To Whom It May Concern:

I am interested in researching New York City’s Chinatown through the framework of my major in American Studies-Religion. I am a junior and my interests include the formation of sacred space in the United States and the aesthetic implications for the architecture of those spaces. Researching Chinatown's religious architecture is a way for me to challenge and inform my general topic of sacred space in the United States by examining the convergence and diffusion of cultures in Chinese enclave communities.

My proposed project is to investigate the historical narrative of religious architecture in Chinatown. The New York City Chinatown is the second oldest Chinatown in the country, roughly forming in 1850. The religious spaces of Chinatown today are represented by a very diverse number of traditions, from Buddhists to Protestants. My research would include archival work in hopes of collecting a layered narrative of the arrival of different religious groups in the community and the manner in which they built their religious space. This historical research will take place in the city's archives, the archives of the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, and through the archives of key religious organizations in the neighborhood.

For me, the goal of understanding Chinatown's sacred architectural history is an investigation of the extent to which aesthetics of a religiously diverse enclave express the cohesion or the divisions of the community. Many of the political and economic organizations of Chinatown were intentionally formed by residents in order to distinguish themselves in the city as a unified front and subsequently to establish a self sufficient structure. I am interested in which ways religious organizations follow or diverge from that trend in their architectural expression.

This project would allow me to work on critical skills for my academic work, including my archival skills, interviewing, and my theoretical understanding of material religion. New York's Chinatown is an excellent subject for me because it requires flexibility in my understanding of China, America, religion, and architectural expression.

Sincerely,

Dana Logan
Project:

New York’s Chinatown is described by academics as both a prime example of enclave culture (Zhou 1992) and a community that is closely intertwined with global and citywide culture (Lin 1998). My proposal seeks to understand the aesthetic restraints present in religious spaces that must express local and transnational interests. The exponential boom of Chinatown has not stopped since 1945 when immigration laws were reformed to allow more women and children to immigrate, and in this growth the diverse needs for religious space have been met by large temples, churches and storefront operations. My project is an inquiry into the ways that religious spaces have been built in Chinatown both from the perspective of the ‘street’, or in terms of exterior presentation, and in terms of the interior space that communicates to members of the religious organization. The inside/ outside choice of perspectives is in part due to the position of Chinatown as an insular ‘enclave’ and as an integrated part of New York.

The relevance of this topic to the discipline of American Studies is emphasized by the existing body of work that have tried to understand models of immigrant assimilation in America through examples of enclaves like Chinatown. Chinatown’s economic and social structure have deeply interested sociologists in the 1980’s in part because, contrary to models of eventual assimilation, Chinatown has managed to stay relatively insular from external markets(Zhou and Logan 1991). The Chinese communities’ exclusion from larger welfare initiatives were also attributed to the close knit internal structure of Chinatown, which became an excuse for the government welfare system to ignore Chinatown while allowing local elites to exploit the influx of new immigrants (Light and Wong 1975). This narrative is further complicated by the Fuzhounese, who as the latest wave of immigrants in Chinatown, now dominate the cultural makeup of the neighborhood while facing exclusion from the established social organization of the elites.

For my purposes in understanding American Studies in terms of religion, the most up to date and relevant research on Chinatown is the work of Kenneth J. Guest, whose “God in Chinatown: religion and survival in New York’s evolving immigrant community” (2003), illustrates the importance of religious space in the lives of the Fuzhounese. For Fuzhounese, “the religious community serves as a liminal space, a transitional place, a place in between, touching both New York and China. It recreates physical surroundings, kinship and village networks, rituals, language, and food that recall life in China.”(Guest, 2003). This new community in Chinatown describes their experience as a transnational one that is linked by the continuities and possibilities of sacred space.

Focusing on the material culture of religion in Chinatown opens up further insight into some of the immanent issues present in the study of Chinatown. The architecture of religious space is of course heavily predetermined by the crowded structures of New York City, but against this restraint, residents must construct a space that is safe and
reminiscent of the religious space that immigrants have just arrived from. Chinatown’s tourist economy relies heavily on a ‘unified front’, a visual spectacle that allows tourists to both recognize and be excited by ‘Chinatown’. This unification is dominantly controlled by local elites through business and social organizations, all groups that the Fuzhounese are systematically rejected by. Thus the interest or ambivalence that Fuzhounese express in conforming to the aesthetic standards of Chinatown present an exciting topic of research.

My preparation for this research is through my work on religion and aesthetics through an independent study with Ken Brashier in the fall of 2005. Through this project I explored the possibility of sacred space as a combination of aesthetic and religious systems. We discussed the possibility of sacred space holding any special distinction from other social space, and what implications this might have for aesthetics. Other classes I have taken that address the topic include Idea Systems in Chinese Religions and Cultural Perspectives in the United States. These classes have helped me prepare my understanding of pluralism in Chinese religion and approaches to looking at ‘marked’ communities in the United States. My junior seminar is on methods of study in terms of religious images. We are working on archival and ethnographic skills that are very much in line with the work that I am proposing.

Timeline:

April-May - I would like to begin making appointments for archival work, writing letters of introduction to religious organizations sometime in April in order to give enough time for responses. Then I would spend the last weeks of May refining my bibliography and further specifying my questions for each site of research.

June - I will fly to New York in the beginning of June where I will be renting a room from my brother. Taking tours of Chinatown I will begin my orientation in the neighborhood. Then I will spend the first two weeks in the New York historical society and the public library’s archives collecting and organizing images of Chinatown in terms of the development of religious space. The last two weeks of June will be spent in the archives of the Museum of Chinese in the Americas, where I can access both images and accounts of religious spaces through their valuable collection.

Jamie Gong- personal tour guide www.chinatownnyc.org

Museum of Chinese in the Americas (MoCA) – 70 Mulberry Street, 2nd Floor. NY, NY 10013 Fax 212-619-4720 – www.moca-nyc.org info@moca-nyc.org


Registers Offices-- 31 Chambers St. (212) 788-8528
July – I would like to begin my documentation in photography of two main sites in Chinatown: the Church of Grace, which the central church for the Fuzhounese community, and the Mahayana Buddhist Temple, which serves as a major gathering place for multiple generations in Chinatown. Both are open to the public. I hope to use these two sites as a way to find other relevant sites that serve the community. At this point any gathering of archival information and interviewing of church and temple leaders would also begin. This would also be the beginning of any interviews with local academic expert Kenneth Guest, who keeps his own archives. Professor Guest and I have been in contact and he is excited about helping me with my project.

Mahayana Buddhist Temple –133 Canal St., New York, NY (212)

The Church of Grace – The Former Municipal Bath House. 1133 Allen St. (212) 254-3886

Kenneth Guest – Baruch College CUNY, Assistant Professor of Anthropology (646) 312 -4477, Fax (646) 312 -4461 KenGuest@baruch.cuny.edu

August—I will use this time to try to organize my findings into a thesis and complete the written portion of the project.

Working Bibliography:


Jones, Lindsay. *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*.


Resume:
2002-2003 Cost-Plus World Market – sales clerk
2003-2005 Reed College Mailroom
2004-2005 Reed-Tubman Partnership – Intern - taught in after-school homework programs and planned my own class for students. The result was a ‘Event-Planning’ class that culminated in a dance party for the whole school.

School:

Anthropology  ANTH 211, Fall 2004
                   ANTH 317, Spring 2006
Art            ART 161 Visual Concepts, Spring 2004
                   ART 201 Introduction to Art History, Fall 2003
Dance          DANC 110 Basic Technique, Fall 2004/Spring 2005
                   DANC 252 Improvisation, Fall 2005
                   DANC 340 Dance and Technology, Spring 2005
History        HIST 374 Gender and Sex, Spring 2005
                   HIST 276 Society in 20th Century America
Humanities     HUM 110 West Humanities, Fall 2003/Spring 2004
Literature     LITG 391 The Frankfurt School, Fall 2005
Religion       REL 155 Introduction to Islam, Spring 2004
                   REL 157 Idea Systems in Chinese Religions, Spring 2005
                   REL 201 Theory and Methods in Religious Studies, Fall 2004
                   REL 301 History of Religions, Spring 2005
                   REL 332 Semantics of Love in Sufism, Fall 2004
                   REL 481 Independent Study, Fall 2005
                   REL 399 Junior Seminar, Spring 2006
Russian        RUSS 120 First Year, Fall 2003/Spring 2004
                   RUSS 220 Second Year, Fall 2005/Spring 2006

Budget:

$ 20  Personal Tour from Jamie Gong
$ 50  Access to the MoCA archives
$ 1,000  Food and misc. expenses
$ 300  Round-trip Flight from Portland to New York
$ 100  Transportation within city
$ 50  Copies
$ 1,000  Rent for three months

Total: 2,530

1 Despite being able to live with my brother in New York, he is requesting this sum for rent, which is relatively small in comparison to staying in New York on my own.