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Chinese Spaces in Unstable Cultural Moments

This panel constitutes an inquiry into the cultural construction of “chineseness” across time, locality, and social conflict. As a method of characterizing cultural space, definitions of Chinese identity were useful and flexible. Together, the presenters reveal “chineseness” as a catchbasin for anxious reactions to undefined or newly emergent spaces. Whether it is fear and desire, sympathy and power, or suspicion and hope, determinations about Chinese identities proved capacious enough to lend definition to, or allow competing definitions of contested spaces within cultures. While Kristin Bayer focuses on opium dens to explore shifting perceptions of threatening Chinese spaces across the nineteenth-century diaspora, Deirdre Murphy examines images of anti-Chinese riots as racial space-claiming sites on the U.S. American frontier. Elena Razlogova, on the other hand, explores Chinese communism as an imagined space of liberty within the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s. For all three presenters, “chineseness” functions as a determining force in moments of cultural destabilization.