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Lauren Hall-Lew

Chinese social practice and San Franciscan authenticity¹

1 The Chineseness of San Francisco

This chapter explores the possibility that Chinese social and linguistic practices are available resources for place authentication in contemporary San Francisco. The analysis draws on ethnographic observation and a content analysis of retrospective narratives about youth styles in neighborhood schools in the 1990s. The emergence of new indexes of place authenticity is seen as a result of the transnationalization of San Francisco and the emergence of neighborhoods known as New Chinatowns (Laguerre 2005). In contrast to earlier periods of American history, these neighborhoods have become sites of new hybridities and the local authentication of what were previously the most exotic and foreign of social practices.

As one of the first neighborhoods ever established in the city, San Francisco's Chinatown might be considered locally authentic by virtue of its clear *historicity* (Coupland 2003: 418). But as a segregated ethnic enclave, and as a diasporic beacon for new immigrants, Chinatown's position vis-à-vis mainstream San Franciscan culture has long been marginal, and at times in the past, actively targeted for removal and destruction. Chinatown was the site for the earliest discursive construction of 'Chineseness' as the canonical American Oriental – that which was most exotic, most foreign, and most threatening. In part because of the poor living conditions in Chinatown at the time, the neighborhood was subject to intense stigma. Irish/Chinese relations were especially infamous for being the most antagonistic. While the Irish began to lay claim to early San Franciscan authenticity (Hall-Lew under review), the Chinese were subject to intense marginalization.

The neighborhood's first shift in authenticity came after the 1906 earthquake and fire; buildings were razed and reconstructed with a new vision. In a process of *museumization* (Relph 1976), Chinatown shifted its economic goals to satisfy

¹ Earlier versions of this paper has benefited from the thoughtful and generous comments of Graham M. Jones, Laura Staum Casasanto, and members of the *Language in Context* research group at the University of Edinburgh. All remaining faults are, of course, my own.

the tourist gaze, to “suit the taste and imagination of...the American public” (Chen 1952: 89, cited in Light 1974). Residents re-imagined their neighborhood as a space for the consumption of an exotic aesthetic in a comfortable American environment. “Chinatown chambers of commerce began to regulate the architecture on main thoroughfares so that a uniform, pagoda-styled decor replaced ramshackled predecessors” (Light 1974: 391). This “other-directed architecture” (Jackson 1956) and its Oriental aesthetic gained a kind of local authenticity, iconizing a style known as “San Francisco Chinese” (Sinclair 2004). By the 1950s, San Francisco Chinatown had achieved a new kind of hybrid authenticity: still ‘authentically foreign’, but firmly situated in the American landscape. In 1957, Herb Caen, a writer for the San Francisco Chronicle, called it the “city’s most fascinating and authentic foreign colony” (50). Chinatown’s localized exoticism helped construct San Francisco’s international reputation as a cosmopolitan urban center. However, as a truly ‘San Franciscan’ social identity, its scope was still limited; Chinatown residents remained confined to working menial jobs and living in over-crowded, substandard housing (Yung 2006). Chinatown’s ‘San Franciscanness’ was merely ornamental.

In the following decades, Chinatown cemented its identity as one of San Francisco’s major tourist attractions and culinary hotspots. Meanwhile, local changes in fair housing legislation opened up the rest of San Francisco to upwardly mobile Chinatown residents. This resulted in a dramatic change in the wider cultural and linguistic landscape. In 1957, Herb Caen called this change the ‘Hongkongization’ of San Francisco (Caen 1957; cited in Ong 1999). By the 1980s, some formerly European (American) neighborhoods came to be seen as ‘New Chinatowns’.

The appellation “New Chinatown” is multi-vocal, as it carries diverse meanings depending on the interpretive actor or analyst. It is projected by Asian Americans as a non-ghettoized enclave since Chinese immigrants can live wherever they want in the city and since it is a mixed neighborhood of white and non-white residents; it is identified by Anglo Americans as a Chinese business district and middle class residential quarter; and it is seen by tourists simply as an exotic immigrant enclave outside its presumed natural niche. The adjective “New” is used in contrast to “Old”, because it invokes the free choice that immigrants have to settle in this community, the location of the enclave outside of the downtown area, the on-going interaction with the homeland for communicational familial, religious, and business purposes, and above all, its status as a microcosm of the Old Chinatown and the homeland. (Laguette 2005: 41)

Despite a Chinese plurality, the New Chinatown is a multiethnic, transnational, “global neighborhood” (Laguette 2005: 42); gone are the days of segregated ethnic enclaves. At the same time, ‘Chinese identity’ in San Francisco became more complex, multidimensional, and diverse. Crucially, it also became less exotic. Ang (2001: 8), describing her visit to San Francisco in the mid-1980s, notes

how “San Francisco has long had a large and highly visible Chinese-American population, so being Asian was nothing exceptional.” Despite this growth and diversification of the Chinese heritage community, ‘Old’ Chinatown remained associated with first-generation immigrants, perpetuating views of the neighborhood as inherently ‘foreign’. Despite the indexical relationship (Silverstein 2003) between ‘Chineseness’ and ‘San Franciscanness’ evident in tourist encounters (for example), and despite the neighborhood’s legitimate historical claims to San Franciscan authenticity, Old Chinatown is still arguably viewed as Caen’s “foreign colony,” where residents are still positioned as the “forever foreigner” (Tuan 1998). Ironically, then, it is in the New Chinatown neighborhoods where Chinese social practice has come to index local authenticity.

I argue in this paper that these neighborhoods have been witness to a major shift away from exoticism and stigma and towards normalcy and even prestige. In arguing that Chinese cultural and linguistic practices have become an integral, ‘typical’ part of San Franciscan life, I also argue that they are increasingly available as resources for local authentication (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). ‘Chineseness’ has undergone a shift of indexical valence, from ‘authentically foreign’ to ‘authentically San Franciscan’, and the recency and rapidity of this change complicates how young people, in particular, construct a San Franciscan identity. Non-Chinese adolescents are increasingly orienting to formerly ‘Chinese’ social practices; this alone is evidence of a radical shift away from a long history of stigma against Chinese in North America. The New Chinatown context means that young white San Franciscans confront the challenges of cultural hybridity in a manner comparable to that described elsewhere for Asian Americans (Lowe 1996; Ang 2001; Louie 2006).

However, while such practices are gaining place-based meanings, they are not shedding their ethnic meanings, and as such, processes of authentication and denaturalization are highly complex. For adolescents of Chinese heritage, while these symbolic resources may allow greater access to constructing a local identity, the interaction between multiple orders of indexicality (Silverstein 2003) can also lead to ambivalence or even rejection of those very same Chinese practices that are gaining currency among non-Chinese. Optimistically, the rise in prestige of the New Chinatown symbolic market seems to offer an American context where Chinese are neither “forever foreign” nor “honorary white” (Tuan 1998). However, while white San Franciscans can begin to draw on Chinese practices to construct a cosmopolitan, transnational-yet-local identity, Chinese San Franciscans are restricted full access to these higher orders of indexicality precisely because of the constraints of their ethnic and racial identity.

This study is part of a larger exploration of linguistic variation in a New Chinatown neighborhood (Hall-Lew 2009). The analysis is based on interviews and

participant observation in public parks, libraries, cafes, and private homes in San Francisco's Sunset District. Here, I focus on narratives of reminiscence produced by a small subset of those Sunset District residents who attended the public neighborhood schools in the 1990s. Schools are microcosmic sites of community shift, and an individual student's experiences shape their particular subjectivity with respect to community identity. Through content analysis of these ethnographic interviews, I focus on how young white women² and young Chinese American women³ experienced the rise of the New Chinatown landscape, in different ways. Descriptively, these narratives demonstrate the consequences of major social change at the individual level. Analytically, they point to the emergence of a higher indexical order for Chinese social and linguistic practice, from ethnic meanings to local, place-based meanings.

2 A San Franciscan neighborhood

All of the San Franciscans quoted here were raised in the Sunset District. The neighborhood is known throughout the city for having a particularly high proportion of Chinese⁴ residents, even relative to an already large proportion across the city in general. In 2008, when asked how the Sunset District “had changed over the years,” the most frequent answer was that it had become more Chinese (1). When asked about what the neighborhood was ‘known for’, one of the first things that San Franciscans mentioned was the large Chinese (or Asian⁵) population (2); residents interviewed in 2012 confirmed this same impression (3).

² The community term is either ‘white’ or ‘Caucasian’.

³ The community term is usually ‘Asian’ (or sometimes ‘Chinese’).

⁴ ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chineseness’ are, of course, essentializations. Sunset residents of ‘Chinese’ heritage are distinguished by “very different and largely unconnected histories” (Ang 2001: 91). However, unlike Ang’s depiction of ‘Chinese’ in Australia, those differences are not cited in San Franciscan discourses nearly as often as homogenizing references to ‘Chinese’ culture, people, and language.

⁵ ‘Asian’ is a complex referring term in relation to ‘Chinese’. By US Census figures, San Francisco’s ‘Asian’ population is over 65% Chinese; Filipinos constitute less than 14% of that population, and all other groups less than 5% each. The robust plurality of Chinese ethnicity means that terms ‘Chinese’ and ‘Asian’ are used nearly interchangeably, even to the extent that San Franciscans will, for example, talk about “whites, Asians, and Filipinos,” discursively placing Filipinos outside of the category ‘Asian’. The indexical shifts discussed here have different consequences for non-Chinese Asians, and will likely be widely variable depending on factors such as specific national and ethnic identification.



- (1) Sal⁶ (b. 1963, male, Chinese American)
LHL: How's it changed?
Sal: How has it changed? Um, I mean, definitely a lot more Chinese.
- (2) Monica (b. 1992, female, Chinese American)
LHL: What do you think the Sunset's known for?
Monica: ... Definitely for being safe, um, ((and)) for having a lot of Asian people! [laughter]
- (3) Marina (b. 1997, female, white)
Marina: The Sunset District is definitely very, a very Asian district. ... Definitely my neighborhood ((has)) lots of Chinese stores.

In San Francisco's Sunset District, the term 'New Chinatown' is most often applied to the neighborhood's commercial corridors (Figure 1). Chinese language business signs indicate a cultural dominance over the local economy and suggest the regular use of spoken Chinese in public interactions (Landry & Bourhis 1997). Bilingual signs on libraries, churches (Figure 2), and other community spaces add to the perception of a linguistic landscape that is predominantly Chinese. The New Chinatown label is then discursively extended to encompass the neighborhood as a whole, which is largely residential.

The Sunset District became a New Chinatown around the 1980s. Chinese settlement in the Sunset District was initially led by native San Franciscans moving out of the Chinatown area, "to mark their middle class status and to take advantage of the amenities that could be found there and not in the Old Chinatown" (Laguerre 2005: 45). This 2008 comment (4) confirms this:

- (4) Cindy (b. 1966, female, Chinese/Singaporean American)
Cindy: The friends that we hung out with who had lived close to Chinatown moved out to the Sunset District. So it's like if you could get out of Chinatown, you were in the Sunset District if you could afford a place.

New Sunset District residents have also arrived directly from Asia, part of larger immigration trends stemming from a wide range of national and international factors such as the Immigration Reform Act in 1965, the Vietnam War, and Hong Kong's reunification with China, among many others (Fong 2008).⁷ For over a decade, the contemporary ethnic demographics of the Sunset District have been, on average, just over 50 % Asian and just under 40 % non-Hispanic white,⁸ and

⁶ All names given here are pseudonyms.

⁷ Note how the socioeconomic differences between immigration motivations foster the existing class distinctions between New Chinatowns and the old Chinatown (Ong 1999; Laguerre 2005).

⁸ More sociohistorical details about the Sunset District are given in Hall-Lew (2009; 2010).



Figure 1: Noriega St., one of the Sunset District's commercial streets



Figure 2: The Sunset Church, a bilingual church in the neighborhood

a majority of those Asian residents speak a LOTE (Language Other Than English) at home.

The Sunset District's schools, particularly the public schools, are also associated with Chinese ethnicity. For example, the two large public high schools, Lincoln High School and Lowell High School, have large student bodies and are both predominantly Chinese American. Lincoln is the most requested public high



school in San Francisco (Blackstone, p. c.); it is centrally located in the Sunset District and has a high proportion of neighborhood students. Lowell requires a high academic standard for entry and is nationally famous for its long legacy academic excellence. This academic prestige is further associated with its large Chinese American population, a powerful instantiation of the ‘model minority’ stereotype which precipitated a 1983 court case in which the San Francisco Unified School District succeeded in establishing race-based criteria to limit Chinese Americans’ entrance to Lowell. Although these criteria were in effect until 2005, Lowell nonetheless remained majority Chinese throughout the period. In 2008–2009, 53 % of the student body was Chinese, and no other single ethnicity represented more than 15 %.



Explicit hostility toward this rapid demographic shift was readily apparent in the 1980s and into the 1990s. The following quote comes from a sociolinguistic interview conducted by Birch Moonwomon in the Sunset District in 1991:

“There’s just too many Orientals. ... Cause they own everything, and they’re taking over San Francisco. I mean, you may as well call it China, the amount that- that are here. [.] I mean my dad said that when he was a child, there were ... twenty kids on the block to play with, just on your block. And now, you don’t see kids playing in the streets, for one thing. And, if you do, they’re always Chinese and every house on the block you might see um [one] Caucasian family, per block. And they own everything. They get money from the government. They live ... twenty million people in one house so they can all save up money and buy another house. I mean, it, it amazed me the amount of Oriental people. I mean, it’s terrible to be racist but it amazes me on the amount of Oriental people that will, um ... have brand new Mercedes, brand new BMWs ... and you wonder how they get that money. I mean, and not even speak English (laugh). That’s what gets me, they should be able to, they should speak English if they’re in our country.” (22-year-old working class female; Moonwomon 1992: 423)



Sentiments such as these that so clearly expressed a stigmatization of Chinese residents were very hard to come by in 2008. In less than two decades, Chinese bilingualism, or even Chinese monolingualism, had come to be perceived as a ‘normal’ part of the linguistic landscape — a defining feature of the neighborhood. One day during my fieldwork in the spring of 2008 I was introduced to a middle-aged white woman who had grown up in San Francisco’s Sunset District neighborhood. The friend introducing us said that I was conducting a research project in linguistics and that I was “looking for accents in the Sunset.” To this, the woman replied: “Oh! It must be either Cantonese or Toisanese, right?” She went on to explain that she was a local kung fu teacher, and that her students’ language use “has certainly affected my speech!” My interlocutor’s reaction suggested that Chinese ethnicity and Chinese language use were so strongly associated with the neighborhood that the concept of ‘accentedness’ did not refer to variation in English, but to variation in Chinese (or, perhaps, varieties of English



influenced by specific varieties of Chinese). For her, Chinese linguistic practices had become an index of resident identity in the Sunset District. Her comment that her own speech has been “affected” by her students’ suggests local linguistic accommodation toward this new linguistic landscape.

The increased valuation of ‘speaking Chinese’ is the clearest example of changes in linguistic capital in San Francisco, California. Elsewhere, I consider how features of Chinese-influenced English, particularly L-vocalization, may be increasingly available resources, as well (see Hall-Lew & Starr 2010; Hall-Lew & Fix 2012). In addition to these examples, the following analysis examines changes in the circulation and use of a single lexical item from Asian American discourse: *FOB*.

3 *Fob* style in the Sunset District

In the 1990s,⁹ a new style emerged in neighborhood’s public schools that reimagined the symbolic value of Chinese immigrant and transnational identities: the *FOB* style. Since my fieldwork was in 2008, and in people’s homes rather than their schools, what follows is not a complete account of this style, but rather an exploration of differing subjective reminiscences towards it. Here, I focus on how *FOBbiness* is framed by second-generation Chinese American adults, in contrast to how it is framed by adults of European heritage. The original term, *FOB*, is an acronym for *Fresh Off the Boat*, referring to very recently arrived migrants. For much of its life, *FOB* has been a highly loaded and contested in-group slur, “widely used in Asian diasporas, especially in the context of post-1965 Asian migration, to differentiate new arrivals from those who have learned requisite cultural and linguistic codes” (Shankar 2008:270). The use described here, however, does not seem to (primarily) signify recency of arrival.

There also appears to be some use, or at least awareness of its use, among San Franciscans of non-Asian heritage. On the one hand, the retrospective comments by the Chinese Americans highlight complex shifts in second-generation identities over time, as individuals experience new life stages with differing valuations of ethnic identity. On the other hand, one white perspective offers additional, but starkly different, evidence for the valuation of *FOB* identity, one that is clearly positive. And while this amelioration of *FOB* identity among white adolescents is strong evidence that Chinese cultural practices are increasingly available for local authentication, the perseverance of ethnic indexicality limits

⁹ Or perhaps earlier; the data are limited.

access to that local value for those same adolescents. I suggest that both are consequences of the rise of New Chinatowns and the subsequent changes in the local semiotic space.

Previous studies on *FOB* style have focused almost exclusively on representations of *FOB* in youth discourses, showing how “*FOB* is commonly used by second-generation Asian American youth to distance themselves from the perceived negative attributes of first-generation or 1.5 generation youth” (Shankar 2008: 270). Jeon (2001) discusses how American-born students in a Korean-English dual-immersion program resist speaking Korean because doing so indexes the undesirable *FOB* label. The clearest example of *FOB* as an in-group slur comes from Talmy’s (2004) analysis of an ESL classroom in Hawai’i, where “ESL students ... particularly the long-term US-resident, or ‘generation 1.5’ students ... derisively referred to this Other as ‘*FOB*’ – “fresh off the boat” – a noxious label signifying a recently-arrived, monumentally uncool, non-English-speaking rube of mythical, and for some, hilarious proportions” (Talmy 2004:150). In short, most previous work shows that ‘*FOB*’ is a stigmatizing, Other-directed term that indexes recent immigrant status.



One exception to this is an analysis of *FOB* identity among South Asian youth in San Jose, California (Shankar 2008, 2011). Here, *FOB* is found to not index immigrant status directly: “*FOB*by teens were not the new arrivals for whom the term *FOB* is usually reserved. They nonetheless earned this label from populars and other youth who thought that they performed linguistic and cultural attributes of speech, dress, and self-presentation linked to newly arrived immigrants. Youth who displayed *FOB*by styles made ample use of the attributes populars avoided, including gangsta elements and a preference for appearing and sounding tough” (Shankar 2011: 650).

Like the South Asian youth analyzed by Shankar (2008, 2011) Chinese (American) youth in San Francisco’s Sunset District in the 1990s also appear to have used *FOB* to refer not to immigrant status primarily, but rather to a particular, hybridized youth style, only indirectly related to immigrant identity, if at all. Relatedly, the term was not necessarily used as a pejorative slur. In fact, unlike the case described by Shankar (2011), the narratives analyzed here suggest that the Sunset District’s *FOB* style gained circulation beyond Asian diasporas as a coveted, “cool” identity. While Shankar (2011) discusses a local contrast between the *FOB* style and the “popular” style, the prestige of the *FOB* style in San Francisco calls this dichotomy into question. Furthermore, the fact that this prestige is most evident among residents of non-Asian heritage means that its circulation is limited in interesting ways.

In fact, I first learned of the *FOB* style while interviewing Aubrey, a white woman born in 1951 whose children had gone through the local schools in the

1990s. In (5), Aubrey refers to a friendship group that her daughter, Mary, had had in middle school.

- (5) Aubrey (b. 1950, female, Irish American) 

Aubrey: And there's, what is it, 'fresh off the boat'? That's what ((Mary)) would say. Some of her friends changed their clothing habits to look as though they were 'fresh off the boats'. ... They're Asian American, but they changed to – they changed their language and their clothing in order to associate with the new Asian community.

In (5), Aubrey recounts the existence of a particular adolescent group, members of which were American-born, of Asian descent, and self-styling towards a “fresh off the boat” or “new Asian” aesthetic and away from (presumably) ‘American’ “language and clothing.” The fact that this report came from someone outside the relevant social group with respect to both age and ethnicity speaks to the salience of a *FOB* style beyond the ~~limited~~ middle school market, itself. In a separate interview in 2008, as Mary is describing the various social groups that were part of her middle school experience, she also mentions the existence of this ‘new Asian’ style:

- (6) Mary (b. 1979, female, Irish American)

Mary: ... you know, and there's – um, there – there's a lot more. Like, 'fresh off the boat', kind of, you know there's like the 'Russian posse', and there's the – everything, you know, there's all kinds of things. And there was a –, the *FOBs*, when I was there, um, which was the reappropriation of 'Fresh Off the Boat' and was 'Fresh Oriental Boyz'.

What Aubrey meant in saying that “they changed their language and their clothing,” is still unclear; Mary's description here does not elaborate on the elements of the style itself. But what is interesting about her quote in (6) is the act of reappropriation she describes. Not only did this particular social group ameliorate the value of *FOB*, itself they reacronymized it, in effect reappropriating the elements within. The first element plays on the polysemy of *fresh*, playing down connotations of immigration status and playing up connotations of hip-hop culture (Brathwaite 1992; Labov 1992). The second element reappropriates the use of *Oriental* from explicitly racist discourses such as those documented by Moonwomon (1992). Note that the 1990s also mark the period of transition both in San Francisco and across the United States, in general, away from the use of the term *Oriental* to the more prevalent term *Asian* refer to Chinese Americans. Lastly, the third element in *FOB* is change from ‘boat’, indexing immigrant status, to ‘boyz’, indexing youth and gender. Given the nature of the data, the spelling of ‘boyz’ by members of this particular social group is, of course, entirely unknown, but the non-standard ‘z’ is used here because it is categorically used in circulation of

the same acronym on internet.¹⁰ If we take the rendering of standard ‘s’ as ‘z’ to index orientations to hip-hop culture (Smitherman 2006), this may provide some insight into the stylistic composition of the Sunset District *FOB* style.

These two quotes from Aubrey and Mary were two of the four mentions of *FOB* in my 2008 interviews. The other two (spoken by a middle-aged Filipino American man and a young Chinese American man) used *FOB* in its original sense, to refer in an unambiguously pejorative way to recently arrived immigrants. In wondering how the use of *FOB* related to the rise of New Chinatowns in San Francisco in 2012 I conducted ten follow-up interviews that ~~specifically~~ investigated awareness of a *FOB* style. Of the ten interviewees, only Mary was specifically familiar with the ‘fresh oriental boyz’ re-acronymization, and no one older than Mary was familiar with *FOB* as a youth style. However, those who were younger than Mary, and Chinese American, recalled using the term ‘*FOBby*’ to describe a salient middle/high school style. In fact Vicky, in (7), used the term spontaneously to describe the social distinction between the students at her former high school, Lowell, and the students at other neighborhood school, Lincoln.

(7) Vicky (b. 1986, female, Chinese American)

LHL: When you were at Lowell, what did people think about Lincoln?

Vicky: I mean, I think people just thought, oh, it’s just the local, like, Sunset school, lots of Asian people, and the kind of Asian people who are more *FOBby*? I guess? [laughter] I don’t know. [laughter] Yeah.

In (7), Vicky invokes *FOBby* as the most immediately available descriptor for “the kind of Asian people” who attended “the local Sunset school.” *FOBby* functions as an enregistered (Agha 2003) resource for indexing the ideological associations between ethnic identity, neighborhood identity, and certain orientations to immigrant identities. However, it does not denote immigrant identity directly; while ethnicity and place are specifically mentioned here, the “fresh off the boat” meaning is not made explicit. Indeed, as shown in (8) and (9), these young Chinese Americans from the Sunset District appear to not use *FOBby* to refer, primarily, to recent immigrants.

(8) JoJo (b. 1982, female, Chinese American)

JoJo: Um, and I understand that the term is ‘fresh off the boat’ [laugh], and they’re not fresh off the boat but it’s a very, um, it’s a very, Asian. Thing. To do, to cut your hair like that. And so I guess associating that with being Asian, and associating Asian with being a *FOB* [laughter].

LHL: So these were people that were born in California?

¹⁰ E. g., <http://www.myspace.com/freshorientalboyz>; <http://www.myspace.com/fobzdancecrew>

JoJo: I'm assuming, yeah.

...

LHL: So what about people who are immigrants. Are they also *FOBby*?

JoJo: I don't know that I ever use that term for recent immigrants. I mean you can, sometimes you can obviously tell, someone who has arrived recently, but I don't think I'd necessarily associate the term, *FOB*, with them.

JoJo's description suggests that *FOB* style primarily indexes ethnicity; indeed, it may not index immigrant status at all. It is possible that this newer meaning of *FOB* is only possible by virtue of a reassignment in reference value, from 'recent immigrant' to 'Asian style'. However, the latter nonetheless emerges from the former, and the interrelationship is surely complex. If the formation of *FOB* style here is at all similar to that described by Shankar (2008) among South Asian adolescents in the south San Francisco Bay Area, then this is a style that pulls from a wide range of ethnic and Californian linguistic and aesthetic elements. Elements of young Asian immigrant styles are picked up and reinterpreted, situated in the New Chinatown context and restyled locally, simultaneously becoming available for consumption and participation by American-born Chinese adolescents. Vicky elaborates on this in (9),

(9) Vicky (b. 1986, female, Chinese American)

Vicky: And, um, they don't necessarily have to be literally 'fresh off the boat'. I mean, I think there's some who are literally fresh off the boat and then speak whatever language that they were- that's their native tongue, and others are ABCs or American Born Chinese kids who just happen to dress really *FOBby*. [laughter]

In (9), Vicky echoes JoJo's formulation that the identifying factor in the *FOB* group membership was Chinese ethnicity, which was shared, rather than immigrant status, or language use, which were not. Furthermore, her description of the Chinese American participation as "kids who just happen to dress really *FOBby*" highlights not only the (unsurprisingly) central role of physical presentation, but furthermore the status of *FOB* as an aesthetic style on par with other aesthetic styles, which she elaborates on in (10).

(10) Vicky (b. 1986, female, Chinese American)

LHL: So how would you describe what it referred to?

Vicky: I think it's a look, just like when you think about *hipsters*? That image immediately flashes in your mind of somebody in plaid, and skinny jeans and the messed up disheveled hair, and they talk about very, like, esoteric things and, like, you know, kind of- music that's very indie. I think it's a certain look, aesthetic? And I think, for *FOBs*, I used to think of it as, um, somebody really dyed; hair. [laughter] Um, [pause] dressed in black, lot of black, with a souped up car. ... Just like other cliques, people talk about the *skater group* in high school. .. I think there always is, just, like, a *FOB* group, and you find your way into it and then you end up dressing or being like that.

In (10), Vicky positions *FOB* as a style of the same semiotic status as other well-known styles, in that it's "a look, just like" *hipster* and *skater*. Her further comment that "there always is, just, like, a *FOB* group" again highlights the New Chinatown experience and the completion of a shift towards Chinese or 'Asian' styles being viewed as unmarked or 'typical'.

Note also that the similarity in the sartorial features mentioned for the components of *FOB* style, across Chinese American interviewees, is striking. For example, compare JoJo's description in (11) to Vicky's in (10).

(11) JoJo (b. 1982, female, Chinese American)

JoJo: Back in high school, middle school, I just remember the boys had all these bangs, like, hang((ing)) in front and we always associated that with being *FOBby*.

LHL: Anything else besides the hair?

JoJo: Oh, well, the dyed hair, the brown streaks? ... Actually this was not too long ago when I think my friend wanted to dye her hair or streak her hair just have some highlights, and she was like "I just hope that it doesn't come out *FOBby*!" Cuz we just remember the days, back in the days when you, girls, even guys, would have this huge this huge brown streaks down their hair, um, and we associate that with being *FOBby*. Um, I also remember ... Souped up cars, low riders.

In (11) JoJo enacts a moment of reported speech "not too long ago" that suggests that *FOBby* is not a desired quality. So, although *FOB* was a youth style on par with other youth styles, it does not have high symbolic value for her. Although in (12) she describes a context in which its use might be relatively more positive, in (13) Vicky is quite clear that the *FOBby* style is not and never has been an attractive one for her.

(12) JoJo (b. 1982, female, Chinese American)

LHL: So how insulting would it be if somebody said you were *FOBby*?

JoJo: Well it really depends, when you're in high school it's almost like you don't want to associate with being *FOBby*, but as you transition through, at least for me when I transitioned to college, there's more more- it's almost like I want to be associated more with my Asian culture. ... So if someone called me *FOBby* in college I'm like, "Great! I'm doing something right!" you know? [laughter] I'll take it as a positive compliment almost. [laughter]

(13) Vicky (b. 1986, female, Chinese American)

LHL: That's actually – that concept is something that I really want to talk to people about, so, um –

Vicky: Of, like, *FOBbiness*? Really?

LHL: Yeah, like, do you still use that term? Or when's the last time, like is that still- I mean, what do you associate that with?

Vicky: I think I don't talk about that anymore cuz it's just not part of my life anymore? I think you kind of grow out of it. But I do remember talking about it when I was like immersed in it.

I wasn't immersed in *FOBbiness* itself, [laughter] But- yeah. I kind of thought of it as "eeuh" [::shudder:]. But I do remember talking about it, say, in middle school and high school.

...

LHL: But clearly for you it was not an attractive-

Vicky: No. [laughter]

Even JoJo's hypothetical context for a 'positive' interpretation of *FOBby* is hedged: "a positive compliment almost." What's more, her retrospective description of high school valuation is clearly negative, but again hedged, "it's almost like you don't want to associate with being *FOBby*." Her conflicted attitudes appear to stem from her representation of *FOBbiness* as a locus of ethnic authenticity, and variation in her attitude towards her own ethnic identity. She rationalizes this variation by representing it as a contrast between two life stages, high school and college, and the differing political economies of each (see Erikson 1968). Because of the direct association with ethnicity identity, *FOB* becomes an available frame of identification. For Vicky, however, the value of *FOBbiness* is almost viscerally negative, remaining specifically associated with marginalized adolescent styles (e. g., Talmy 2004). Between these two second-generation Chinese Americans, then, perspectives vary; the *FOB* identity is met with some ambivalence in one case and aversion in the other.

One additional observation about the use of *FOB* among contemporary Chinese Americans in San Francisco is that, generally speaking, there seems to be a general reluctance to talk about the term. The frequent laughter in Vicky's and JoJo's quotes may serve as a contextualization cue (Gumperz 1982) to this reluctance. *FOB* may be an example of Herzfeld's (2005: 3) "cultural intimacy": "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality." This is especially the case when *FOB* is used to refer not to adolescents but to the traditional referent, the elderly immigrant. For example, in the case of the website "My Mom is a Fob",¹¹ the use is similar to a term of endearment. The co-occurring and contrasting possibilities of reference make the use of the term *FOB* additionally complex.

In short, Chinese American orientations to *FOB* style are diverse. Given the social landscape of the Sunset District's public schools, where some Chinese American adolescents were members of the *FOB* group while others (probably most) were not, this diversity of orientation is hardly surprising. Both Vicky's and JoJo's opinions reflect their positionality as hybrid subjects (Lowe 1996; Ang 2001) whose adolescent years entailed navigating the local, rapidly changing shifts

11 <http://mymomisafob.com/>

in local symbolic value. So, while JoJo's differing valuation of *FOB* as an adult versus as an adolescent may be due to the difference between social distinction and ethnic identity in high school versus college, it may also be aided by changes in the value of Chinese practices across the Sunset District.

Their experience is particularly striking in contrast with an experience like Mary's, a fifth-generation Irish American San Franciscan, whose perspective was that the *FOB* style was an unambiguous carrier of positive symbolic value within the adolescent heterosexual market; that it was the style of "the crowd" (Eckert 2008; this volume). According to Mary, the experience of a frustrated adolescence marked by an unachievable *FOB* aesthetic is an experience that today unites some middle-aged white San Franciscans, at least those who grew up in the New Chinatowns of the Richmond or the Sunset Districts. Mary describes this in her 2012 interview:

(14) Mary (b. 1979, female, Irish American)

Mary: You know, I talk a lot with the other woman who leads my team, she grew up in the Richmond, she came from Russia when she was five, we talk a lot about ... ((How)) we both, like in middle school, wanted to be five-foot-tall Asian girls who could dance and like write in bubbly letters [laughter]. There's like this distinct 'girl' who's like part of this group who had like the perfect high bangs and like all of these things that just didn't work, um-

LHL: So this is a [type of] girl who hung out with the 'Fresh-'

Mary: Yes, '((unintelligible)) Oriental Boyz,' the girl version. Um, and they all had Hello Kitty stuff and had really cute writing and [laughter] like glittery pencils and like stuff like that [laughter]. You know, the middle school cool stuff.

LHL: Would you call those girls 'FOBby'?

Mary: Um – it was really – I mean for my experience of it, it was a self-reflective [sic.] term. So it wasn't – it was basically like, "Oh, they're gonna be going out with the *FOBs*."

Mary describes the female *FOB* style with none of the same features mentioned by JoJo and Vicky, and she goes into much greater detail, citing dance, penmanship, and evidence of conspicuous consumption. Her greater attention to stylistic detail, in addition to her expression of "wanting to be" part of this group, reflects a much stronger valuation as "cool" of the *FOB* style for Mary than was seen for the Chinese Americans.

Not only was *FOB* style clearly valued and yet unattainable for Mary, the term *FOB* itself was not even available for her to use, except (it seems) in reference to the name of the group. The adjectival form *FOBby*, which was the most commonly used form in JoJo's and Vicky's interviews, seems to be off-limits to Mary. Unlike mainstream processes of cultural appropriation of Asian commodities by white, middle-class Americans, the market value of the *FOB* aesthetic appears to have been produced by Asian(American)s themselves, within a local economy and desired by, but unavailable to, non-Asians. This production of symbolic

capital marks a crucial turning point where Chinese and other Asian (American) social practices begin to index local belonging. Furthermore, as Asian practices acquire place-based meanings, older indexes of authenticity begin to index that era, rather than local belonging. They come to construct the subject as old-fashioned or nostalgic; they come to index a time, rather than place. Young Sunset District residents with birthright to that older model of authenticity, such as Mary (a fifth-generation San Franciscan of Irish Catholic heritage), therefore struggle against the confines of that birthright, attempting to adapt in order to stake claims to local belonging. Mary's avoidance of the adjectival, *FOBby*, indexes her inability to fully align with new forms of local authenticity.

The physicality of the *FOB* style, particularly as it relates to racialized or ethnicized bodies, is central to Mary's descriptions. In (14), Mary describes the physical aspects of the *FOB* style as "all of these things that just didn't work." She begins by citing height, a stylistic feature that is the epitome of unalterable if the valued height is a shorter one. Height appears to be the most salient feature for her; she mentions it in both 2008 and again in 2012, both times using the exact phrase "five-foot-tall" (approximately 1.5 meters) as the remembered ideal. The ethnic quality of the *FOB* style thus gets expressed through a larger discursive frame of Asian bodies being short and European bodies being tall, particularly for women. The relevant distinction for the *FOB* style is, again, not immigrant-versus-American, as the original source of the acronym might imply, but rather Asian-versus-European. This point is highlighted by Mary's reference to her colleague, who came to San Francisco as a Russian immigrant, but who was also excluded access to the valued *FOB* style. In (15), Mary recounts ~~to me~~ the expression of solidarity through a reported speech moment in which the colleague 'jokes' about the undervaluation of their European bodies:

(15) Mary (b. 1979, female, Irish American)

Mary: The 'pretty girls' were always these like tiny, tiny girls. And I was this tall – I'm five-ten, I was five-ten at thirteen. [laughter] But ((name of colleague)) and I joke about it all the time, she's like, "Anywhere else in the country, you're a five-foot ten blond who weighs like a hundred and thirty pounds, and you're stoked! [laughter]. But here it's like "uh::: [groan of resignation]." [laughter]

In (15), Mary's experience becomes locatable in her community, a place that gains distinctiveness by virtue of being in contrast to "anywhere else in the country." Mary's experience of frustration around her inability to adapt to the symbolic market of her middle school thus becomes a resource for constructing a very local kind of white American experience. The bounds of this constructed place are not always clear – her narrative is explicitly about her middle school and her colleague's middle school, however our interview is explicitly about the Sunset

District, and her colleague's school was in the Richmond District (the 'other' New Chinatown), so both of these neighborhoods may be included in the scope of place identification. Whatever the bounds of her constructed place, Mary's experience is framed as crucially local. I take this locality to be relevant wherever the New Chinatown appellation applies. The rise in authentication of what were previously exoticized and stigmatized Chinese social practices, and the loss of prestige of what were previously authenticating European social practices, is a key feature of an individual's lived experience in the New Chinatown context.

While these narratives reveal a new use of a particular referring term, with some mention of the sartorial elements that accompany that use, they say little about the linguistic elements that accompanied the style. Aubrey's description in (5) suggests *FOB* stylization involved a change in "language," and the following excerpt from her daughter's interview in 2008 hints at the nature of those linguistic features.

(16) Mary (b. 1979, female, Irish American)

Mary: You get to pull like, anything you want out of the different influence[s] you had growing up, and it comes off natural. ...I was about as cartoonishly, you know, upwardly-mobile-white-girl as you get, but I could slip into how I talked when I was in middle school and people were like 'Whoa, how do you know how to talk like that?' you know and I was like, 'Oh [laughter] all I wanted to be when I was thirteen was a five-foot-tall Asian girl who could breakdance!' [laughter]

In (16), Mary links her youthful bids for *FOBby* identity to a contemporary skill for linguistic style-shifting. She re-enacts an interactional moment of recognition by her contemporary interlocutors to claim a certain fluency in the code associated with that target youth style. At the same time, she again frames her thirteen-year-old bids for identity as aspirations rather than direct reflections of her friendship network. Her description that her use of this linguistic style "comes off natural" effectively strikes a balance between parody and farce on the one hand ("comes off") and authenticity on the other ("natural"). The linguistic style, "how I talked when I was in middle school," is framed in two different ways: first, as directly contrasted with the persona of the "upwardly-mobile-white-girl," and second, as equivalent with the linguistic style appropriate to someone wanting to be "a five-foot-tall Asian girl who could breakdance." The specific citation of breakdancing, combined with tentative insights from internet representations of the 'Fresh Oriental Boyz' reacronymization discussed earlier, minimally suggests an alignment with the *FOB* style and hip-hop styles more generally. With respect to race and class, 'Asian' links through hip-hop culture to African American identities and away from upward mobility and traditional associations of whiteness. Despite the lack of any empirical data, we have reason to suggest that the linguistic features

of *FOB* style in the Sunset District in the 1990s would have drawn on features of Hip-Hop Nation Language (Alim 2004b). Indeed, several accounts of English language variability in other parts of the US have documented the use of African American linguistic practices among Asian American youth for the construction of non-white identities (Chun 2001; Reyes 2005). Work on youth styles in other parts of the San Francisco Bay Area also strongly support this analysis (Bucholtz 1999, 2011; Alim 2004a; Paris 2009), including work looking specifically at Asian youth (Bucholtz 2004) and *FOB* style (Shankar 2008, 2011).

As the referent of *FOB* sheds its associations with immigrant status and gains local ethnic meanings, it simultaneously enters into wider American tropes of ethnicity, i. e., race: the *FOB* style indexes not only ‘Chinese’ or ‘Asian’ identities but, crucially, *non-white* racial identities. In this context, Mary’s inability to fully attain her desired place in the peer social order is blocked on multiple semiotic levels, of which height is only one (which is perhaps the most frequently cited one because it is less contentious than skin color). The *FOB* style presents a strong example of how the challenges of late-modern hybridity can be just as palpable for white subjects in the San Francisco context as for Asian subjects in other North American contexts (Lowe 1996; Ang 2001; Louie 2006; Shin 2012).

4 Discussion

The retrospective narratives presented above paint a picture of variable orientations to the rise of New Chinatown symbolic markets in San Francisco, California. As retrospectives, they represent hindsight accounts of a period of particularly dramatic social change by those individuals in adolescence at the time of the change. I take these accounts to represent a window into San Franciscan society at the historical moment when the city becoming a truly transnational space. At one level, these changes echo similar shifts across North America, as the 1990s witnessed a rise in ~~neoliberalism and~~ the global exchange of commodified symbolic resources. However, the unique position of San Francisco as the historical (and, in many ways, contemporary) center for Chinese American culture encourages a further interpretation of these processes as crucially local, as well. In particular, I suggest here that white San Franciscans’ positive orientation to *FOB* style is understood in terms of local authentication, rather than illegitimate appropriation.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define *authentication* in contrast to its opposite, *denaturalization*. The former “focuses on the ways in which identities are discursively verified,” whereas in the latter, “by contrast, such claims to the inevitability or inherent rightness of identities is subverted” (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:

601–602). At its most basic, the adoption of a *FOB* style – presumably comprised of elements of Chinese and African American social practices – by an Irish American is, itself, a prime example of denaturalization. Discursively, Mary’s recognition of her inability to use the adjective, *FOBby*, is recognition of that fact. This process operates at the first order of indexicality (Silverstein 2003), in the realm of ethnic meaning and ethnic identity. The ease with which JoJo and Vicky use the adjectival (or, even more obviously, speak in Chinese) would be an example of authentication of the first order.

However, the ethnographic evidence suggests that processes of social change in San Francisco have resulted in the emergence of higher orders of indexicality. Specifically, indexes of ethnicity are now (also) indexes of place authenticity. This second order meaning has different consequences for different ethnic subjects, resulting in something of an inversion of authentication. To the extent that her practices are successfully ratified (and the evidence for this does appear to be variable), Mary’s engagement with *FOB(by)* social and linguistic practices may authenticate her position as a San Franciscan. This authentication operates along two tracks, one drawing on the historicity of the Chinese presence in San Francisco, the other drawing on San Francisco’s transnational identity and centrality in the political economy of the Pacific Rim (see Ong 1999). However, access to this place-based level of authentication is more difficult to access for people like JoJo and Vicky, whose bids for place-based authenticity are more likely to be interpreted as authentications of ethnicity. This perspective helps to reconcile Mary’s account of self-stylization toward *FOB* style with JoJo’s ambivalence and Vicky’s aversion toward the same.

The narratives presented here only represent a small sample of the full scope of lived experience, and they provide only a retrospective account of a style that is now two decades in the past. There are a large number of unanswered questions about the composition of the *FOB* style and the position of the *FOBz* in the broader symbolic marketplace. The most glaring omission in the present analysis is a consideration of narratives produced by the *Boyz* themselves, or in fact any male perspectives on the value of *FOB* style, at all. In fact, the present discussion has not been able to give space to equally frequent descriptions of race-based conflict that reached a violent peak during this same period, the 1990s, in this same location, the Sunset District. Narratives of this violence typically come from, and concern, adolescent males, which in itself casts doubt on the likelihood that the *FOB* identity was prestigious among non-Asian male students at Mary’s middle school. If the local valuing of Chinese and other Asian social practices were indeed limited according to gender, this raises compelling questions about the intersectionality of indexing authenticity.

5 Conclusion

This chapter explores the possibility that Chinese social and linguistic practices are available resources for contemporary San Franciscan authenticating. This authenticity is grounded in historicity, for Chinese Americans today can claim a San Francisco nativeness that is just as old as any (non-Hispanic) European American claim. In areas like the Sunset District, a Chinese plurality is now the norm for schools, businesses, and other community spaces. While some may lament the radical restructuring of the ethnic landscape, for an increasing number of residents, the New Chinatown is the norm. This chapter explores how young San Franciscans, those who have experienced this demographic shift directly, have understood and navigated local belonging in a hometown that became increasingly Chinese over the course of their adolescence. Their perspectives suggest that social practices that previously only indexed Chinese ethnicity have undergone a shift in indexical value. They cite instances of Chinese Americans self-styling with elements of Chinese immigrant-oriented styles, and of non-Chinese Americans coveting those same elements. This superficially unusual context follows logically from an emergent indexical order in which non-Chinese Americans can index local place authenticity via Chinese social practice, unlike Chinese Americans, whose engagement with those same practices is more often interpreted as indexing only ethnic identity.

Of course, San Francisco is a highly complex city, and Chineseness is but one part of this picture of 'glocalization' (Robertson 1995, a. o.). The meanings indexed by the Chinese practices discussed here co-exist with innumerable other indexes of authenticity available to San Franciscans, ones beyond the scope of this paper. However, 'Chineseness' is a particularly interesting case for detailing the emergence of authentication because its historical trajectory is rooted in characterizations as quintessentially foreign. Understanding how authenticity may emerge from such profound indexes of exoticism, and how the two might paradoxically co-exist in the present day, may shed light on the nature of authenticity, itself. Despite a long-standing pattern of racial and linguistic discrimination, the consequences of New Chinatown glocalization point to the ability for 'non-native' practices to come to index particular kinds of 'native' authenticities. From this perspective, Chinese in San Francisco is but one example of a remarkable shift in indexical value, from 'foreign' to 'local', from Oriental exoticism to a new American authenticity.

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