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Radical History of Chinatown: Designing a Digital Tour | Spring 2023 Studio Course

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Global Urban Humanities & Future Histories Lab, UC Berkeley

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RADICAL HISTORY OF SF CHINATOWN: DESIGNING A DIGITAL TOUR

GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIO
CASE STUDY



WHY READ THIS CASE STUDY?

Students in “A Radical History of SF Chinatown: Designing a Digital Tour” worked with two community partners to dig deeply into the rich history of this thriving district in San Francisco and share it with a public audience.

Project-based learning provides opportunities for students to deepen their research and improve a variety of skills. By preparing a public-facing website, students took responsibility for undertaking research in which accuracy is consequential; for creating writing that is clear and compelling; and for creating visuals that are meaningful and effective in conveying information.

Students created an interactive map of meaningful locations in Chinatown, giving visitors to the website access to

an array of articles they wrote on themes including culture, education, housing, public health and public space.

This case study provides an overview of the arc of the semester that allowed students to both conduct research produce a website. It will be useful to instructors in history, ethnic studies, and other disciplines who wish to experiment with project-based learning and public-facing work.

Keywords:

Project-based learning, public humanities, public history, digital humanities, ethnic studies, storymapping, Asian American history.

This case study is part of an archive of the UC Berkeley Global Urban Humanities Initiative and its Future Histories Lab, supported by the Mellon Foundation. The entire archive, including course case studies, faculty and student reflections, digital projects, symposia, exhibitions, and publications, is available at https://escholarship.org/uc/ucb_guh_fhl.

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

RADICAL HISTORY OF SF CHINATOWN: DESIGNING A DIGITAL TOUR



A GLOBAL URBAN HUMANITIES RESEARCH STUDIO

Asian American Studies 190 / Humanities 32 / Environmental Design 132

4 Units, Spring 2023

Instructor:

Lok Siu (Ethnic Studies)

“Radical History of Chinatown: Designing a Digital Tour” was part of a year-long series of courses and arts programming at UC Berkeley focusing on immigration that was called *A Year on Angel Island*. This project-based course explored San Francisco’s Chinatown as the site of Asian American civil rights activism with the goal of developing a conceptual blueprint for an interactive online tour of SF Chinatown. Students read historical and ethnographic accounts, conducted interviews with community leaders, visited community organizations, went on a walking tour, and mapped and visually documented culturally and politically significant sites in Chinatown. Upon completing this research, students conceptualized and created an interactive digital tour of SF Chinatown.

The central goal of this project was to use humanistic methods of interviewing, photographing, story-telling, videographing, combined with digital mapping, to produce an interactive tour that allows “visitors” to gain deeper insight into the political struggles that have made Chinatown what it is today. The spatial formation and shifting boundaries of SF Chinatown, the variation of architectural aesthetics, and the placement of community centers and organizations all provide opportunities to uncover the hidden challenges the community has faced, the negotiations they have made, and the struggles they have launched. Without contest, SF Chinatown has been the hub of Asian American activism and civil rights mobilization. It is the cultural-political center where Asian Americans have organized against anti-Asian violence since the Chinese exclusion era, advocated for racial desegregation and bilingual education, and built a social infrastructure to serve its vulnerable populations. In short, this project takes the emblematic site of SF Chinatown to examine the politics of place-making for Asian Americans. Students worked with Chinese for Affirmative Action and the Chinese Historical Society of America as community partners.

THE INSTRUCTOR



Lok Siu, Professor

Lok Siu is a cultural anthropologist and Professor of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley. Her areas of expertise include Asian diasporas in the Americas, Chinese diaspora, un/belonging and citizenship, racial/ethnic/gender formation, food, and ethnography. Her books, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* and *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions* (co-edited with Rhacel Parreñas), received the Social Science Book Award from the Association for Asian American Studies in 2007 and 2009. Other books include *Gendered Citizenships: Transnational Perspectives on Knowledge Production, Political Activism, and Culture* and *Chinese Diaspora: Its Development in Global Perspective*. Her new book, *Worlding Asian Latinx: Cultural Intimacies in Food, Art, and Politics* is forthcoming. She is currently working on a new project tentatively titled, *Chifas: How Chinese Food Became Peru's National Treasure*.

As Chair of the Asian American Research Center, she helped launch several campus-community collaborative projects, including the Pipeline for AANHPI Community Health, the CAA Oral Histories Project, and the project on Community Archival Resilience and Engagement: *Voices of Asian American Elders in the Post-COVID San Francisco bay Area*. In 2022, She also convened the 30th Anniversary Conference of the International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas, a multi-sited conference involving UCB, UCLA, and Jinan University that took place in San Francisco, CA; Guangdong, China; and via Virtual Webinars.

She has lectured at universities throughout the US and Europe; at museums such as the Smithsonian, the Museum of Food and Drinks in NYC, the Chinese American Museum in LA, and the California African American Museum; and at institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. She has appeared in a range of news media, including CBS News, New York Times, NBC News, Bloomberg, CNN, and WNYC.

COURSE SUMMARY

CONTEXT

The Radical Histories of San Francisco Chinatown Project was created through the collaborative efforts of twenty-two undergraduate students, led by Professor Lok Siu and GSI Jessica Jiang. Funded by the Future Histories Lab, a project of the UC Berkeley's Global Urban Humanities Initiative, the course was cross-listed in three units, including the Asian American & Asian Diaspora Studies Program, the Art and Humanities, and the Environmental Design department.

Students began the course by reading existing scholarship on SF Chinatown, accompanied with guest lectures and a guided tour of Chinatown. The class brainstormed ideas for how we wanted to organize our project, identifying five broad themes we felt were important to cover in a survey of Chinatown's history: Housing, public space, public health, education, and cultural enterprise. We identified five locations as "anchoring sites" for the project based on existing community connections and availability of archives, with each site corresponding to one of the broad themes. In the following weeks, students broke into small groups according to these themes and dove into independent research in archives and with community members.

The format of our platform was an important question as we wanted readers to maintain an awareness of time and space in Chinatown, while also communicating complex webs of relationships between people, places, and politics. After exploring several existing digital humanities platforms, we ultimately settled on the form that you see now, a website and interactive map coded from scratch by students. A small group of students focused on building the website, working closely with the other small groups to develop unique designs for each research theme.

This first iteration of the project only represents the tip of the iceberg that is SF Chinatown's vibrant history. While future classes will continue working on the site, the design and content of the website you see now is the product of our students' hard work and diverse skills in research, multimedia journalism, web development, and design. Moreover, this project would not have been possible without the generosity of our community partners, who were eager to encourage our research. Thank you to the many community members across the Bay Area who fielded our emails, hopped on Zoom calls to answer questions, invited us to community events, gave us building tours, and shared their archives and memories with us.



Students worked with community partners to create an interactive website exploring the history of important sites in San Francisco's Chinatown.

SEMESTER MAP

ARC OF THE SEMESTER

WEEK 1- INTRODUCTION

- Review digital sites
- Digital Research on Chinatown

WEEK 2- CONSTRUCTING SF CHINATOWN

- Review material of San Francisco Chinatown
- Guest Speaker: Ling-chi Wang, Professor Emeritus of Asian American Studies

WEEK 3- CHINATOWN IN TRANSITION

- Review material of San Francisco Chinatown
- Guest Speaker: Jennie Lew, Better Parks and Recreations in Chinatown

WEEK 4- A NEW VISION OF PLACE AND BELONGING: COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

- Class Group Work: Archival Research, Ethnic Studies Library (TBC)

WEEK 5- CLAIMING CHINATOWN: CONTINUED STRUGGLES

- Class Chinatown Tour led by Jennie Lew

WEEK 6- GROUP PROJECTS: RESEARCH PLAN, ROLES, AND TIMELINE

- In-Class Screening Film: Chinatown Rising
- Guest Speaker: Digital Q&A with Joshua Chuck, director of Chinatown Rising

WEEK 7- CHECK-IN AND SMALL GROUP WORK

- Students turned in their planning/brainstorming document

WEEK 8- CHECK-IN AND SMALL GROUP WORK

- Students turned in their site write-up + list of other sites/subtopics

WEEK 9- CHECK-IN AND SMALL GROUP WORK

- Students continued working on other sites/subtopics within theme

WEEK 10- PEER REVIEW

WEEK 11 & WEEK 12- CONTENT ASSEMBLY & IMPLEMENTATION

WEEK 13- CONTENT ASSEMBLY & IMPLEMENTATION

WEEK 14- ROUGH FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATION

**WEEK 15- WEBSITE LAUNCH: CELEBRATION WITH INVITED CAMPUS AND
COMMUNITY MEMBERS**





Through the studio, students created a website with an interactive map. By clicking on a location on the map, the viewer can access descriptions and a student-written article on themes including housing, public space, public health, education, and cultural enterprise.

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STUDENT WORK



INTRODUCTION

San Francisco's Chinatown is the oldest Chinatown in North America and one of the largest and most influential ethnic Chinese enclaves outside Asia. With the onset of the California Gold Rush, San Francisco served as the entry point for Chinese migrants, mostly from the Guangdong Province, coming to California in search of fortune. Beginning in the 1850s, Chinese merchants settled near Portsmouth Square and established shops, restaurants, and other services around Dupont Street (now Grant Avenue) to provision miners heading inland in search of gold and to support the growing Chinese community. With the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, about 15,000 Chinese male workers were brought to California, and when the railroad was completed in 1869, many of these workers found their way to San Francisco as well as other cities where Chinese enclaves had formed. Chinatown expanded to the area bordered by Stockton, Kearney, California, and Broadway streets and became the only geographical space where Chinese were able to inhabit, purchase, and inherit dwellings within the City. Unwelcomed in other parts of the City, Chinatown quickly became the most densely populated area in all of San Francisco.

As a result of rising anti-Chinese violence and widespread anti-Chinese sentiments, several legislations were passed to restrict Chinese immigration. The Page Act of 1875 effectively prohibited the immigration of Chinese women, while the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 expanded the prohibition to all Chinese laborers, thereby drastically curtailing Chinese immigration and the social reproduction of Chinese American families.

When the Earthquake of 1906 destroyed the older parts of the City, discussions around the relocation of Chinatown emerged. However, the fear of loss of Chinese trade and labor in the City, along with pressures from the Chinese government thwarted these discussions, and Chinese merchants immediately began rebuilding Chinatown, drawing on orientalist motifs to present the grandeur of "Chinese culture" and to appeal to tourism.

SF Chinatown endured over the decades, and with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Chinatown received a new wave of migrants. At the same time, the youth population became drawn into the Civil

Rights movement, the anti-War movement, and the Third World Liberation Front. As Chinese American youth engaged in struggles for housing, healthcare, education, and public space, Chinatown became a critical site of social transformation. A range of organizations were founded to ensure sustained support for the community. And although Chinatown continues to evolve, the legacy of community struggle and activism remains strongly imprinted in its social infrastructure.

Without contest, SF Chinatown has been the hub of Asian American activism and civil rights mobilization. It is the cultural-political center where Asian Americans have organized against anti-Asian violence since the Chinese exclusion era; advocated for immigrant access to bilingual education, better housing, and healthcare; and built a social infrastructure to serve its vulnerable populations. In short, this project takes the emblematic site of SF Chinatown to examine the politics of place-making for Asian Americans.

This website attempts to capture some of the major themes reflected in the radical histories of San Francisco Chinatown. They include housing, public space, public health, education, and cultural enterprise.

EXPLORE CHINATOWN

Bracketed by the towering Financial District and the wealthy elites of Nob Hill, San Francisco's Chinatown is unique in its merciless compaction of space. Though historical bounded to only seventeen blocks, revisions to racial exclusion laws has allowed for expansion beyond predetermined borders. Explore SF Chinatown and our Sites of Interest through the Interactive Map below.



MAIN THEMES



CULTURE

- Grant Ave Follies
- Kearny Street Workshop
- Kubla Khan Nightclub
- Mr. Jiu's / Chop Suey (Food)
- The Forbidden City
- The Golden Dragon Massacre



EDUCATION

- CCSF - Chinatown
- Chinese for Affirmative Action
- Lau v. Nichols
- The Model Minority Myth



HOUSING

- Housing and Community Organizing in Chinatown Today
- International Hotel
- Mei Lun Yuen
- Ping Yuen
- Reimagining Community Safety



PUBLIC HEALTH

- Asian Mental Health
- Chinese Hospital
- Traditional Medicine
- Women's Health



PUBLIC SPACE

- Alleyways Program
- Portsmouth Square
- Willie Wong Playground
- Woh Hei Yuen Park

CULTURE



From its very formation, San Francisco's Chinatown has always been a site of community agency and empowerment. Faced with discrimination and prejudice outside the boundaries of Kearny, Powell, California, & Broadway, residents of Chinatown created for themselves a self-sustaining community, with everything from the likes of culturally-appropriate groceries to Chinese theaters and herb shops. Of great significance is Chinatown's long list of cultural enterprises — with a vibrant history of arts, entertainment, and culture, Chinatown has been home to many notable places and events, like the iconic Golden Age nightclubs Kubla Khan and Forbidden City, the Golden Dragon Massacre, the long-standing community arts institution Kearny St. Workshop, and now, a new generation of high-end restaurants, like the Michelin star-earning Mister Jiu's. These pieces of history have all been a part of forming the social fabric of Chinatown, and continue to shape Chinese American identities, community, and culture. Groups like the Grant Ave. Follies carry on the legacy of the Golden Age of Chinese Nightclubs, while artistic and cultural hotspots like the Kearny St. Workshop and Mister Jiu's take charge of what it means to be Asian American. These are only some examples of the ways culture thrives in San Francisco's Chinatown. Through art, community, and innovation, San Francisco's Chinatown continues to be a beacon of Chinese diasporic culture in the United States and beyond.



The Grant Avenue Follies, based in San Francisco Chinatown, reignite the magic of San Francisco's Golden Age of Chinese nightclubs. Follies are an integral part of the Chinatown community. Learn more about the Grant Ave Follies at the link below.



Kearny Street Workshop (KSW) is the oldest Asian Pacific American multidisciplinary arts organization in the county. The mission of KSW is to produce and promote art that empowers Asian Pacific American artists and communities. Learn more about KSW at the link below.



In 1944, the **Kubla Khan Theater Restaurant** opened its doors by the entrepreneur Eddie Pond, who emigrated from Hong Kong in 1923. The nightclub, widely advertised as San Francisco's "most exciting" theater restaurant. Learn more about Kubla Khan Theater at the link below.



Chop Suey first came up as the idea of putting all their sides together and mixing them up during the Gold Rush, but later on becomes capitalized during the era of Nightlife in San Francisco. Learn more about Chop Suey at the link below.



Charlie Low's **Forbidden City** is perhaps the most famous of all the nightclubs of the Golden Age, with its vivid interiors, \$1.50 chop suey, and a Golden Buddha watching from above. Learn more about the Forbidden City at the link below.



The **Golden Dragon Massacre** was largely the consequence of long-standing conflicts between two groups of youth: American-born Chinese and foreign-born immigrants predominantly from Hong Kong. Learn more about Golden Dragon Massacre at the link below.

EDUCATION



Access to education not only serves as a chance at a better life, but is also key to integrating with the larger community. However, formal education has always been a struggle for San Francisco's Chinatown. Segregationist laws, inadequate resources, and lack of bilingual education had created systemic and self-perpetuating oppression for recently arrived immigrants. Without the ability to learn English, many could never confidently leave the boundaries of Chinatown—severing what little chance they had at better-paying jobs downtown as well as the possibility of integrating with the larger SF community.

Though many generations have passed and racially segregated education has collapsed, the dedication to bilingual education remains—not only as a resource to those who have recently arrived, but also as a symbol of Chinatown's resilience. Whether committing to broader representation or establishing more learning opportunities, educational issues have persisted at the forefront of Chinatown's politics. Education in Chinatown continues to empower immigrants and nurture their voice, building opportunity and a better San Francisco.



City College of San Francisco's (CCSF) Chinatown/North Beach campus stands tall as a pillar of higher education in Chinatown. The campus marks an immense and hard-won victory for higher education in Chinatown. Learn more about the CCSF Chinatown/North Beach campus at the link below.



Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) was founded in 1969 to advocate for the Asian American and Pacific Islander community against racial injustice. CAA has continually challenged systemic discrimination, prioritized the community, and created bridges. Learn more about CAA at the link below.



In 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of educational access for non-English speaking students in **Lau v. Nichols**, which originated from San Francisco Chinatown. Learn more about Lau v. Nichols at the link below.

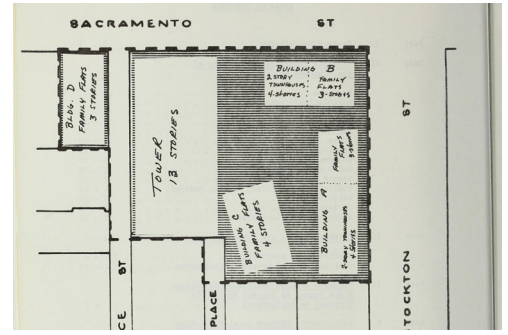


The **model minority myth** categorizes Asian Americans as a socioeconomically successful minority group that is able to achieve social mobility through a high work ethic. The model minority myth was popularized in the 1960s. Learn more about the model minority myth at the link below.

HOUSING



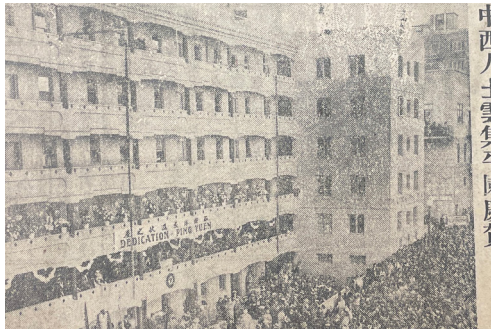
Since its inception in the nineteenth century, San Francisco Chinatown was birthed as a result of segregationist policies and racist sentiments that made it difficult for Chinese people to live anywhere else in the city. As a result, SF Chinatown became one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the country, as well as a bastion of affordable housing for low-income immigrants in an increasingly expensive city. From the 1930s to the present, Chinatown community members have taken it upon themselves to fight against the state for more affordable housing in their neighborhood. This has resulted in a long tradition of organizing that traces from the International Hotel in Manilatown, to Ping Yuen and Mei Lun Yuen, to the continued threat of gentrification to Chinatown today. This fight offers lasting lessons in community organizing and resilience in the face of capitalist interests, not just to preserve access to affordable housing, but to defend the place Chinatown residents call home.



Housing and community organizing in Chinatown today continues to grapple with housing affordability, especially for its low-income and elderly residents. Learn more about the housing and community organizing at the link below.

San Francisco's **International Hotel** spanned three locations in its over 150 years of history, and was the site of one of the Asian American Movement's most iconic struggles in the 1970s. Learn more about the International Hotel at the link below.

The Chinatown Coalition for Better Housing proposed the **Mei Lun Yuen Redevelopment Project**, which would develop the a block in Chinatown into low-income housing. Learn more about the Mei Lun Yuen Redevelopment Project at the link below.



The construction of **Ping Yuen** Housing project was not nearly enough to alleviate Chinatown's housing crisis. In 1968, 778 families were on the waitlist for an open apartment in Ping Yuen. Learn more about Ping Yuen at the link below.

Police Brutality was a weapon utilized by white predators in the Chinatown area. Beyond physical assaults, police were recorded holding unwarranted raids on business and legal aid groups. Learn more about Asian American encounters with police brutality at the link below.

PUBLIC HEALTH



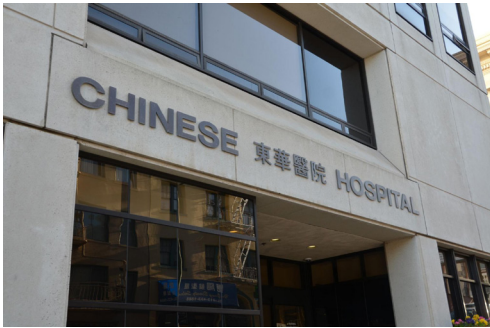
Healthcare in San Francisco Chinatown is a complex and interweaving issue, spanning from historical barriers in Chinese-American's experience to access, the racialisation of disease, to recent concerns such as COVID-19 and the provision of mental health services.

At the heart of this topic is the San Francisco Chinese Hospital, a community owned non-profit hospital founded in 1925 to provide much-needed medical care to a population that was historically excluded from Western medical institutions.

In taking a snapshot at community healthcare, physicians and healthcare providers face challenges with linguistic differences and relationships with Traditional Chinese Medicine. The backdrop suits power dynamics, racial prejudices, and cultural transformations that continue to impact Chinese-Americans in San Francisco's accessibility to healthcare.



Mental health continues to be a misunderstood and stigmatized topic within the Chinese American community. Learn more about Asian American mental health at the link below.



The **San Francisco Chinese Hospital** has a rich and captivating history that reveals the Chinese American community's responses to its healthcare needs. The hospital serves a diverse patient population, including speakers of Cantonese, Mandarin, and other dialects. Learn more about the Chinese Hospital at the link below.



Chinese herbal medicine, also known as **Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)**, has been an integral part of Asian healthcare for thousands of years. Learn more about Traditional Chinese Medicine at the link below.



Today, **Chinese immigrant women** in the United States continue to face unique health challenges and disparities, including limited access to culturally sensitive reproductive healthcare, prenatal care, and breast and cervical cancer screenings. Learn more about women's health at the link below.

PUBLIC SPACES

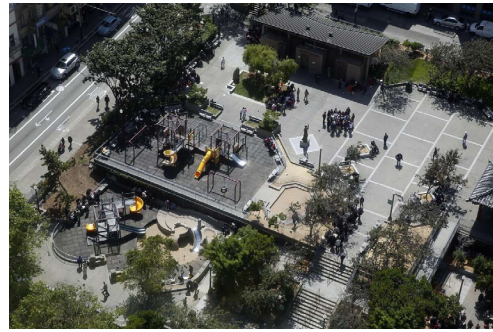


Ensuring access to open space is essential for any successful city. Parks and plazas serve as important sites for people of all ages to socialize, exercise, and play. This is doubly true for underserved neighborhoods like Chinatown, which has served as a landing pad for multi-generational immigrant families throughout its history. Due to the high cost of living and a lack of economic opportunities, many of these families are forced to live in small, overcrowded spaces. Residents lack space to gather with friends and family. Despite knowing this intense need for open space, it is extremely challenging to address the issue due to the neighborhood's lack of undeveloped land. As such, Chinatown has the smallest amount of park space per resident of any San Francisco neighborhood.

Over the decades, disinvestment, bulky new construction, and bureaucracy have threatened Chinatown's limited public spaces. Grassroots advocacy organizations like the Committee for Better Parks and Recreation in Chinatown have fought to preserve the quantity and quality of Chinatown's public open spaces. Through legal battles, public-nonprofit partnerships, and community-centered design, they have successfully protected and improved the quality of Willie "Woo Woo" Wong Playground and Portsmouth Square. Through political maneuvering and creative designs, they have also expanded Chinatown's open space portfolio to include the Alleyways Program and the Woh Hei Yuen Park.



In Chinatown, **alleyways** could well serve as gathering places, mini gardens, and public art spaces that enrich Chinatown's community and infrastructure. Learn more about the Alleyways Program at the link below.



Known as Chinatown's living room, **Portsmouth Square** is a historic community park and public gathering space at the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown that unites its local residents with rich cultural developments. Learn more about the Portsmouth Square at the link below.



Willie "Woo Woo" Wong playground opened in 1927 on a one-third acre lot. It continues to be, one of the only public outdoor recreational places in Chinatown. Learn more about the playground at the link below.



The opening of **Woh Hei Yuen Park** in 1997 was eagerly welcomed by residents of Chinatown, many of whom lived in cramped conditions without a dedicated living room. After waiting 25 years, the park was seen as an answered prayer by the community. Learn more about Woh Hei Yuen Park at the link below.

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