

Exploring Chinatowns

Teaching Materials Developed by: Faye Hammill, University of Glasgow

Adapted by: Alice Martin, Rutgers University

Introduction:

This is a lesson-plan for a two-hour seminar focusing on the theme of “Chinatown.” It was part of a masters, level-5 Modern American Literature course. The course as a whole focused on “present[ing] a coherent foundation for the study of modern American literature, introducing contemporary critical frameworks, key cultural trigger points, and a diverse range of literary texts. Rather than tracing a chronological line ... each five-week unit [addressed] a specific iteration of five key foci or themes that [were] developed and explored across two semesters. Those themes—Cities, Institutions, Movements, Entertainments, Anthologies—[represented] the course’s efforts to see writers and canons in dynamic contexts, to promote dialogue and effective comparisons between sessions, and to suggest different routes that students [could] pursue in more detail across the degree as a whole.”

In this particular activity, the class explored Chinatowns in different North American cities, looking at a series of (very) short texts, including some writing from the turn of the twentieth century and some from the early twenty-first century.

Key words: Chinatowns, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, cities, Winnifred Eaton, context, class discussion

Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

Learning Outcomes:

- Strengthen close reading skills
- Engage in primary source materials and contextual interpretation of North American 20th-century urban spaces
- Practice talking in class discussions about unfamiliar materials
- Formulate ideas and routes of exploration for further research

Task:

While reading, students will consider the following questions related to five primary themes, annotating their primary texts (see list of pre-assigned texts below) accordingly:

CONTESTED TERRAIN: “On the metaphorical and literal level, the residential, business and cultural space of the Chinese in America or Chinatown has been a contested terrain. The dominant white culture sees it as a foreign ground, and the visiting Chinese see it as not Chinese enough.” (K. Scott Wong). In what ways does Chinatown emerge as “contested terrain” in the set readings? Are there any other conflicts or tensions, in addition to the one that Wong mentions? Do these authors present a balanced view, or do the texts align themselves with one side or another of the debates explored in the stories?

FASHIONABILITY: Chinatown scenarios were very fashionable in North American popular culture of the early 20thC (film, fiction, magazines) and Chinese clothing and ornamentation were also appropriated in white culture. How do the early 20thC texts respond to or exploit this “oriental” vogue, and to what extent do they critique it? (Here, you might look at the Ruth Mayer article listed under “Further Reading”).

MARRIAGE: What is the effect of the juxtaposition of the two stories from *Mrs Spring Fragrance*? How do they modify one another via their perspectives on love and marriage?

FOOD: Compare the presentation of white attitudes to Asian food in the cookbook and in “Eggroll.” What has changed and what has not, over the intervening century? How is food used to focus broader debates about immigration and cultural hybridity?

STYLE: What do you think of the way each of the four texts captures speech and dialogue? How are second-language speakers of English represented?

Students will then revisit these questions in small groups within the classroom, taking notes on some of the discussion. Make note of passages that came up often to cite in the bigger group conversation to come.

Finally, the larger class will discuss these questions with each group sharing thoughts and adding to the formulation of larger interpretations and questions for further exploration.

Purpose:

Students will strengthen their close reading and their engagement in contextual interpretation by considering specific questions as they read the assigned texts. They will revisit these questions in classroom discussion to practice expanding their ideas and begin formulating potential theses and questions for further research.

Criteria/Grading:

By the end of the class period, students should have heavily annotated texts, as well as a number of passages and discussion points that they can revisit for future projects. Each student should be actively engaged in the small group discussions as well as contribute to

the larger class conversation. This activity is not graded except by general participation during the lesson.

Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:

Pre-assigned Readings

- Edith Eaton [Sui Sin Far], “Mrs Spring Fragrance” and “The Wisdom of the New”, two short stories in the collection *Mrs Spring Fragrance* (1912). Access the title story with a contextual introduction via the Library of America [here](#), and the whole book at archive.org [here](#).
- Winnifred Eaton and Sara Bosse, Preface to *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook* (1914). Access via the [Winnifred Eaton Archive](#) under “Playing Japanese” or directly [here](#).
- A Garry Engkent story of the instructor’s choice in *Ricepaper* magazine [here](#) (original assignment used the story “Eggroll,” no longer available online).

Contextual Materials on Historical and Socio-Cultural Background:

The following information and links should help the instructor and the students orient themselves in this topic before the class turns to the primary texts:

- **Defining Chinatown:**
 - “A section of a large town, especially a sea-port, in which Chinese live as a colony and to a great extent follow their own customs” (OED).
 - Chinatowns exist all around the world, and the best introduction I have found to the international concept of “Chinatown” is, for once, a Wikipedia entry, so you might start with this for background: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinatown>
 - For an introduction to the history of Chinatowns in the US, I recommend the short article by K Scott Wong, listed under the “Further Reading” below.
- **These websites give a brief outline of the historical conditions that led to immigration and the establishment of Chinatowns in major cities in the US and Canada:**
 - <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration>
 - <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-canadians>

Contextual Materials on the Authors of the Primary Texts:

The seminar centered on four short primary texts. First, we looked at the work of three sisters: Edith Eaton, Winnifred Eaton, and Sara Eaton Bosse. They were born to a British father and Chinese mother, and lived at various times in New York, Montreal and other cities.

- Winnifred Eaton also wrote under the Japanese pen-name Onoto Watanna
- Edith Eaton also wrote under the Chinese pen-name Sui Sin Far
- For more biographical information on all three sisters, see the [Biographical Timeline on the Winnifred Eaton Archive](#)
- For a brief biography of Winnifred Eaton see the [Oxford Bibliographies Online entry on Winnifred Eaton here.](#)
- For more biographical information see the following:
 - “Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far).” *Asian American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students*. Ed. Keith Lawrence. Bloomsbury, 2020.
 - “Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far).” *Dictionary of Literary Biography 381: Writers on Women’s Rights and United States Suffrage*. Ed. George Parker Anderson. Brucoli Clark Layman, 2017. 82-95
- We also looked at one contemporary Chinese-Canadian author, Garry Engkent, whose short biography appears at the bottom of his stories online.

Further Reading–Critical Articles:

- Dominika Ferens, “Native Americans, Chinese, and White Progressivists in the *Land of Sunshine*, 1895-1909”, *ATQ: 19th-century American Literature and Culture* 15.4 (2001): 305-316.
- Zhen Liu, “Asian Canadian Communal Literary Enterprise”, *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 31.1 (2018): 81-103.
- Ruth Mayer, “The Glittering Machine of Modernity: The Chinatown in American Silent Film.” *Modernism/Modernity*, vol. 16 no. 4, 2009, p. 661-684. Project MUSE, [doi:10.1353/mod.0.0144](https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.0.0144).
- Karen Skinazi, “As to her race, its secret is loudly revealed”: Winnifred Eaton’s Revision of North American Identity”, *MELUS* 32.2 (2007): 31-53.

- Min Hyoung Song, “Sentimentalism and Sui Sin Far,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 20: 1-2 (2003): 134-52.
- K. Scott Wong, “Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain”, *MELUS* 20.1 (1995).

Further Reading–Additional Primary Texts:

- Explore the “resources” section on the Winnifred Eaton Archive site, and the “fiction,” “poetry,” and “non-fiction” selections available on the [Ricepaper magazine site](#).
- YiYun Lee’s story “A Flawless Silence,” published in *The New Yorker* in 2018, [here](#).
- Winnifred Eaton [Onoto Watanna], “Li Ching’s Baby” (1898). Access via the [Winnifred Eaton Archive](#) under “Early Experiments” or directly [here](#)