The assemblage of artifacts from this feature is not only extremely large, it is also very diverse (ARS, Cataloged Artifact Summary). This suggests a mixed context for the assemblage in Feature 5, probably including domestic, commercial and combined contexts.

Finally, Feature 7 of 86-36 was the only feature that contained all three classes of artifacts, a candleholder, an incense burner and an oil lamp dish. Unfortunately, remarkably little was said about this feature by the original excavators. It is merely listed as a “redwood lined cistern” (ARS, 86-36 Feature List). The assemblage of artifacts from this feature does not provide any indication of the context of this feature, except to say that it had a relatively large and varied assemblage of artifacts. The most common artifacts cataloged were glass and Anglo-ceramics (ARS 1987-1988, Feature #7 and Cataloged Artifact Summary), suggesting that this may have been associated with a domestic context.

From this discussion, it seems clear that the majority of the ceramic ceremonial artifacts found at the Market Street Chinatown were from domestic or commercial contexts. Only three of

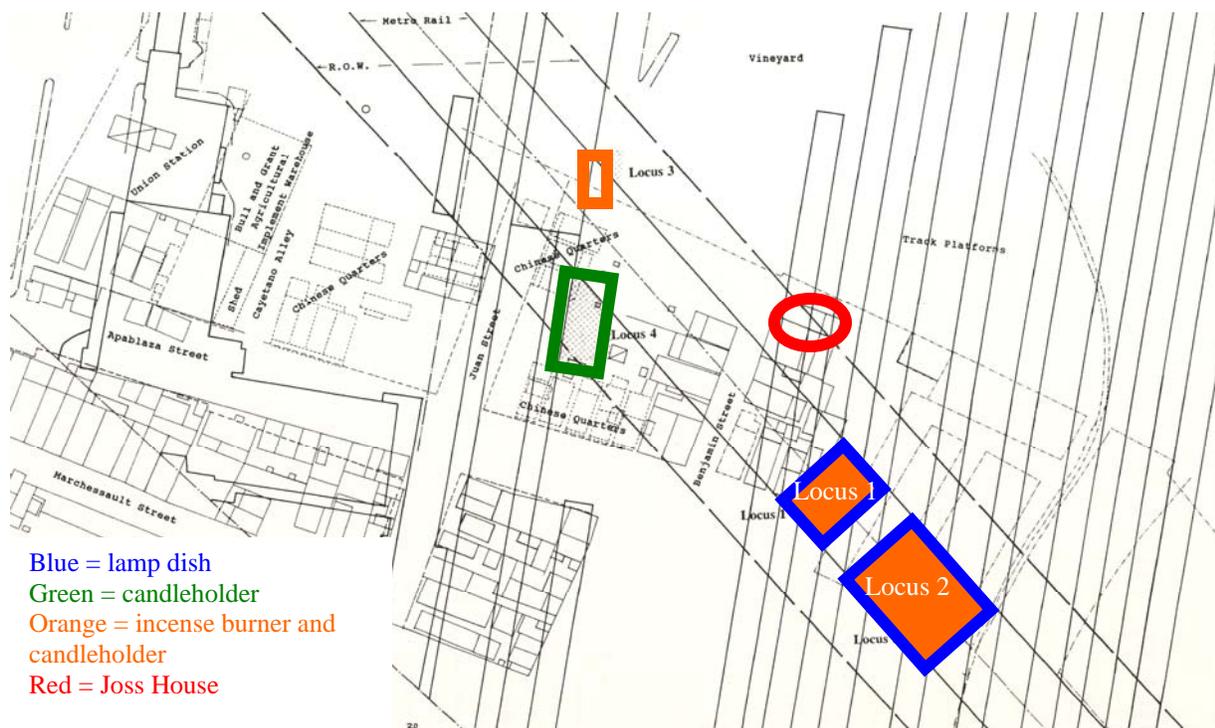
the artifacts, two candleholders and one lamp dish, of the 15 total artifacts were found in features that were even possibly associated with the Joss House. The mix of commercial contexts with domestic contexts in Market Street is not surprising, given the tendency in Overseas Chinese communities for store and other business owners to live above the commercial area of their business. This makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between those ceremonial objects that might have been used in a domestic altar versus the altar of a business. It is unknown, in these cases, whether the Overseas Chinese even made a distinction between domestic and commercial space. However, it is enough to say that these objects came from contexts outside of the Joss House, and thus can be considered indicative of small scale religious worship. Based on the presence of such simple ceremonial objects in the archaeological record, domestic and small scale religious ritual definitely existed in the community of the Market Street Chinatown, though the extent to which these practices occurred is difficult to ascertain from this evidence.

### **Los Angeles Chinatown**

The Los Angeles Chinatown on Apablasa Street was founded in 1887, the year the Market Street Chinatown was destroyed by fire, and was occupied until 1933, when it was leveled to make way for the new terminal of Union Station (Greenwood 1996). Like the Market Street Chinatown, the Apablasa Chinatown was a mixture of married merchants who lived with their families and bachelor laborers who worked in town and in the surrounding agricultural area.

The site was excavated in four primary loci, each consisting of several features. In these excavations, more than 32 examples of the ceramic ceremonial vessels were found. Only those artifacts that could be assigned to a specific feature were used for this analysis, thus this represents a sample of total assemblage. In particular, only the presence of lamp dishes was noted for several features, with no indication of the number found, so these features are listed as

“at least 1” and counted as only one example in the analysis. No distinction was made between candleholders, incense burners and incense stands when the number of examples for each feature was tallied, so they are merely listed as “incense burner/candleholder” in Appendix A (Greenwood 1996). Again, each locus will be discussed individually, relating the proximity of the features to the Joss House, the character of the buildings near the feature and the nature of the artifact assemblage.



Map of the Los Angeles Chinatown with Joss House and ceramic ceremonial objects listed

Image courtesy of Greenwood 1996

In Locus 1, two incense burner/candleholders and at least one lamp dish were found. The excavators determined that this feature was an informal trash pit that was used until about 1906. The artifacts found in Feature 2 were consistent with typical domestic refuse, ceramics, glass, metal, charcoal and food remains. According to Greenwood (1996), this feature and several of the others in Locus 1 were associated with the communal activities of vegetable peddlers in the

area. Of all of the areas excavated in this Chinatown, Locus 1 was the closest to the Joss House and therefore the most likely to contain objects, ceremonial or otherwise, which were associated with ritual in the temple. However, the general lack of finds of ceremonial objects and the domestic/commercial context in which the few were found, suggests that they were not associated with the temple.

Locus 3 and Locus 4 are both located further away from the temple than Locus 1, behind an area labeled “Chinese Quarters” on period maps. A total of four objects were found in these loci, two incense burners/candleholders and one lamp dish in Feature 39 of Locus 3 and one candleholder in Feature 57 of Locus 4. Both of these features were primarily deposits of trash, Feature 57 being a converted privy, and their contents reflected the domestic activities of the bachelor workers in the area (Greenwood 1996). Based on this assessment, the ceremonial objects found in these loci were almost certainly not associated with the community temple.

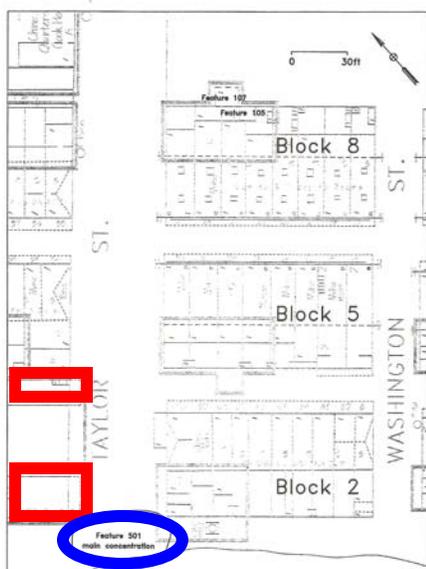
The case of Locus 2 has been saved for last because it is the most complex context in the LA Chinatown. Locus 2 had by far the largest assemblage of ceremonial artifacts of any locus, accounting for 78% of the ceremonial objects. Within this locus, 31% and another 25% were concentrated in Feature 29 and Feature 17 respectively. With the exception of Feature 29, all of the features in Locus 2 where ceremonial objects were found were associated with two buildings, the wagon shed and a warehouse for vegetable peddlers, both built sometime around 1925. Both of these buildings were commercial in nature, but also provided housing on the second floor for workers (Greenwood 1996). Fifteen artifacts total were found in the contexts associated with the commercial and domestic lives of bachelor workers. Feature 29 predates the construction of the warehouses, and represents a very large, probably single deposition of trash in an old earthen cellar. The excavators originally hypothesized, based on ceramics, that this was a deposit from a

communal kitchen or restaurant (Greenwood 1996). On the whole the assemblage seems to be primarily related to food production, though the sheer size and density of the feature makes generalizations difficult. There is nothing in Feature 29 to suggest that it might have been associated with the Joss House.

The results of the analysis of the ceramic ceremonial objects in the Los Angeles Chinatown are consistent with those from the Market Street site. The vast majority of these ceremonial objects were found in contexts not associated with the temple, or with temple ritual, providing evidence that ritual was likely carried out in multiple locations around the site outside of the Joss House. In comparison with Market Street, where many of the ceremonial objects were likely from the households of merchants and their families, a large number of the artifacts were associated with the living and working quarters of the bachelor laborers. However, this trend could merely be an effect of the uneven aerial coverage of archaeological investigation in both sites. As with the San Jose Chinatown, the existence of small scale religious ritual in this Overseas Chinese community is evident from the archaeological evidence.

### Woolen Mills Chinatown

The Woolen Mills Chinatown of San Jose, as it was called, was set up immediately after the destruction of the Market Street Chinatown in 1887. Unlike both Market Street and the LA Chinatown, this was a community, almost exclusively, of bachelor laborers who worked in the wool mills and canning factories surrounding the Chinatown (Allen et al. 2002). A comparison of this community with the mixed Overseas Chinese community found at Market Street is



Map of Feature 501 in relation to the Joss House, Woolen Mills Chinatown, San Jose  
Image courtesy of Allen et al. 2002

important for understanding the differences in the religious practices of the families versus single male workers.

A total of nine objects were found in the excavations the Woolen Mills site, all oil lamp dishes, virtually identical to those found at both the LA Chinatown and Market Street. No candleholders or incense burners were found during excavation. These objects were all found in Feature 501, a very large communal dump site at the edge of the community, virtually next to the primary Joss House. This dump served the entire Chinatown, and represents a shift in the management of waste in Chinatown and in California in general, from small, localized trash pits to large communal dumping areas (Allen et al. 2002). This context makes it difficult to determine whether or not these lamp dishes were associated with the temple. The excavations in Feature 501 were poorly controlled, so it is impossible to reconstruct discrete dumping events from the excavation data which might some more detailed context for the lamp dishes.

The fact that only lamp dishes were found at this site is particularly interesting. It is possible that this was related to the all bachelor community of the Woolen Mills Chinatown. Sources related to domestic ritual in China suggest that women were primarily associated with the practice of ritual in the domestic sphere. The assumption that the oil lamp dishes were associated with ritual must now be questioned. The facts that bachelor men rarely seem to participate in domestic or small scale ritual and that no other classes of ceremonial objects were found at this site suggest that lamp dishes of this type might have been used for purposes other than fire rituals and offerings. They were likely used in a more utilitarian manner, simply as light sources. Thus, the archaeological evidence from the Woolen Mills Chinatown suggests that oil lamp dishes may not be as indicative of small scale ritual as originally believed.

### **SF Dump Site**

The final examples of ceremonial objects come from a dump site known as N-5 in downtown San Francisco, with ceramics closely associated with the Chinese community in the city. A majority of the ceramics found in this site were deposited between 1880 and 1885, contemporaneous with the Market Street Chinatown in San Jose. Some 15 candleholders were identified in this assemblage, as well as one incense burner and its matching tripod stand (Garaventa and Pastron 1983). The context of a communal dump presents the same problems with interpretation encountered in the Woolen Mills Chinatown example, however, some of the other artifacts from this site shed new light on this discussion of ceramic ceremonial objects. A total of 76 decorative tiles, tiles whose decoration links them to the Temple of T'ien Hou in the San Francisco Chinatown, were found in this dump (Garaventa and Pastron 1983). While the exact archaeological associations between the decorative tiles and the other ceremonial objects were not discussed specifically, the fact that both were present in the same context is important. This suggests the possibility that the ceramic ceremonial objects might have been used within temple contexts, as well as in household and small scale ritual.

## Conclusions

This analysis, based on the proximity to the Joss House, the character of surrounding buildings and the nature of the assemblage, has demonstrated that the majority of artifacts designated the as ceramic ceremonial objects were found in probable domestic or commercial contexts within the Market Street Chinatown. Only two examples were excavated from contexts possibly related to the Joss House in this community. The comparison of this site with the Los Angeles Chinatown revealed a similar pattern, few if any objects that could be tied to the temple. The findings from the San Francisco dump site, N-5, however, indicate that this may not always be the case. Finds of ceramic candleholders and incense burners along side temple tiles intimates

that these objects may have been used in temples as well. Thus, it can be concluded that candleholders, incense burners and incense stands of the type discussed in this paper are suggestive, though not indicative, of small scale religious ritual.

The lamp dishes, however, are a different matter. It is known that they were often used in conjunction with candleholders and incense burners, but the evidence from the Woolen Mills Chinatown that they may not have been exclusively ritual objects. The fact that primarily single men lived in this Chinatown, not those typically involved with household religion, and the absence of the other ceremonial objects points toward purely functional uses of these dish-style oil lamps in some contexts.

The archaeological evidence provides strong indicators that small scale or household religious ritual did in fact occur at the Market Street Chinatown. All of the artifacts associated with the domestic altar are known from this site, candleholders, incense burners and lamp dishes. They are found in diverse contexts, not associated with the temple or Joss House. While these objects are testimonial to the existence of small scale religion in this community, the full extent of these practices is still unknown. Who participated in these rituals, whether the practice of domestic ritual was widespread or not, and the meanings of these ritual for the practitioners and in the general community remain mysteries.

### Implications, Significance and Future Research

Now that classes of artifacts have been identified as suggestive of domestic religious practices in the Chinatowns of California, it is possible to use these artifacts to explore numerous other questions about household religion. It is now possible to explore the very questions that originally prompted this study, mainly who participated in domestic ritual, what was the role of women in domestic ritual in overseas communities, how did domestic ritual relate to the process

of acculturation, and what can domestic religion tell scholars about the political and cultural sentiments of the Chinese immigrants in overseas communities. The first step to exploring these questions is to examine more Chinatowns in the United States and beyond that have been excavated archaeologically, to develop comparisons of ceremonial objects in various contexts.

The question of whether families or bachelor workers participated in domestic religion is an important one. By studying the patterns of ceremonial objects found in archaeological contexts using a methodology similar to the one used here, it might be possible to determine which segments of the population participated in these and other aspects of religion. Women are often overlooked or hidden in the archaeological record, particularly in the archaeology of Overseas Chinese communities. By connecting them with the domestic altar and the artifacts of household religious practice, it might be possible to get at the lives of the women who lived in Chinatowns across the United States, and to understand their experiences as immigrants and as women in predominately male communities.

Studying religion, especially domestic religion, in Chinese overseas communities is particularly important because religion in these contexts was at least nominally free from the influence of the Qing bureaucracy. Religious practices in the Overseas Chinese communities were free from the standardization of ritual, and could change and develop. Religion and religious practices, even those in the domestic sphere, were highly politicized during the Qing Dynasty. The Qing state and its bureaucrats took an increased interest in the religious practices of the people. Attempts were made to standardize the gods worshipped in China and to eliminate heterodox beliefs and teachings in the country. Such standardization was presumably enforced throughout the country by the local elites and lower level bureaucrats. The primary goal behind such standardization was to create and to maintain the appearance of a single, united culture all

across China. However, the vast regional differences and the ambiguities in the beliefs of Chinese Religion forced the bureaucrats to be content with a system of shared ritual practices, over orthodoxy (Szonyi 2007).

These are only a few of the many topics that might be addressed by further study of domestic and small scale religion in Overseas Chinese communities and of the material objects associated with the household altar.

## Appendix A. Ceramic Ceremonial Objects and their Contexts

### Market Street Chinatown

Artifact type	Artifact number / Feature	Context	Cataloged	Found	Notes
lamp dish	85-31/1/161	domestic	X	X	
lamp dish	85-31/18/26 and 85-31/18/86	domestic	X	X	associated with ash deposit
candleholder	85-31/18B/4	domestic	X		associated with ash deposit
lamp dish	85-31/23/1	domestic	X	X	
candleholder	85-31/25/5	domestic	X	X	
candleholder	85-31/34/11	commercial	X	X	
candleholder	86-36/1/188	commercial/domestic			associated with ash deposit
lamp dish	86-36/5/39	domestic/commercial	X	Museum	
lamp dish	86-36/5/162	domestic/commercial			
lamp dish	86-36/5/227	domestic/commercial			
lamp dish ?	86-36/5/282	domestic/commercial			
candleholder	86-36/5/353	domestic/commercial			
candleholder	86-36/7/1	domestic/commercial	X	Museum	
incense burner	86-36/7/5	domestic/commercial			
lamp dish	86-36/7/495	domestic/commercial			

### Los Angeles Chinatown

#### Locus 1

incense burner/candleholder	Feature 2	domestic			
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 2	domestic			
lamp dish (at least 1)	Feature 2	domestic			

#### Locus 2

incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
lamp dish (at least 1)	Feature 17	commercial/domestic			Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner	Feature 22	domestic			

incense burner/candleholder	Feature 22	domestic	
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 22	domestic	
lamp dish (at least 1)	Feature 22	domestic	
lamp dish (at least 1)	Feature 24	commercial/domestic	Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 29	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
lamp dish (at least 1)	Feature 31	commercial/domestic	communal cooking/restaurant
candleholder	Feature 38	domestic	Vegetable Peddler's Warehouse
<b>Locus 3</b>			
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 39	commercial/domestic	
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 39	commercial/domestic	
incense burner/candleholder	Feature 39	commercial/domestic	
<b>Locus 4</b>			
candleholder	Feature 57	commercial/domestic	
<b>Woolen Mills Chinatown</b>			
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 2057		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 2067		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 9985		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 9987		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 9987		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 502 - 9989		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 9999		communal dumping area
lamp dish	Feature 501 - 9999		communal dumping area
<b>San Francisco Dump Site (N-5)</b>			
candleholder (total 15)	N-5 dump site		large dump site, associated with temple

incense burner

N-5 dump site

tripod incense stand

N-5 dump site

tiles

large dump site, associated with temple

tiles

large dump site, associated with temple

tiles

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