The Chinese American community had a huge role in the Los Angeles produce industry. They are believed to have cultivated and sold produce as early as the 1850s. By the 1880s, roughly 83% of registered vegetable peddlers in Los Angeles County identified as Chinese. In the early 20th century, it is estimated Chinese residents and laborers grew and distributed nearly 80% of the produce consumed in Los Angeles.

Early farms involved small plots of land around Old Chinatown and later farms moved to areas outside the urban center. In addition to farming and selling produce at markets, Chinese Americans dominated vegetable peddling, walking door-to-door with two basketfuls of vegetables hanging on the ends of a bamboo stick. Chinese Americans grew all types of produce, but were famous for growing asparagus, celery, cauliflower, and cabbage, as well as introducing rice, tea, sugar cane.

Overall Chinese Americans were a very important part of the local food supply chain because they brought produce from surrounding suburban farms to in neighborhoods into the heart of LA. Not unlike modern-day farmers’ markets, this locally-sourced food system was beneficial in many ways. It not only supported the local economy, but also brought healthy produce to city residents without having to be shipped long distances or imported—ensuring fresher food and less air pollution created in the process of transporting the produce.
The City Market was one of the most important spaces for the Chinese American community in the first half of the 20th century. Although the majority of the tenants were Chinese, people of Italian, Japanese, Greek, and Jewish descent, among others, also worked at the market, selling wholesale produce to restaurants, individuals, and hotels.

The City Market was opened on April 3, 1909 after Mr. Louie Quon rallied a group of investors to provide the capital for the market’s construction. It was originally located between San Pedro St, San Julian St, 9th St, and 11th and expanded over time to Wall St. and 12th.

Many City Market workers lived in the area surrounding the market and many Chinese-oriented businesses and services flourished, including grocery stores, restaurants, laundries, and even a church. Families working at the market sent their children to schools nearby, and the children would work at the market before class. The area became to be known as “City Market Chinatown”. This is fitting as in the time period between the destruction of Old Chinatown and the construction of New Chinatown and China City, the City Market area acted as a temporary Chinatown for LA.

Later on, increased opportunities during the World War II economic boom allowed Chinese Americans to move out of the area and look for work in other industries. The construction of China City and the New Chinatown also encouraged Chinese Americans to move out of the City Market area. Today, the old City Market is gone and projects are being proposed to use the space for retail, office space, and other uses.
New Blooms: History of the LA State Historic Park (the "Cornfields")

1870s
The space is purchased by South Pacific and opened as a railyard and freight depot.

1991
Union Pacific buys the railyard in the late 1990s after freight rail operations move, leaving the older downtown railyards unused.

1998
Majestic officially announces its plan to purchase the empty land, with the vision of using the space for warehouses and manufacturing. Then-LA mayor, Richard Riordan, solicits $12 million in federal loans from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to aid the project.

In response, Arthur Golding, Chi Mui, and Lewis MacAdams, form the Chinatown Yards Alliance.

Summer 2000
The city planning commission approves Majestic Reality's plan without conducting an environmental review of the project.

The Chinatown Yard Alliance appeals to the city for a review, lobbies city planning meetings, and eventually files a lawsuit, alleging the city had failed to require Majestic to prepare a full Environmental Impact Report (EIR) to assess the environmental impact of the project on the surrounding communities.

September 2000
Chinatown Yard Alliance members lobby the HUD, arguing against the loan to Majestic Reality.

The HUD sends a letter to the city that it will not lend Majestic Reality the $12 million until a full EIR is completed.

April 2001
The Chinatown Yard Alliance and Majestic settle. The Trust for Public Lands (TPL) offers to buy the land from Majestic Reality. TPL then sells the land to the state to be used as a state park.

April 22 2017
LA State Historic Park officially opens.

2005
Park construction stagnates due to lack of funding and momentum. Lauren Bon, a local artist, creates an art installation in the field, converting the land into a cornfield that helps remove contaminants in the soil from the railyard. This gives the space its local name, "the Cornfields".

Around this time, the land is also used for performances, events, and venues. Development of the park moves slowly over the next few years with the economic downturn.
Flowering Change: Looking at LA State Historic Park as a story of Environmental Activism in the Los Angeles Chinatown

The Los Angeles State Historic Park (LASHP), locally known as the Cornfields, is a 32 acre state park located a mile north of the Chinese American Museum. The park is not only LA’s first downtown state park, but it is also the most accessible green space for the Chinatown community and an important symbol and story of environmental activism in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Chinatown community.

THE ISSUE: Environmental Injustice

Los Angeles is considered a “park poor”. Before the creation of LASHP, Chinatown and other neighboring communities had no substantial access to green space. Chinatown and Lincoln Heights, two neighborhoods that were adjacent to the railyard, are two of the highest risk neighborhoods for unhealthy air in LA. Such trends are not uncommon. Low income communities and communities of color often experience higher exposure rates to environmental pollution, such as being situated closer to landfills or having higher amounts of air and water pollution.

THE CHAMPIONS: The Chinatown Yard Alliance

At the heart of the initiative was the Chinatown Yard Alliance, a diverse, multiracial coalition of community, environmental, business, and civil rights organizations. Many community members of neighborhoods surrounding the railyard were a part of this coalition.

The founders of the alliance were Arthur Golding, the architect who had initially proposed that the railyard be converted to a park; Chi Mui, a local Chinatown activist and community member; and Lewis MacAdams, the founder of the Friends of the Los Angeles River.

Mui was essential to organizing and gaining support from the Chinatown community, as well as cultivating an Asian American face to the alliance. Not only was Mui fluent in Mandarin, Cantonese, and English, but he was an immigrant and long-time community organizer of Chinatown. Mui went on to become the first Asian mayor of San Gabriel before passing away in 2006.

THE BENEFITS: Parks as a Green Gold

Urban parks such as the LA State Historic Park are extremely valuable to urban communities. Parks not only provide areas for people to relax and play, but also act as important community and social spaces. By acting as spaces for public events and community gatherings, parks can build safety and community.

Furthermore, parks also have health and environmental benefits. Public green spaces provide free spaces for people to exercise, destress, and improve their mental and physical health. Plants in parks can also keep urban temperatures cooler by providing shade and removing air pollutants in the air which trap heat. Trees are especially effective at filtering the air and improving air quality.
This student exhibit highlights the role of Chinese Americans in the Los Angeles produce industry, the history of City Market, and the story of environmental activism surrounding the Los Angeles State Historic Park (also known as “the Cornfields”). On view from November 2 through November 11, 2018 on the Mezzanine floor at the Chinese American Museum.

The exhibit "Red, Gold, and Green: A Look into the Los Angeles Chinese American Experience and their Relationship with Sustainability in the Past and Present" was created by Jasmine Leung, Summer 2018 intern with the National Park Service at the Los Angeles Office of the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, in coordination with the Chinese American Museum. Jasmine Leung is currently an undergraduate student at the University of Washington studying Community, Environment, and Planning (CEP) and Chinese.