

ENGL 120: Reading and Writing the Modern Essay  
Professor Kate Bolick

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Michelle Vong

Wok with Me: Oakland's Chinatown at a Crossroads  
by Michelle Vong '28

In 2006, a newly married couple baptized their first daughter and drove their dusty Honda Accord through the busy, bumpy streets of a city that seemed never to end. Their destination was between Webster and 7th Street, a dingy but colorful restaurant with a sign that read *Gourmet Delight: Seafood Restaurant* in white cursive font. They were there to celebrate their daughter's cleansing of Original Sin over plates of chicken feet, green beans, and steamed fish. One finger dipped in holy water, the next in a plate of soy sauce.

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Sixteen years later, looking for dinner, I searched “dim sum 2 go open now chinatown” in Google Maps and was flooded with options in San Francisco, despite selecting the “nearby” filter—reminding me to add “Oakland” at the end of my query. Beside *Gourmet Delight* was glaring red text: PERMANENTLY CLOSED—yet another restaurant financially devastated by COVID-19<sup>1</sup>. At the time, I didn't feel any loss. The remedy was simple: ten more alternatives lit up my screen. I relaxed, knowing there would always be another dingy but colorful, cheap Chinese restaurant where I could blow a crisp green Hamilton (many of the establishments were cash-only).

Take it from a Bay Area native: Oakland's Chinatown is far superior to San Francisco's, which has been watered down by decades of tourists. It's polluted with the never-ending sounds

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<sup>1</sup> Alix Wall, "East Bay Restaurant Openings and Closings in December," *Oaklandside*, December 23, 2020, <https://oaklandside.org/2020/12/23/east-bay-restaurant-openings-and-closings-in-december/>.

of honking cars, storefronts draped in primary-colored banners, dingy apartments above with clothes drying out of the windows, and sidewalks twisting beneath fading red Oriental patterns. It smells of piss and cigarettes, but it doesn't give a fuck. You won't find trendy rebrands or slick marketing ploys here—just the comforting sight of a pink bakery box promising egg custard tarts that put any food blogger's "hidden" gems to shame.

Even so, my San Franciscan friends make the 40-minute (2-hour if caught in the net of rush hour traffic) journey for what they call a more "authentic" version of Chinese food. If they aren't ashamed, they'll admit they love how most restaurants haven't adjusted for post-2008 inflation. There's a moment of guilt when they grab their bag of underpriced har gow from the old Chinese grandmother working the counter—someone probably scraping by—but it disappears as soon as they take a bite. The "authentic" taste of Oakland's Chinatown food mirrors the neighborhood's essence, which can be summed up by one word: unapologetic.

Community members praise these 16 blocks as a monument to how locals—not tourists—will always triumph over the city. After the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, many displaced Chinese immigrants rebuilt in Oakland<sup>2</sup>, and ever since, their buildings have stood firm, no matter the growing threats of gentrification or the economic crises that followed. Despite the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, and the increasing number of unhoused people filling Chinatown's sidewalks, shops like Ming's Tasty will always have a fresh batch of pork dumplings ready to be served by 9 a.m.

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Perhaps, instead of the word "unapologetic," I mean "stubborn." Stubborn against time's inevitable cruelty. Chinese elders are afraid of change and progress. Tradition, conservatism, and

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<sup>2</sup> History of Asian Culture in Oakland Chinatown." Visit Oakland (blog). Accessed October 7, 2024. <https://www.visitoakland.com/blog/post/history-of-asian-culture-in-chinatown/>.

hierarchy are woven into the very structure of Chinese culture: the language, the architecture, the menus, even the recipes. Chinatown doesn't budge. Buildings are decaying, required safety checks aren't being met. Mold grows in the corners of each store's inventory. The same woks and steamers that have crisped and warmed my favorite dumplings are yellowing. Fresh paint barely masks the rot. Prices seem frozen in place. Shattered windows are held together with duct tape or completely boarded up. Trash bags pile up and are quickly removed the next day, but juices and sauces stain the concrete. Stubbornness is praised by community members, but it may be a key factor in the neighborhood's impending, long-delayed downfall.

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We always drive past *Gourmet Delight* on the way to Target, so I only ever see it from the front. But one time, I catch sight of the building from its side. Suddenly I'm aware of how little I remember from before its closure. I don't recall ever going there on my own. All my visits only made possible through my parents' memories. My mother's words paint a picture: a place always aglow with light, bustling on Fridays and Sundays. Young lovers splurging on payday dinners; milestone celebrations like birthdays and weddings filling the back room with joy. The once-vibrant entrance is plastered with concert and movie posters obscured by amateur graffiti. Its dark green awning still hangs like some sick looming corpse. A reminder I'll never be able to taste why it was my parents' favorite. A warning that everything I know carries a ticking time bomb—stores close, nothing stays.

A chill runs down my spine. What else have I taken for granted?

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I turn back once more and see a mural on the side of what was once *Gourmet Delight*. It's vivid, bright, an intricate painting of reds, greens, and blues—flowers, a China vase, dim sum

dishes, a phoenix. Unlike the layers of paint that try and fail to replicate the past on most of Chinatown's buildings, this mural is boldly recent. It breathes fresh life into what were once bare walls.

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*ABC: American-Born Chinese.*

I look up this term when I overhear some girls on the bus on the way to 9th Street gossiping about classmates at their high school. "They should be embarrassed," they say. "They can't even speak Chinese."

The workers at Chinatown restaurants must feel the same when they look at my friends and me, posting photos of the food we ordered in broken Cantonese. We are their greatest hopes and worst fears in the flesh. I don't know any Chinese other than my favorite menu items. I don't own a *qipao* because I feel like a caricature; my Americanness protruding out of the short sleeves of the traditional dress. Instead, I take French in high school and conjugate verbs like *écouter* and *manger* while I cannot utter two sentences to my *mama* (grandmother). Chinatown is overrun with my kind, the ABCs. The DNA that gives us our features is at odds with the XYZ that makes up our lives. All we have is our food. Greedily, we eat all the shrimp rice rolls our hearts desire to prove to ourselves: We are Chinese. We are Chinese.

The ABCs are fleeing Chinatown's cramped, piss-covered streets for dreams of silver skylines and grey cubicles. I ask my Asian friends where they want to live in the future, and they list off New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, *San Francisco*. They don't want to inherit these run-down shops. I imagine a longer list of closures joining *Gourmet Delight*. The elders must see it, too. I wondered if the Asian Tech Bros were aware their code would continue to generate the PERMANENTLY CLOSED text on the digital pages of restaurants they grew up eating at. I am

Commented [BK1]: Instant Iconic Line.

afraid that we have not only swallowed up our language but our history as well. Who will we be when our Chinatown is gone?

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How do we save a neighborhood in denial about its battle with time? Can we preserve a culture rooted in tradition when its people are evolving? Maybe the mural on *Gourmet Delight* offers some answers. Its vibrant, fresh paint suggests that it's possible to honor our heritage while embracing our ABC identity.

I'm not sure.

While my friends and I flee to the East, North, and far West for college, some youth choose to stay. A movement called #SaveOaklandChinatown emerges as a response to the declining number of families committed to their businesses after the pandemic. They organize Chinatown's first Night Market, a community effort to revive its nightlife and businesses. In the weeks leading up to it, the community transforms the streets—scrubbing away grime, painting over graffiti with colorful murals and youth art<sup>3</sup>.

Early evening, September 7th, 2024, nearly 3,000 miles away from home, I watch clips of the event unfolding on my phone. I see the mural that had first given me a glimmer of hope; its reds, blues, and greens are just as vivid on my screen as they were in real life. Elderly vendors feed youth amid laughter and lively chatter, gathering around food stalls offering signature dishes. They embrace modernity, using social media to share their stories and attract a new generation.

Maybe, this is how Chinatown survives.

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<sup>3</sup> Ying Zhao, "Oakland Chinatown Hosts First-Ever Night Market," MSN, September 17, 2023, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/other/oakland-chinatown-hosts-first-ever-night-market/ar-AA1qcUO4>.