

Overseas Chinese Placer Mining Sites in the Santa Clara River Watershed: Documentary Evidence, Archaeological Implications, and Significance

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Abstract

Documentary evidence, oral history, and even place names reveal the participation of Chinese miners in the low yield gold placers of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties during the late nineteenth century. Analysis of the fragmentary references to this activity indicates that these sojourners were derived in part from the Chinatowns of San Buenaventura and Bakersfield, while others were ex-railroad laborers seeking new means of subsistence. Chinese placer miners may have left archaeologically identifiable vestiges in specific canyon areas, including placer tailings and ditches, habitation sites, and trash deposits containing Chinese ceramics and opium smoking paraphernalia similar to such remains found in other documented mining districts in the American West and New Zealand. While placer mining activity was of little consequence to the historical development of southern California, it served a valuable purpose for some of the region's underprivileged minorities, including Mexicans and Chinese. The adaptive importance of placer mining to the subsistence strategy of the overseas Chinese is posited, with this seasonal industry serving as supplemental employment, augmenting agricultural and service labor.

Introduction

Scattered documentary references and oral history sources indicate that overseas Chinese were active in wet season placer mining in two separate locales in the Transverse Ranges northwest of Los Angeles, within the greater Santa Clara River watershed (Fig. 1). One locus of this activity, and the best documented, is the lower Piru Creek (a tributary of the Santa Clara River) watershed centered around and extending as far as fifteen miles northwest of Newhall in Los Angeles County. A second area of probable Chinese placer mining activity was situated in the Lockwood Valley area of the upper Piru Creek watershed, principally in the vicinity of San Guillermo Creek, approximately 65 miles northwest of Los Angeles and approximately 50 miles from Bakersfield. The latter area is situated in northeastern Ventura County.

Insofar as the author is aware, no archaeological manifestations of overseas Chinese mining sites have yet been identified or recorded in southern California. The following sections present information to sensitize archaeologists to the potential existence of such sites and to aid in their identification and evaluation.

Historical Background

The vast majority of Chinese emigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century were Cantonese-speaking natives of the Kwangtung Province in South China. Kwangtung province encompasses the Pearl River Basin, and its principal population center is the city of Canton (Chinn 1969:2). Political oppression and economic hardship spawned domestic turmoil in China during the nineteenth century. These circumstances induced many Chinese citizens to seek opportunities elsewhere. The advent of the California Gold Rush and the promise of good wages provided a beacon of opportunity that drew many disenchanting Chinese from the Pearl River Delta. A great eastward maritime migration began in 1849, and by the early 1850s, there were an estimated 25,000 Chinese living in the state. By 1857 the number of Chinese immigrants in California had nearly doubled, reaching 45,000, but the influx slowed markedly during the 1860s. There were an estimated 50,000 Chinese in California in 1867, but by 1873 their number had risen to 62,500, and in 1880 the count reached 83,600 (Chinn 1969:18; Rohe 1989:329-330).

Many of the Chinese emigrants were bound for the mining districts of north-central California. In spite of discriminatory treatment that included imposition of a Foreign Miners' Tax, overseas Chinese persisted in the industry although many left to pursue other economic opportunities. In fact, by the early 1860s most white prospectors had abandoned gold mining, and by the end of 1863, the Chinese owned most of California's placer claims (Chinn 1969:33). Beginning in the 1860s, many Chinese miners arriving or working in California departed for new gold fields in Idaho and Montana, and by the 1870s they had spread to virtually every major placer area in the American West (Rohe 1989:331, 341).

Overseas Chinese miners filtered southward from the Mother Lode area to the newly discovered Kern River mining district around 1857, and by 1860 they were busily engaged in placering in that locality. In addition to mining, Chinese settled in the budding communities of Kern County, including Havilah, Kernville, and Bakersfield. By 1870 Bakersfield harbored a small Chinatown, whose occupants worked as laundrymen, cooks, and gardeners (Boyd 1972:192-193). Chinese were readily employed as early agricultural labor in the Bakersfield vicinity; they reportedly helped build the Kern Island Canal in the late 1860s and planted cotton in 1872 (Boyd 1972:93, 96).

Prior to the mid-1870s, very few Chinese had settled in southern California. However, the situation changed with the arrival of numerous Chinese laborers engaged in building the Southern Pacific Railroad line from San Francisco to Los Angeles (Chinn 1969:23). Their employment by the Southern Pacific followed the earlier success of the great transcontinental railroad project of 1865-69, when Chinese provided a significant amount of the labor for the Central Pacific's race across the Sierra Nevada and the Great Basin toward Promontory Point.

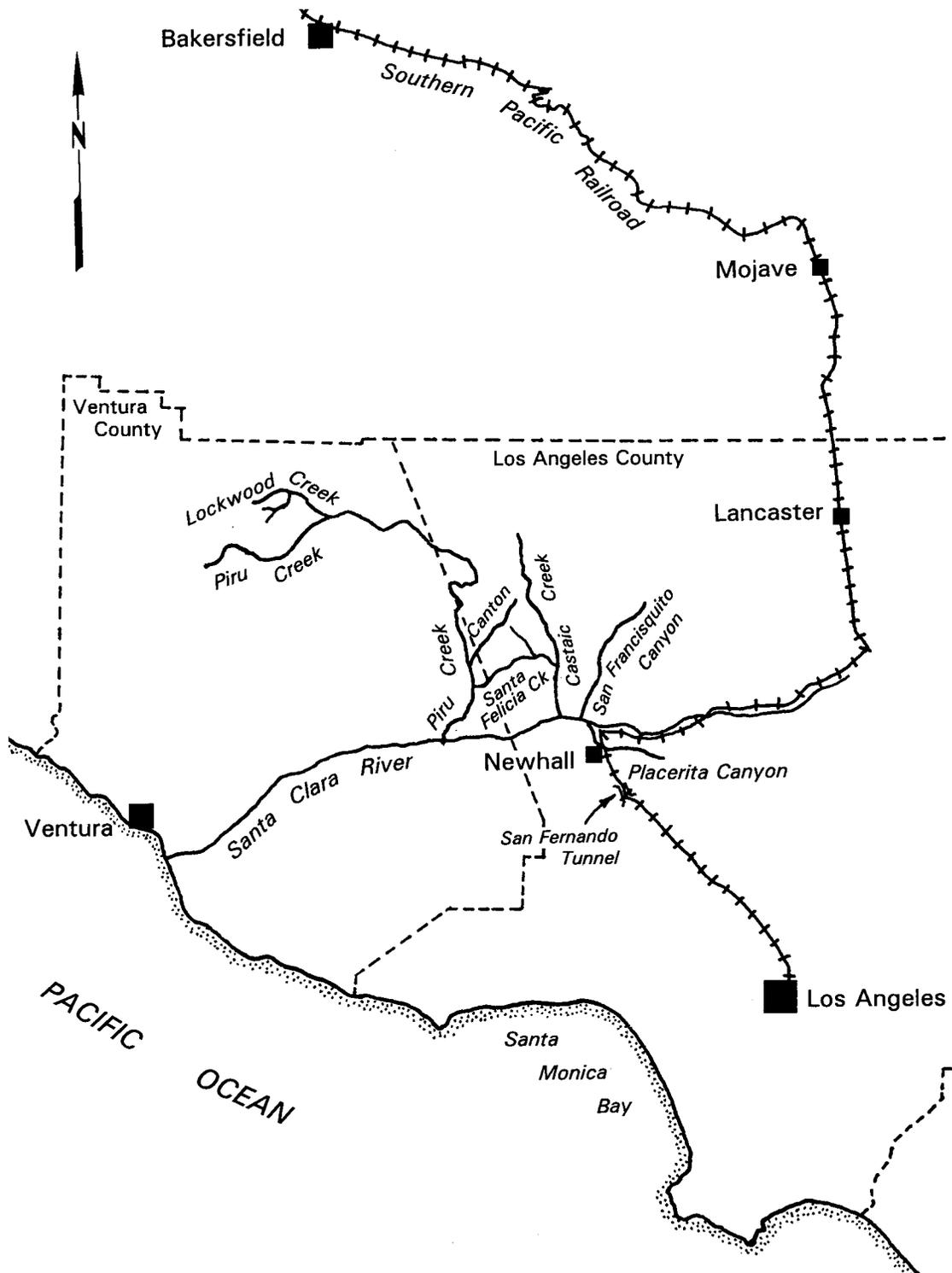


Fig. 1. Vicinity map showing the Santa Clara watershed of Los Angeles and Ventura counties and localities associated with 19th century Chinese placer mining.

The transcontinental connection with the westward advancing Union Pacific was made in May of 1869, and by December of the same year, the Central Pacific commenced constructing a line southward through the San Joaquin Valley toward Los Angeles. In 1872 the line had been extended as far south as Goshen in Tulare County (near Visalia) when the Central Pacific and Southern Pacific Railroads came under joint control (Wilson and Taylor 1952:52, 237). Henceforth, the line was continued south of Goshen Junction with a new corporate identity as the Southern Pacific Railroad. By 1875 the Southern Pacific was tackling the formidable Tehachapi Mountains, and in the same year a force of approximately 1,000 Chinese laborers was engaged in the difficult task of boring the 6,975 foot long San Fernando Tunnel at the edge of the Los Angeles basin. The tunnel was finished by July of 1876, and by September of the same year, the rail connection of California's two principal cities was in place (Chinn 1969:46). While some Chinese railroad workers stayed on to lay track as the Southern Pacific pushed eastward across the Mojave Desert and into Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, a sizeable number apparently were laid off or chose not to continue. Some of these laborers reportedly drifted into the nearby placer fields, not far from present-day Newhall (Perkins 1958:160, 296). The overall number of Chinese in Los Angeles County jumped from only 234 in 1870 to 1,169 by 1880. The increase is likely due to the influx of former railroad workers, many of whom presumably settled in Los Angeles' Chinatown district.



Fig. 2. The San Fernando Tunnel on the Southern Pacific Railroad constructed by Chinese laborers near Newhall, California. View of the north portal, taken by the author in 1998.

One other source of overseas Chinese placer miners was the coastal mission town of San Buenaventura. A small Chinatown sprang up in Ventura in the late 1860s or early 1870s, and by 1875 it contained a resident population of approximately 200 “Celestials” (Wlodarski 1976:443-445; Triem 1985:50). As was the case in Bakersfield, some of Ventura’s Chinese provided labor that benefitted the developing agricultural economy while others operated laundries or worked as servants, laborers, or vegetable peddlers. Chinese laborers were reportedly utilized to dig a water supply canal to Ventura in 1871, and their proven capacity for manual labor may explain why they were recruited in the early 1870s to serve as hired labor for placer mining ventures in the Ventura County backcountry (Wlodarski 1976:444; Outland 1986:80).

After their arrival in southern California, overseas Chinese exploited a variety of economic opportunities in spite of severe discrimination. They provided labor that contributed to the growth of commercial agriculture, and some, on the coast and Channel Islands, developed a thriving industry harvesting abalone (McWilliams 1983:87-89; Berryman 1995). Chinese also operated numerous laundries and restaurants in urban areas (McWilliams 1983:85). Southern California’s placer fields offered yet another, albeit uncertain and seasonal, source of potential income. Equipped with a rudimentary knowledge of gold recovery methods and the temperament and patience to perform substantial labor with modest returns, it is little wonder that the overseas Chinese of southern California engaged in placer mining in the mountains of the Santa Clara River watershed.

The Overseas Chinese Placer Mining Pattern

The overseas Chinese practiced a characteristic “pattern” of mining which distinguished them from their Euro-American counterparts. They almost exclusively devoted their efforts to the recovery of gold from alluvial surface deposits, or placers, although Chinese were hired in some instances to dig tunnels or move rock at lode mines. The Chinese generally worked as independent miners or under the employ of Chinese companies. However, as time passed, they were hired in increasing numbers by Euro-American mining interests, and by the late 1880s nearly one third of California’s Chinese miner’s worked as hired labor for Euro-Americans (Rohe 1989:333).

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Chinese placer mining was their devotion to re-working tailings and placers abandoned by Euro-American miners. After rich surface placers were supposedly exhausted, Chinese frequently moved in and reprocessed the tailings to recover remaining traces of gold. They proved effective at this type of “scavenging” because they brought to bear the combination of patience, careful and labor-intensive methods as well as a willingness to settle for a lower yield in gold per ton of material processed. Obviously, the re-working of tailings and other low-grade deposits was also an adaptation by the overseas Chinese to the pervasive climate of anti-Chinese sentiment which averted conflict with the dominant (Euro-American) cultural group.

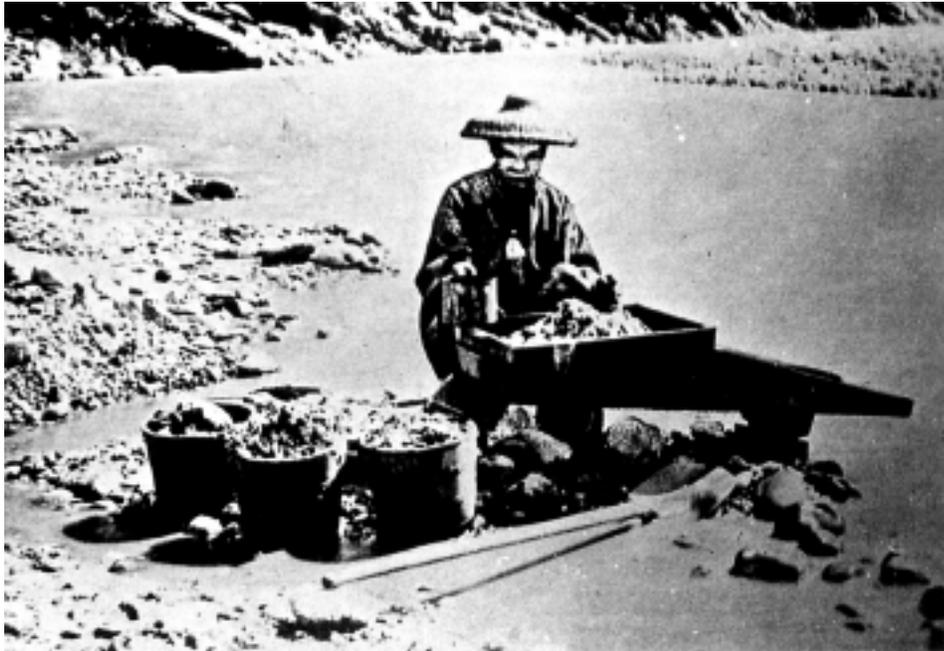


Fig. 3. Chinese placer miner using a cradle or rocker at a stream placer in California, ca. 1890. (Source: California Division of Mines and Geology Archives, Sacramento).

Chinese placer mining emphasized labor intensive methods and simple technology. They typically worked gold placers using the cradle or rocker, a relatively primitive, but portable, homemade wooden device that processed alluvium more efficiently than panning (Fig. 3). As noted by Rohe (1989:333), mobility was an important consideration for the Chinese, who were frequently faced with hostile treatment by Euro-Americans. Chinese miners also frequently worked cooperatively to increase the efficiency of placer mining by building reservoirs and ditches to impound and re-direct water to wash gravel. In northern California, they built wing dams to divert streams and thereby expose stream bed gravels which would then be run through sluice boxes and long-toms (Chinn 1969:32; Rohe 1989:334). Chinese also readily turned to hydraulic mining, utilizing high-pressure streams of water to liquefy stream bank deposits which would then be run through a sluice to recover particles of gold. Most Chinese mining companies active in California during the 1865 to 1880 period were engaged in hydraulic mining (Rohe 1989:334). Obviously, a sufficient source of water was necessary to sustain hydraulic mining operations.

Chinese placer miners in California usually established ephemeral camps on the banks of streams near their mining claims. They typically occupied tents or created crude but serviceable housing from available materials including brush houses (Chinn 1969:30; Rohe 1989:332).

Documented Chinese Mining Areas in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties

A number of minor gold producing districts were developed during the nineteenth century in the mountains north and northwest of Los Angeles, and in fact, the earliest documented gold production in California (ca. 1842) was derived from one such locale (Placerita Canyon). These districts are characterized by low yield placers and lack of water which inhibited the establishment of permanent mining settlements. Chinese are known to have participated in the seasonal mining activity in two distinct areas of the mountainous watershed of the Santa Clara River.

A vaguely defined but extensive area in the western San Gabriel Mountains of Los Angeles County, encompassing a number of canyons on both sides of Interstate 5 near Newhall and Castaic, was the scene of sporadic placer mining activity, primarily by Mexicans, that began in the early 1840s following the serendipitous discovery of gold in Placerita Canyon. These canyons all drain into the Santa Clara River or its major tributaries including Castaic and Piru Creeks. The gold placers in the Newhall-Castaic region of the Lower Santa Clara River watershed have been referred to by a variety of names including the San Feliciana or Castaca Diggings, the Newhall Placers, the Saugus District, the Soledad District, and the San Fernando Placers, to name a few (cf. Clark 1970:176; State Mineralogist 1894:152; Robinson 1973:16-20).

While the placers of the Newhall-Castaic area were first discovered and mined by Mexicans in the 1840s, the Kern River gold rush of 1855-1856 reportedly brought an influx of Euro-American miners into Santa Felicia, Castaic, and San Francisquito Canyons by the late 1850s (State Mineralogist 1917:474). There is ample evidence that in the 1870s and 1880s, Chinese miners were also engaged in placer mining here. In describing the industries and conditions of Soledad Township which encompassed the town of Newhall, Thomas H. Thompson and Albert A. West in 1880 stated (67, 104) "Placer mines are still worked during the winter season, by Chinamen and natives principally. The yield amounts to several hundred dollars per week, while water lasts."

Chinese were apparently also actively mining in the Piru Mining District in northern Ventura County at about the same time. The placers in this area extend principally along portions of upper Piru Creek and its tributaries, Lockwood Creek, and San Guillermo Creek (sometimes referred to in early reports as San Quelmo Canyon). One early report stated that "sluicing and rocking have been carried on intermittently here for many years" but also noted that "the great trouble heretofore has been the lack of water for sluicing" (State Mineralogist 1894:315). The mining region of the Piru Creek/ Upper Santa Clara River watershed is relatively poorly documented due its remoteness from centers of population, and there are no early published accounts discussing the presence of Chinese. The only documentary reference to this activity was derived from the privately published history of the Snedden family, early settlers of the Lockwood Valley.

It is impossible to ascertain an accurate count of the Chinese miners who worked in the placer fields of southern California. Due to their alienation from the dominant Euro-American cultural group and their generally secretive nature, the overseas Chinese were rendered a relatively invisible sector of the mining population. In the Soledad and San Fernando townships, comprising the northern portion of Los Angeles County, enumerators collecting data for the 1880 U.S. Census identified only seven of 52 Chinese as miners (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1880). However, these data may not accurately reveal the extent of placer mining activity by Chinese; for example, Chinese listed as “laborers” and “gardeners” may have also conducted mining on a part-time basis during the rainy season (the census data was collected during June of 1880). Chinese placer mining in the lower Santa Clara River watershed, including Santa Felicia, Castaic, Palomas, Placerita, and San Francisquito Canyons, was better documented than that in the upper Piru watershed for a number of reasons. Due to its proximity to Los Angeles, the lower Santa Clara River watershed area was undoubtedly subject to a greater frequency of visitation by such reporters as Thompson and West and mining engineers than the relatively unsettled and remote upper Piru Creek/Santa Clara River watershed. Also, there is little doubt that the placers of the Newhall-Castaic area were more productive in terms of gold recovery.

The following sections present the available historical evidence for Chinese placer mining in specific localities within the upper and lower Santa Clara River watershed areas.

The Lower Santa Clara River Watershed

Areas within the lower reaches of the Santa Clara River watershed that were subject to Chinese placer mining included Placerita, Castaca (Castaic), Palomas, San Felician (Santa Felicia), San Francisquito, and Canton Canyons (Figs. 4 and 5).

Placerita Canyon

The earliest documented gold mining activity in California (1841-42) occurred in Placerita Canyon, the mouth of which opens westerly toward the location of present day Newhall. Mexican prospectors made the initial discovery, and placer mining was conducted sporadically for many decades by Mexican, American, and later, Chinese miners. Several references testify to the presence of Chinese engaged in placer mining in Placerita Canyon during the latter years of the nineteenth century.

According to Mr. Curtis Lewman of Newhall, some of the Chinese laborers who had completed building the San Fernando tunnel and laying track for the Southern Pacific Railroad line to Los Angeles, engaged in mining at a location “a couple of miles southerly from Newhall, variously known as “China Gulch,” or “Chinese Camp,” just east of Highway 6 or northeast of Lyon Station, which was at the present junction of San Fernando Road (to Newhall) and State Highway 6” (Perkins 1958:160). Based on the above description and the

known location of Lyons Station (Grenier 1978:311), the Chinese mining activity occurred along the lower (western) end of Placerita Canyon. They reportedly worked the gravels on “the mesa between Whitney and Quigley Canyons” (Perkins 1958:160). This indicates that the location of “China Gulch” or “Chinese Camp” was actually on the margin of Placerita Canyon since Whitney and Quigley Canyons straddle Placerita Canyon with Whitney Canyon paralleling it to the south and Quigley Canyon to the north.

The location described by the informant, Mr. Lewman, corresponds closely with another description of Chinese mining activity in Placerita Canyon published in a contemporary account by mining engineer E.B. Preston (1890:200-201). Preston explored the canyon in 1889 as a field assistant of the State Mineralogist and reported on the geology and mineral resources of Los Angeles County. He noted that in the portion of Placerita Canyon within Section 5 of Township 3 North, Range 15 West (S.B.M.) where a vein of limestone was exposed there was visible evidence of placer mining activity. Preston went on to state that “on inquiry we found that the Chinese work here during the wet season” (Preston 1890:201).

The Chinese placer mining activity in Placerita Canyon continued well into the 1880s, and another of Perkins’ informants indicated that the Orientals were succeeded by Chileans late in the decade (Perkins 1958:160). Engineer Preston’s account suggests that the Chinese were still engaged in mining in Placerita by the end of the decade, albeit only when water was available for placering. It is possible that they conducted small scale hydraulics, and Perkins (1958:160) mentions that abandoned mining flume ditches were still visible in the vicinity of the China Gulch/Chinese Camp workings into the 1920s.

Castaca (Castaic), Palomas, and San Feliciano (Santa Felicia) Canyons

Situated approximately ten to twelve miles northwest of Newhall is a relatively extensive area of auriferous gravel that encompasses portions of San Feliciano, Castaca, and Palomas Canyons. Placer mining activity was conducted in this region at least as early as the 1870s under a variety of appellations including the Castaca Placer Diggings, the San Feliciano [sic] Placer Diggings, and the Palamos [sic] Mining District (State Mineralogist 1888:333-334; Preston 1890:201).

There were reports of Chinese mining activity in what was vaguely referred to contemporaneously as the “San Feliciano placers” and the “Piru mines” as early as 1874; however, it is impossible to determine the location(s) with any degree of certainty or precision. For example, Charles Outland (1986:80) cited a contemporary newspaper account that described the results of a mining expedition to this locale in the winter of 1874 led by R.G. Surdam of Ventura. The work was done by a group of Chinese contract laborers recruited from Ventura’s Chinatown.

Chinese labor was reportedly employed in what was referred to as the “east part of the Palamos Mining District,” and a relatively specific location for this activity was presented in

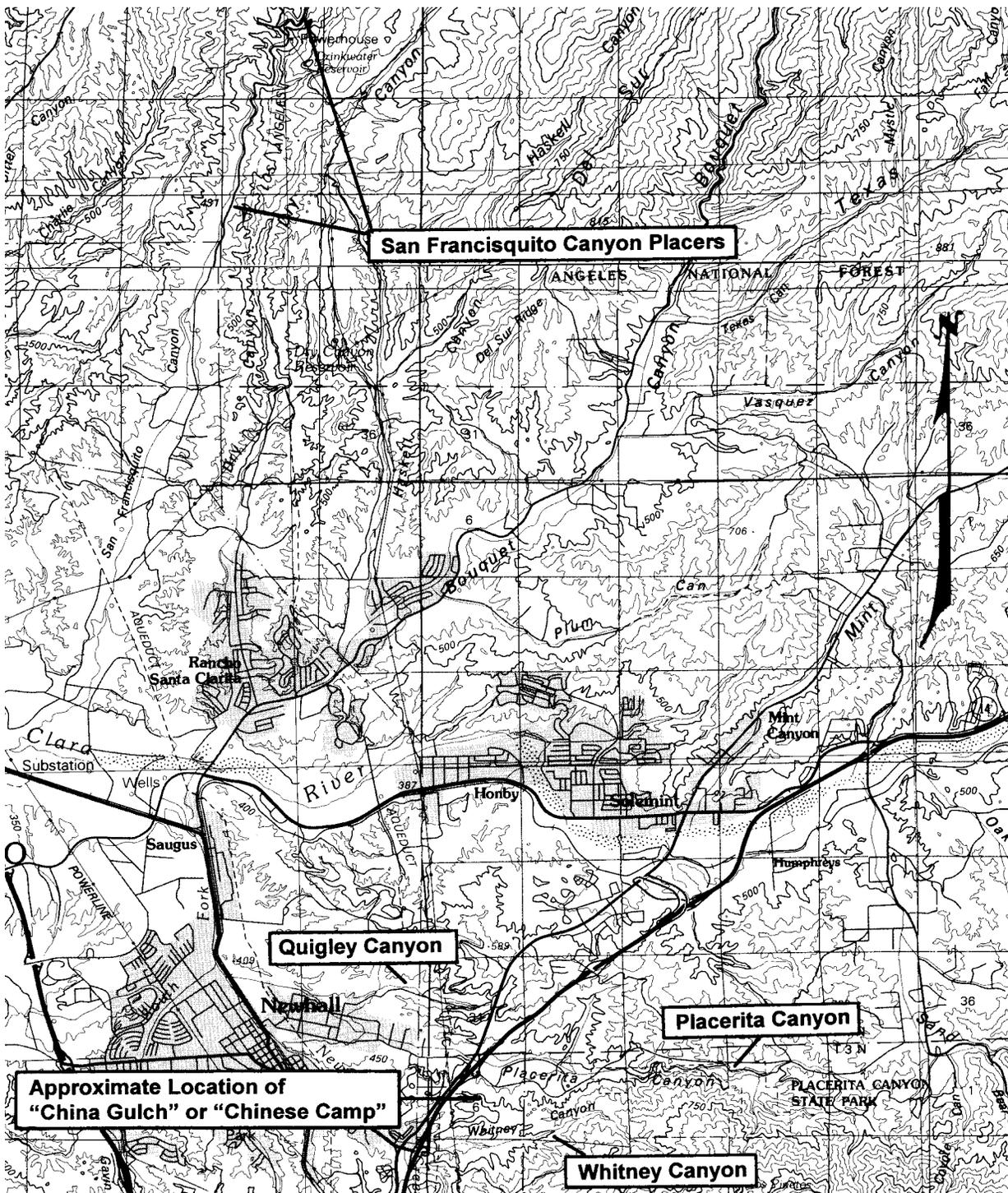


Fig. 4. Placerita and San Francisquito Canyon Placers of the Santa Clara River watershed, in which Chinese placer mining activity reportedly occurred. Source: USGS Los Angeles and Lancaster 1:100,000 Scale Topographic Maps.

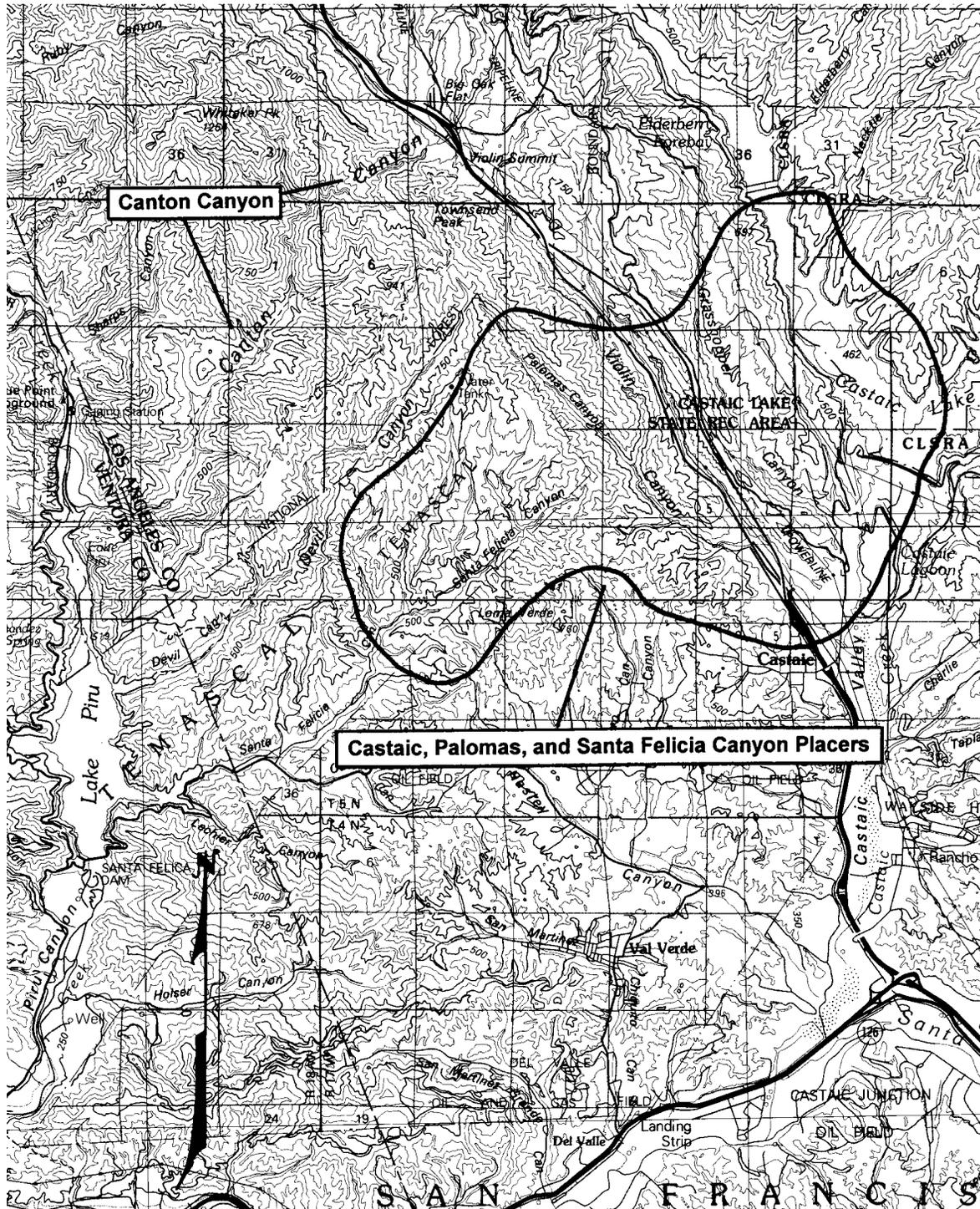


Fig. 5. Documented Chinese mining area of Castaic, Palomas, and Santa Felicia Canyons, and the potential Chinese mining area of Canton Canyon. Source: USGS Los Angeles and Lancaster 1:100,000 Scale Topographic Maps.

the field report by Preston (1890:201-202). Near the junction of Palomas and San Feliciana Canyons, a spring with an output of one and one fourth miner's inches was tapped [a miner's inch is equivalent to 12.5 gallons per minute], and the water was used to conduct limited hydraulic mining of the gravel deposits. The spring water was collected in a small reservoir, and the quantity available allowed for the use of a two-inch nozzle in the hydraulic operation for only two and a half hours per day. The account by Preston clearly states that the Chinese did not manage the placer operation, but rather were utilized as hired labor. Unfortunately, no measure of the size of the Chinese mining population in this area is known, nor are other details such as the duration of the activity or the location of a residential locus or camp.

San Francisquito Canyon

San Francisquito Canyon, a relatively major drainage tributary to the Santa Clara River, was also reportedly the scene of ephemeral Chinese placer mining operations in the nineteenth century. The canyon extends for about fifteen miles, forming a deep cleft into the San Gabriel Mountains trending generally north to northeast; it empties into the Santa Clara River about two miles southeast of Castaic Junction. According to Luis Raggio, the son of an early settler of this mountainous region, "about 50 Chinamen" were working the tailings of non-Chinese miners in 1876 in the vicinity of Power Plant No. 2. The informant's father, Charles Raggio, reportedly fed these Chinese miners, suggesting that these sojourners were in his employ. Luis Raggio further stated that

"The whole flat was very rich. The dust was not as fine as some of the other placers. The Camp's two richest fields were at the Power Plant site, and at Drinkwater Canyon, a half mile further down the canyon" (Perkins 1958:156-157).

While Luis Raggio's testimony is plausible, one must bear in mind that his information was not obtained first-hand. Luis Raggio was born in 1884, some eight years after the reported Chinese mining activity of 1876, and his father, Charles Raggio, passed away in 1888 when Luis was only four years old (Perkins 1958:157).

In any event, there is little potential for the survival of archaeological evidence of Chinese placer mining in San Francisquito Canyon due to the infamous and catastrophic collapse of the St. Francis dam on March 12, 1928. The ill-fated dam was originally located about five miles further up the canyon from Power House No. 2 and the placer tailings reportedly worked by the Chinese, and its collapse sent a torrent of water down the canyon which likely scoured away any evidence of early placer mining.

Canton Canyon

Another possible locus of nineteenth century Chinese placer mining activity is Canton Canyon, a tributary of Piru Creek that drains in a southwesterly direction from between Whitaker and Townsend Peaks emptying into the artificial Lake Piru. It is one of a series of northeast-southwest trending canyons dissecting the rugged mountains northwest of Los Angeles and lies between Devil Canyon to the southeast and Sharps Canyon to the northwest.

While there are no published references to Chinese placering in Canton Canyon, its name and proximity to the San Feliciano-Palomas-Castaca gold region points to such a conclusion. The place name "Canton Canyon" can be traced back at least as early as 1903 when it appeared on the U.S. Geological Survey 30' *Tejon* quadrangle map. The name is absent from the General Land Office survey plats of the region produced in 1880. Neither Ricard's (1972) compendium of Ventura County place name, nor Gudde's (1969, 1975) compendia of California place names make mention of Canton Canyon. Nevertheless, it is possible that the name refers to the principal city in the Kwangtung Province of China from which the majority of overseas Chinese originated (Chinn 1969:2). Quite likely Canton Canyon was prospected by groups of Chinese laborers during the late 1800s contemporaneous with the documented Chinese placer mining activity in nearby San Francisquito, Placerita, and Palomas/San Feliciano Canyons.

The Upper Piru Creek Watershed

Within the upper Piru Creek watershed, two specific areas have been identified as potential sites of Chinese mining activity: San Guillermo Creek with the adjacent "Leopold Flats" and the confluence of Lockwood and Piru Creeks (Lockwood Flat). These locations are shown in Figure 6.

San Guillermo Creek/ "Leopold Flats"

According to David F. Snedden, grandson of pioneer settler Samuel Snedden, Chinese miners were active in the Lockwood Valley area during the late nineteenth century. Placer mining by groups of Chinese was reportedly conducted along San Guillermo Creek, a tributary of Lockwood Creek, in the vicinity of "Leopold Flats" (Snedden 1947:30). Leopold Flats is an obscure place name not shown on U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps or General Land Office survey plats, nor is it mentioned in published compendia of place names (Gudde 1969, Gudde 1975). It is probably derived from the name of Don Leopolda, a miner who reportedly operated claims in the vicinity of Lockwood Creek (Ventura Signal 1879). The area referred to by David Snedden as Leopold Flats is an area of open terrain situated directly east of San Guillermo Mountain and Pine Spring Campground (operated by the U.S. Forest Service) between the two forks of San Guillermo Creek (Personal communication with David Snedden Jr., 11/23/1993; Snedden 1947:31-33). A squatter's cabin shown in this vicinity on the 1880 General Land Office survey plat may represent the dwelling of Don Leopold or Leopolda.

According to David Snedden, Chinese farm laborers or farmers from the Bakersfield area made regular forays into the mountains near Lockwood Valley during the wet season to work the placer deposits.

Published anecdotal reminiscences by Snedden family members, early pioneers of Lockwood Valley in Ventura County, stated that in addition to Caucasian miners working in the Lockwood Creek vicinity “many Chinamen in small and large parties had been coming into those mountains to mine for gold” (Snedden 1947:30). A group of miners visiting the Snedden’s rural homestead reportedly estimated the presence of over one hundred Chinese miners working the drainages near Lockwood Creek. David Snedden Sr., eldest son of patriarch Samuel Snedden, is said to have observed a Chinese miners’ camp in Leopold Flats in 1879 or 1880, a description of which is related by Genevra Snedden:

“He found their camp on a hillside about one hundred feet above a ravine where they were digging for gold. They had made dugouts in the hill. There they slept. These dugouts were much the same as those in which our front-line soldiers often had to sleep during the big war in the 1940s” (Snedden 1947:31-32).

Unfortunately, this description is of dubious value since David Snedden Sr. was only eleven years old at the time, and the story was related second-hand. The same published source also describes how the Chinese miners in this area were despised by the Caucasian miners as unwanted competitors for the gold and consequently were driven out by intimidation.

It has been impossible thus far to determine the precise location of the alleged location of the Chinese miners’ camp near San Guillermo Creek discussed in the Snedden family history book. Conflicting information was provided by David Snedden Jr., who in a phone interview (11/23/1993) placed the site on the “north side of Leopold Flats” near the Piano Box Campground; he also marked a different location further east on a topographic map of the area provided by the author (Fig. 6). A cursory reconnaissance of the location plotted on the map conducted by the author in the summer of 1996 not only failed to find archaeological evidence of Chinese miners, but the alleged location was found to be topographically unsuitable (too steep) for habitation. However, in spite of this confusion, the likelihood remains that Chinese did, in fact, pursue seasonal placer mining somewhere in the general vicinity of San Guillermo Creek and “Leopold Flats.”

Lockwood Flat/ Lexington

A dubious reference to Chinese occupying the short-lived mining camp of Lexington was provided by Russ Leadabrand, in a guidebook discussing the Alamo Mountain area of Ventura County. According to Leadabrand (1968:118):

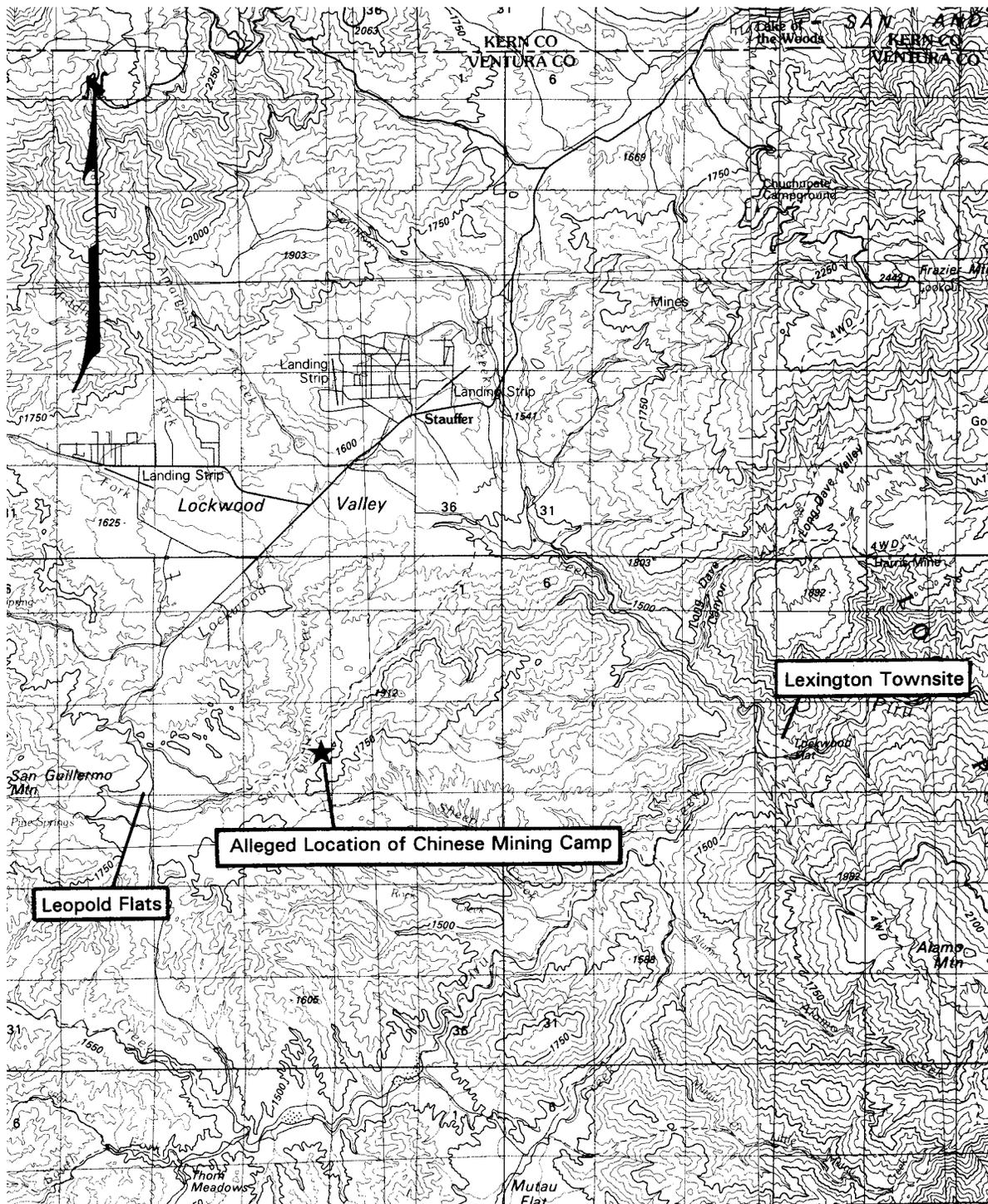


Fig. 6. Locations associated with rumored Chinese placer mining activity in the Upper Piru Creek watershed in Ventura County. Source: USGS Lancaster and Cuyama 1:100,000 Scale Topographic Maps.

“Up where Piru Creek joins with Lockwood Creek there is a flat [Lockwood Flat] of maybe seventy-five acres. An old settlement once stood here - its name is forgotten even by the oldtimers. The settlers made their living from the gravel golds and at least part of the camp was made up of Chinese. Some old purple bottles have been found at the site, reachable today only by jeep.”

Presumably, the source for this information was one of the “oldtimers,” and more reliable evidence concerning the presence of Chinese miners in this location has yet to surface. Lexington was a speculative venture typical of the townsite craze of the 1880s in southern California that apparently failed to materialize (Dumke 1944:198). Although a plat for the townsite was filed in February of 1887 and in spite of a flurry of promotional newspaper articles, no permanent settlement ever was established at the confluence of Piru and Lockwood Creek (Smith et al 1887; Outland 1986:64-67). Still, an ephemeral camp of miners undoubtedly did live and work in this locality, and the possibility exists that Chinese may have been among them.

Expected Archaeological Evidence of Chinese Placer Mining

Archaeological remains of overseas Chinese mining and labor camp sites in America and New Zealand provide useful information applicable to Chinese placer mining sites that may exist in the mountains of southern California. Previous studies indicate that features such as habitations and placer tailings may suggest Chinese ethnicity, but that artifact assemblages usually found in association with habitation sites are far more reliable indicators of the former presence of Chinese. The following sections summarize available data concerning Chinese ethnicity as potentially reflected by habitation features, placer mining tailings, and artifacts.

Habitations

Like their Euro-American counterparts, overseas Chinese miners occupied a variety of habitations ranging from expedient structures such as dry-laid masonry rooms, dugouts, and brush huts to more substantial structures such as log cabins. The form(s) of mining camp housing constructed by Chinese miners in a given area was probably determined by such factors such as the availability of building materials, the climate, and the duration of occupation and relative intensity of mining (based upon the richness of the placer deposits). For example, Chinese miners in Leesburg, Idaho, built log cabins like their Euro-American neighbors probably because timber was widely available, and such structures offered comfort and good protection from the elements in this relatively high altitude mining district (Earls et al. 1993).

In general, habitations used by overseas Chinese miners exhibited great variability. Chinn (1969:30) claims that in California, Chinese sojourners established camps “characterized by small tents and brush houses” while another investigator of a Shasta County (California) mining camp inhabited by Chinese was impressed by the apparent lack of habitation struc-

tures (Ritter 1986, cited in Earls et al. 1993:29). Chinese habitations documented along the Lower Salmon River in Idaho included rectangular, semi-subterranean, rock-walled structures, as well as natural rockshelters improved with dry-laid rock walls across the opening (Sisson 1993). Similarly modified rockshelters utilized by overseas Chinese placer miners in New Zealand were also reported by Ritchie (1993). Other forms of expedient housing occupied by Chinese miners and railroad workers in the American West included tents in Northern California sites and dugouts often with dry-laid stone reinforcing walls at a variety of locations in Nevada, Oregon, and Texas (Sisson 1993, citing a variety of sources). Rectangular dugouts built and occupied by Chinese ex-railroad workers were also found in Paradise Valley, Nevada (Marshall 1995:22-24). In addition to these makeshift shelters, researchers have also noted that where possible Chinese miners readily re-occupied abandoned Euro-American dwellings (Earls et al. 1993:29; Sisson 1993:58).

A number of crude habitation structures have been documented as a result of archaeological survey in the vicinity of Palomas and Santa Felicia (or San Feliciano) Canyons, an area known to have been occupied in part by Chinese placer miners (Gumerman and Head 1989). A total of eight structures were recorded, all of which were generally rectangular-shaped enclosures with low walls of stacked rock walls and cobbles. At least two of the structures contained rock features which may represent internal fireplaces. All of these habitation features were determined to be associated with mining activity, and six of the eight structures were clustered in two "camp" groupings of three each. However, the ethnic identities of these structures' occupants is indeterminate based upon morphological attributes, and the few proximal artifacts noted were of Euro-American origin.

Attempts to identify ethnically diagnostic attributes of expedient Chinese mining camp housing have yielded inconclusive results (Sisson 1993). For example, the deeply entrenched traditional cultural belief of *Feng shui*, which involves principles guiding the orientation of manmade objects and structures within the environment in order to maximize good fortune and minimize harmful supernatural effects, should be reflected in Chinese structures. However, in practice, tangible expressions of *Feng shui* in overseas Chinese dwellings have proved essentially unverifiable due to the numerous variables involved (Ritchie 1993:365-366; Sisson 1993:38-39). Integral to *Feng shui* is the quest for *ch'i*, the powerful life essence inherent in the environment, which is enhanced by certain natural conditions and elements but is degraded by other harmful conditions and elements. *Feng shui* principles dictate that a dwelling site should be protected on three sides, that the front of the structure should face south whenever possible, and that it is generally beneficial to face water. Ritchie (1993:366) noted that particularly favorable locations based on *Feng shui* lore included sites backing onto sloping ground, overlooking watercourses, and at the confluence of streams. (Note: one grouping of crude rock habitation structures documented by Gumerman and Head (1989) near Santa Felicia Canyon was situated at the confluence of two drainages). Since Chinese miner's dwellings do not seem to follow a distinctive morphological pattern, one is left to rely upon ethnically diagnostic artifacts to identify Chinese habitations. Still, it is wise to consider such

non-Western notions as *Feng shui* when evaluating the ethnicity of potential Chinese miners' habitations.

Placer Tailings

The detritus of placer mining activity, referred to as "tailings," may be suggestive of the presence of overseas Chinese miners. It is commonly believed that neatly stacked waste rock piles were invariably created by overseas Chinese placer miners, and that such tailings may therefore serve as universally recognizable trademarks or signatures of Chinese placer mining activity (Rohe 1989:334-335). However, caution is advised in accepting this generalization as dogma. In a study of placer mining sites in New Zealand's Upper Clutha River Mining District, Ritchie (1981) classified a number of morphological forms of placer tailings left by Chinese and European miners and warned that "many mining sites which have been worked only by European miners are equally tidy. Conversely, the tailings in some sites known to have been worked by Chinese miners are not neatly stacked" (Ritchie 1981:55). In spite of this warning, the presence of neatly stacked placer mining tailings in conjunction with other archaeological evidence (e.g., Chinese ceramics or opium smoking paraphernalia) would heighten the likelihood that a site containing these physical manifestations represents occupation by Chinese.

Artifacts

Overseas Chinese sites often contain a variety of artifacts diagnostic of ethnicity including Chinese ceramics, opium paraphernalia, coins, and gaming pieces. Chinese artifacts may also occur in association with Euro-American artifacts, a situation which may be indicative of Chinese re-occupation of a Euro-American site or of the use of commercial Euro-American products by the sojourners.

Chinese ceramics include the ubiquitous brown glazed stoneware (also referred to as Utilitarian Brown Ware) vessels such as shouldered food jars, soy sauce pots, and globular storage jars. Brown-glazed stoneware vessels are generally thick-walled and are typically covered with a thick dark brown to black glaze exhibiting abundant imperfections and flaws (Olsen 1978, cited in Earls et al. 1993:282; Garaventa and Pastron 1983:298-299).

Other types of readily identifiable Chinese ceramics include porcelain or porcellaneous stoneware tablewares including rice bowls and tea cups (as well as other vessel forms) decorated with either Celadon glaze or a variety of recognized polychrome overglaze designs such as "Four Seasons," "Three Circles and a Dragonfly," and "Swirl", (or "Double Happiness"). Celadon glazed wares are characterized by a thick pale green glazed exterior and a milky white or green glazed interior. Celadon vessels usually feature a hand painted potter's mark in cobalt blue applied to the base (Olsen 1978, cited in Earls et al. 1993:284). One of the most widespread of the Chinese polychrome motifs was Four Seasons, defined by hand-painted

flowers, plum, lotus, peony, and chrysanthemum, applied on each quadrant of the vessel's exterior. For further information, the reader is referred to various illustrated descriptive studies of Chinese ceramics including Olsen (1978), and Garaventa and Pastron (1983).

Opium smoking was a widespread addictive practice among overseas Chinese in both urban and rural contexts and involved a distinct "kit" of smoking paraphernalia that is archaeologically distinguishable. As described by Wylie and Fike (1993:262), a typical opium smoker's kit included a specialized pipe, opium containers, a small glass oil lamp to heat the opium, a needle to manipulate the opium, scissors for trimming the lamp wick, and a straight or curved knife to clean the bowl and needle. Archaeological evidence of opium smoking most commonly includes whole or fragmentary ceramic opium pipe bowls and whole or fragmentary opium cans.

Opium pipe bowls were produced in a variety of shapes and were generally hollow circular or polygonal forms made of hard red clay with a convex upper smoking surface penetrated by a tiny central "smoking hole." The base of the opium pipe bowl terminated in a central cylindrical stem with which it was joined to the perpendicular cylindrical pipe body. Opium pipe bowls frequently bear impressed or embossed stamps containing Chinese characters. They have been extensively studied and morphologically classified, and for more information the reader is referred to the detailed work by Wylie and Fike (1993). Opium pipe bowls were subject to frequent breakage, rendering them the most common type of opium paraphernalia found in overseas Chinese sites (Wylie and Fike 1993:267).

Opium cans are also common artifacts at overseas Chinese sites. Such cans, which were of a standard size (five-tael), are rectangular-shaped sheet metal containers with detachable lids that usually bear Chinese brand stamps. Lids from opium cans may also exhibit incised cross-hatching reflecting pre-1909 opium tax stamp cancellation. Standard five-tael opium cans are constructed of five pieces of sheet metal soldered together, and complete cans typically measure 9.3 cm. tall by 6.5 cm. wide by 4.3 cm. deep (Wylie and Fike 1993:287-288). The lid was separated from the body of the can by removing a 15 mm. wide circumferential sealing strip.

Other distinctive Chinese artifacts which may be commonly encountered include circular white and black glass markers, which were used in such Chinese games as *Fan Tan* and *Wei-chi* (Earls et al. 1993:384). Chinese coins are another class of artifacts that occurs routinely in overseas Chinese habitation sites. These coins are generally made of cast brass and are disc-shaped with square central holes surrounded by Chinese characters (Earls et al. 1993:384-386). Square-holed Chinese coins, or *wen*, served a variety of non-monetary purposes for the overseas Chinese including talismans, gaming pieces, decorative items for clothing, and even as medical devices and hardware (Akin 1992).

Conclusions

The fragmentary documentary and oral history evidence presented above attests to the participation of an undetermined number of overseas Chinese in seasonal placer mining operations in the canyon placers of the mountains northwest of Los Angeles. This mining activity was necessarily restricted to the rainy season when water was available to wash potentially gold-bearing alluvium. Southern California's rainy season generally extends from November through March or April and produces most of the region's approximately 25 to 75 cm. (10 to 30 inches) of annual precipitation (Donley et al. 1979:134-135).

Although it is impossible to accurately determine the numbers of Chinese that were involved in seasonal placer mining, the documentary evidence suggests that the potential exists for the discovery of sites associated with this context in a number of canyons in the Transverse Ranges of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. Such sites should be identifiable by association with diagnostic Chinese artifacts and other archaeological remains such as habitation structures and placer tailings may also provide clues to this activity.

Chinese involvement in the gold mining districts of southern California was characteristic of a pattern repeated throughout the West. Wherever mining areas were developed, Chinese often supplanted the original (usually Euro-American) miners who departed after the rich surface placers were believed to be exhausted. According to Rohe (1989:328-329; 342), this cultural succession typically reflected a transition to methods of mining suited to the working of lower grade deposits, and Chinese readily occupied this "niche." Thus, seasonal mining was an enduring tradition in the mountainous region north of Los Angeles in the latter decades of the nineteenth century commenced initially by Mexican miners, followed after American acquisition of California by American, and later by Chinese miners.

In contrast to the proven and richer gold producing districts in California, Idaho, Montana, Arizona, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia, and elsewhere that drew Chinese miners in large numbers to engage in large-scale and sustained mining operations, the relatively poor placers of southern California served a different purpose for the sojourners. Characterized by low gold content and hampered by the seasonal and quite limited water supply, placers in the mountainous gold districts of Los Angeles and Ventura County provided opportunistic and industrious Chinese with one of several means to eke out a living within an area whose economic opportunities were constrained by the dominant Euro-American society. Applying near-legendary traits of thrift and patience, overseas Chinese utilized their imported knowledge of placer mining in the rugged southern California backcountry and enhanced their subsistence strategy with gold. The participation of overseas Chinese in the low yield placers of southern California can therefore be viewed as an adaptive response and as a part of a varied subsistence strategy of resource exploitation loosely analagous to an aboriginal seasonal round, but placed within the economic context of capitalism.

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