

Resource Note

Notes on Chinese American Historical Research in the United States

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Early Historical Writings

Chinese have lived in the United States for at least two hundred years. However, it was not until after the mid-nineteenth century that the Chinese became numerically significant and their society, activities, and role in this country attracted much attention. Their earliest chroniclers were observers outside the community: white missionaries such as William Speer, A.W. Loomis and Otis Gibson and writer/journalists or historians/social scientists such as Charles Nordhoff, Stewart Culin, and H.H. Bancroft. There were also sojourning Chinese diplomats such as Chen Lanbin and Zhang Yinhan and travellers such as Li Gui and Liang Qichao. Such writings, either by Chinese or non-Chinese from outside the community, were numerous from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century when the controversy over Chinese labor was a hotly debated issue.

After Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the Chinese population began to decline, public attention was diverted to other more immediate issues. Chinatown came before the public only in relation to events such as "tong wars." Similarly, during the first half of the twentieth

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century, only a few works were published on Chinese American history for popular consumption. Some examples were *Tong War!* by Eng Ying Gong and Bruce Grant (1930), and *San Francisco Chinatown*, by Charles C. Dobie (1936). This genre continued well after World War II with works such as *Pigtails and Gold Dust* by Alexander McLeod (1948) and *The Hatchet Men*, by Richard Dillon (1962). The treatment of Chinese American history and society in these books was superficial and tended to perpetuate stereotypical images. However, by the 1960s this type of writing had been eclipsed by histories written in the community and on the campuses.

Within the Chinese American community, most of the early pioneers were too busy ensuring their survival in a strange and hostile environment to have leisure time to document their own community history. Thus, it was not until nearly the end of the nineteenth century that Chinese in America attempted to describe their own society. Even then, it was mostly in a defensive vein to help White America achieve better understanding of the Chinese. Some examples were magazine articles written by Walter N. Fong. There were also such works as J.S. Tow's *The Real Chinese in America* (1923) and Leong Gor Yun's *Chinatown Inside Out* (1936).

During this same period, efforts to chronicle the community's history began in earnest as the Chinese began to sink roots into this country. In Hawaii, a sizable Chinese American middle class had emerged and by the 1920s the Hawaii-born Chinese had become a majority. The community's collective quest for an equal share in Hawaii's society stimulated the development of ethnic solidarity. Such feelings were further heightened by nationalist sentiments emanating from Republican China. These factors stimulated Chock Lun to publish *Chinese in Hawaii* in 1929 and again in 1936. These bilingual volumes which looked at the Chinese in Hawaii from an immigrant's point of view included a wealth of biographical and historical information derived from archival and community sources.

On the continental United States, anti-Chinese restrictions greatly hampered the growth of a Chinese American middle class. Due to the higher percentage of single men as compared to Hawaii, the growth of families, and hence, growth of a U.S.-born population, also lagged. Nevertheless, by 1935 the increasing number of American-born led to the founding of the English language weekly, *Chinese Digest*, in San Francisco. For the first time, community activities and institutions were looked upon from a Chinese American perspective, emphasizing the fact that Chinese Americans are a part of American society. Around 1937, William Hoy of the *Chinese Digest* formed the California Chinese Historical Society to research Chinese American history. The organization was limited to a small circle and existed only a few short years.

With the Marco Polo Bridge incident in 1937, Japan began an undeclared war on China. The Chinese people's struggle against the Japanese

military machine won the sympathy and admiration of many Americans. When Pearl Harbor later brought the United States into the war, China became America's ally and one of the Big Four powers. These events created favorable conditions enabling repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act. The same legislation also gave Chinese in America the right of naturalization.

During this period many Chinese served in the U.S. armed forces and the merchant marine. America's wartime manpower needs also offered opportunities for the non-white minorities, including the Chinese. Thus by the end of the war many Chinese Americans had improved their economic lot. The middle class, increased in strength and number, emerged with a sense of ethnic pride, and a stronger sense of community, and looked forward to achieving equal status in American society.

Historical Writings in Chinese

In the post war period, increased feelings of community led to the publication of several handbooks on Chinese Americans by Chen Ju Chou (1946), Ling Lew (1949), and Chen Kwong Min (1950). In 1954 Wu Shang-ying published the first book-length history on the Chinese of America based on his series of historical articles in San Francisco's *Chinese Times*. Wu's book was followed by the works of Jun T. Sun in 1962 and Y. K. Chu in 1975. The most authoritative study is Pei Chi Liu's three volume history, published in 1976, 1981 and 1984. Yuk Ow, another respected historian, used primary sources extensively in compiling the definitive *A History of the Sam Yup Benevolent Association in the United States, 1850-1974* (1974).

The content of these works was largely descriptive. History was seen primarily as a struggle by the Chinese as a group to achieve success in American society. There was a tendency to gloss over critical examination of the conflicts within the community. Neither was there much depth in the analysis of dynamics and processes which governed the community's development. The works show strong identification with China, and the emphasis is on the immigrant Cantonese-speaking population within the Chinatowns.

These few historians worked as individuals, thus there is no continuity in their research efforts. Since they wrote only in Chinese, their influence is limited basically to those Americans who read Chinese and those on the Chinese mainland and Taiwan interested in the subject. However, these historians had good access to community sources and their works are rich in details of Chinatown events and personalities. Thus far there has been no general histories published in English that are comparable in content.

During the 1980s, Chinese became more active in U.S. politics. Those intellectuals who had immigrated since the 1940s had a new interest in Chinese American history. They have published historical writings in the

World Journal, China Times, International Daily News, and Centre Daily News, and other publications. There are also book length works such as *A Century of Chinese Exclusion Abroad*, by I-Yao Shen.

Him Mark Lai wrote a weekly series of articles on Chinese American history in the *San Francisco Journal* from 1980 to 1984. This was one of the histories written in Chinese from the perspective of a native-born Chinese American.

The Historical Societies

Paralleling the development of Chinese language works are those written in English from a Chinese American perspective. These are written by those born in the United States or by immigrants with a westernized orientation. The rise of this group can be traced to international and domestic changes of the post-war decades. Many colonies and protectorates of the western powers fought for and achieved independence. In the United States, non-white minorities began to demand full recognition of their civil rights. The vanguard was middle-class Blacks, who led this struggle beginning in the late 1950s. At first limited to the South, the civil rights movement soon spread all over the country and inspired other non-white minorities.

Although the Chinese were too small numerically to play a decisive role in the struggle, the events created an atmosphere which heightened ethnic awareness among Chinese Americans, especially the more Americanized middle class. One expression was an increased interest in their collective historical experience. In 1967 Betty Lee Sung wrote *Mountain of Gold: The Story of the Chinese in America*, a popularized account of the history and contemporary status of Chinese American society. This was followed in the next two decades by *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown*, by Victor G. and Brett de Bary Nee (1972); *Chinese of America, from the Beginnings to the Present* by Jack Chen (1980), *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island* by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (1980). There also were other individuals actively interested in this field. However, in many Chinese American communities it was the historical societies which played the vital role in encouraging the development of historical research.

In 1963, Thomas Chinn, H. K. Wong, Ching Wah Lee, C. H. Kwock and Thomas Wu, using as a model the numerous local historical societies in the U.S., founded the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA) to research, document and disseminate information on the history of the Chinese of America. The CHSA actively promoted greater interest in, and awareness of, Chinese American history among Chinese Americans and the general public. A museum was founded in 1965 and is still the only

facility in the United States with a permanent exhibit devoted solely to the history of the Chinese of America.

Due to the civil rights movement, by the late 1960s and early 1970s the larger society had accepted the validity of including the history and culture of an ethnic minority as part of a pluralistic, multicultural America. During this period CHSA also expanded its activities. At the centennial of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1969, CHSA erected plaques at Sacramento and at Promontory Point to commemorate the contribution of the Chinese railroad workers. The same year CHSA organized a seminar on Chinese American history for educators and published *A Syllabus, A History of the Chinese in California*, which filled a need for a reference work in the field. Also in 1969 Asian American Studies began at San Francisco State College (later California State University San Francisco), and CHSA members Philip Choy and Him Mark Lai taught the first course on Chinese American history in the United States. In 1975, the society, in observation of the U.S. bicentennial, organized the first national conference of Chinese American Studies in the country.

During this period, the increasing ethnic awareness among Chinese Americans stimulated the founding of similar groups in other communities. The earliest was the Hawaii Chinese History Center (HCHC), founded in 1970 and incorporated in 1971. Its general direction, as set by executive directors Irma Tam Soong and Puanani Kini, stressed the family history and genealogy of Chinese in Hawaii. In 1985 HCHC sponsored a conference, "Researching One's Chinese Roots." It is also planning a conference on Chinese Hawaiian history to be held in Honolulu in 1988 during the bicentennial of the coming of the Chinese to Hawaii. The society has issued a number of publications including *The Chinese in Hawaii, an Annotated Bibliography*, by Nancy F. Young (1973); *The Sandalwood Mountains, Readings and Stories of Early Chinese in Hawaii*, edited by Tin-yuke Char (1975); *Sojourners and Settlers, Chinese Migrants in Hawaii*, by Clarence E. Glick (1980); *Chinese Historic Sites and Pioneer Families of Kauai* (1979) and *Chinese Historic Sites and Pioneer Families of Hawaii* (1983), both jointly by Tin-yuke and Wai Jane Char.

In 1975, Paul Louie, Gerald Shue, Stan Lau, Paul de Falla, William Mason and others in the Los Angeles area founded the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California (CHSSC). Its objective is to document the history of the Chinese in Southern California. In 1976 the society erected a plaque honoring Chinese laborers who built the Southern Pacific Railroad and the San Fernando Tunnel. In 1978 it joined with UCLA's Asian American Studies Center in an oral history project which resulted in the publication, *Linking Our Lives, Chinese Women of Los Angeles* (1984). Currently the society is helping to develop a Chinese American historical museum at El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park.

The New York Chinatown History Project (NYCHP) is the only major Chinese American historical research group on the East Coast. It began in 1976 when John Tchen coordinated the Asian American Resource Center (AARC) as part of New York City's Chinese American cultural organization Basement Workshop. In 1980 John Tchen and Charles Lai founded NYCHP and also inherited the AARC collection.

NYCHP gathers information on New York City Chinese community folklife and history. This information is applied to a wide range of activities such as radio docu-dramas, historical slide programs and video documentaries. Since 1980, NYCHP has been conducting historical interviews of New York residents, including laundrymen and members of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance. It has organized a major exhibit *Eight Pound Livelihood, Chinese Laundry Workers in the U.S.* (1983), and in 1984 the organization received the Municipal Art Society of New York Merit Award for contributions toward cultural enhancement of New York City.

The Chinese Historical Society of the Pacific Northwest (CHSPNW) was also formed in 1980. The founders included Willard Jue and other individuals from Seattle's Chinese community, and Douglas Lee and others from the university community. Its goal is to do research on the history of Chinese in the region. The CHSPNW has co-sponsored a traveling exhibit of Chinese herbal medicine with the Wing Luke Museum of Seattle (1984). The society has also published two collections of historical essays in 1983 and 1984.

The youngest historical group is the Chinese Historical Committee of Stockton, founded in Spring 1985 as a special project of the Stockton Cathay Club. Later the Chinese Cultural Society of Stockton also became a co-sponsor. The focus of the committee is to inventory, collect, record, and preserve historical information in Stockton, California and nearby communities.

Membership in the above historical groups is diverse, consisting of Chinese and non-Chinese, academic and non-academic persons, amateur and professional historians. As part of the local community, each society can effectively disseminate information on the history of the Chinese of America to the public by exhibits, speakers, field trips, and publications. The members are highly motivated and their tireless efforts have helped to initiate and push actions to preserve several historic sites with varying degrees of success such as the Angel Island Immigration Detention Station, the China Camp shrimp camp, the town of Locke, and the Chinese temple at Hanford. Their community contacts also facilitate access to informants and historical documents. Hence, they also play a vital role at the grass roots level recording and preserving historical materials. Their historical writings are basically descriptive in content. Most members are not fluent in Chinese, which tends to channel their research

toward areas where their English language capabilities can be used to advantage.

Historical societies also work in close collaboration with cultural organizations. The most prominent is the Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco (CCF). Founded by J. K. Choy, Joe Yuey and others in 1965, this organization established a Chinese Culture Center (CCC) in 1973. Successively under executive directors William Wu, Shirley Sun and Lucy Lim, CCF has developed activities to introduce Chinese and Chinese American culture and history to the public.

Among major Chinese American historical exhibits at CCC were the following, some of which were organized in cooperation with CHSA: Three Generations of Chinese: East and West (1974); Island: History of the Chinese Immigrants Detained on Angel Island, 1910–1940 (1980); Chinese of America, 1785–1980; and Chinese Women of America, 1834–1982 (1982). After being exhibited in seven American cities the Chinese of America in 1985 became the first such exhibit to be shown in the People's Republic of China.

In 1980 CCF, CHSA and the AAS program of the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) co-sponsored the second national conference on Chinese American studies. In 1982 CCF co-sponsored with Chinese American community organizations an exhibit and seminar to commemorate the centennial of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. New York City's China Institute, Boston's Chinese Culture Institute, Seattle's Wing Luke Museum and the Santa Ana's Chinese American Historical and Cultural Council also have organized historical activities at one time or another. There are organizations such as San Francisco's Association of Chinese Teachers (TACT) which developed audio-visual materials on Chinese American history for use in the schools, and Boston's Asian American Resources Workshop (AARW), community arts and educational organization, which seek to popularize the Asian American experience. Community newspapers such as *East/West* and *Asian Week* also often featured articles to help promote a sensitivity to Chinese American history.

Traditional Academic Approaches

Early academic research on Chinese Americans was mostly in the fields of history and sociology. Interest in the subject was often influenced by demands of the political situation in the larger society; one of the earliest historical works, Mary Coolidge's classic, *Chinese Immigration*, was written when the Chinese question was still a hotly debated subject. However, after the Chinese had dwindled, interest in this field also declined. Two of the significant works during this period were Ira B. Cross' *A History of the Labor*

Movement in California (1935) and Elmer C. Sandmeyer's *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1939).

The ethnic awareness engendered by the social unrest in American society during the 1960s and 1970s stimulated a number of researchers to undertake more historical and sociological studies. One of the earliest researchers was Stanford Lyman, who has written numerous papers analyzing different aspects of Chinese American society from a historical-sociological approach. A collection of his papers is published as *The Asian in North America* (1977). There have also been other notable historical works, such as *Chinese Labor in California, 1850–1880* by Ping Chiu (1960); *The Chinese in the United States of America* by Rose Hum Lee (1969); *Chinese in American Life, Some Aspects of Their History, Status, Problems and Contributions* by S. W. Kung (1962); *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850–1870* by Gunther Barth (1964); *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* by Alexander Saxton (1967); *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* by James W. Loewen (1971); *Chinatown, N.Y.: Labor and Politics 1930–1950* by Peter Kwong (1979); *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* by Clarence E. Glick (1980); *The Unimpressible Race: A Century of Educational Struggle by the Chinese in San Francisco* by Victor Low (1982); *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams: Music in the Life of San Francisco's Chinese* by Ronald Riddle (1983); *Chinese in the Post Civil War South: A People without a History* by Lucy M. Cohen (1984); and *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region* by Sandy Lydon (1985). Most of these works were edited from doctoral dissertations. The work often becomes the only one written by the author on Chinese American history and thus there is no overall coordinated effort or continuity.

Within the last decade archaeologists have also entered this field. Surveys have been made of Chinese sites in U.S. national forests. Other archaeologists have excavated railroad construction camps at California's Donner Summit and in Texas, a San Francisco dump site, and a number of Chinatowns and Chinese mining camps in Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, California and other western states to gather evidence of the immigrants' material culture. A major archaeological-historical investigation headed by Paul Chace is under way at the site of Riverside's Chinatown, and an Overseas Chinese Research Group has been established in California by workers in this field. However, this field of inquiry is still in its infancy, and researchers have yet to relate their findings meaningfully to Chinese American history. Many of their results have yet to be incorporated into historical writings.

Asian American Studies

The student movement on the university campuses led to the rise of the Asian American Movement and founding of Asian American Studies

(AAS) in the late 1960s in the San Francisco Bay Area. From there, other programs spread up and down the West Coast, to Hawaii, and to the East Coast. The bulk of AAS programs is in the West. Although many schools have courses or programs, most have inadequate budgets for development, and often also have had to fight uphill battles to gain legitimacy in the eyes of those working in the established academic disciplines.

As AAS was established as part of a wider movement for social change in American society, both curriculum development and research in the field reflect an orientation of protest and criticism of the existing order. As part of the re-examination of American society and history, AAS researchers have sought to analyze the Asian American historical experience using interdisciplinary approaches from sociology, history, economics and other disciplines. Research on Chinese American history is also a part of this field of study, although the emphasis and depth varies with the institution.

The Asian American Studies Center (AASC) of the University of California, Los Angeles is the only program designated primarily as a research center. One of its major projects, studying the role of Asian workers under U.S. capitalism, has resulted in the publication of a collection of essays under the title *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II* (1984). More specifically related to Chinese American historical research is AASC's pioneering efforts with Zhongshan University to do investigations in Taishan emigrant villages (1979) and an agreement with Zhongshan University and Hong Kong University to compile bibliographies on overseas Chinese historical materials (1981).

The primary mission of AAS programs in most other schools is class instruction. However, many in the programs are also engaged in research. Thus far the most notable accomplishment has been the publication of bibliographies of English language materials to facilitate research. Two examples are *Asians in America, A Selected Annotated Bibliography* (University of California, Davis 1971, revised 1983) and *Asians in the Northwest, An Annotated Bibliography* (University of Washington, 1978). In 1986 UCLA's AASC published *A History Reclaimed: An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Language Materials on the Chinese of America*, the first work in English on these resource materials. There also have been a number of oral history projects at schools such as the California State Universities at San Francisco and Fresno, and University of Hawaii. Other projects have probed into aspects of Chinese American historiography—the role of American racism as it relates to the Asian (Chinese) American experience, the applicability of the sojourner concept in the case of Chinese immigrants, and the role of Chinese American women. Research papers have been published in publications and scholarly journals, notably UCLA's *Amerasia Journal* and UCB's *Asian America Review*. However, because Asian American Studies is relatively new and only a limited number of people in it are directly doing

research on Chinese American history, no major interpretative works on Chinese American history thus far have emerged.

Research in Asian American Studies is different from, and in some ways more difficult than that in the traditional social sciences in that many of the resources can be found only in the ethnic communities themselves. Thus, often cooperation between academic circles and ethnic communities should be the best means to achieve meaningful results. In recent years there have been some successful cooperative efforts. As mentioned, the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California worked with UCLA's Asian American Studies Center on an oral history program, while the University of California Asian American Studies program at Berkeley co-sponsored a conference and a seminar with the Chinese Historical Society of America and Chinese Cultural Foundation. A significant step was taken in 1978 when Berkeley's Asian American Studies Library accepted on a long term loan the extensive archival and publication holdings of the Chinese Historical Society of America to start a collection of research materials. This move has made it possible for the University of California at Berkeley to become one of the leading centers for Chinese American research materials, much of which is not available elsewhere. The UCB AAS Library Collection includes more than 35,000 items, out of which Chinese American archival materials comprise more than half. The latter includes publications of Chinese American organizations, business directories, ledgers, personal papers, institutional archives, etc. The AAS collection also includes some 134 Asian American community newspapers, 167 journals, 2000 reels of microfilms, 3500 items of audio-visual materials, as well as a vertical file of newspaper clippings. The above efforts demonstrate that, in some areas at least, cooperation is beneficial to the development of better understanding of Chinese American history.

Academic circles and community historical societies each have their roles to play. Those in academic circles, with their professional expertise, are perhaps in a somewhat better position to organize and interpret the materials. On the other hand, historical societies, being at the grassroots level, have good contacts and access to community resources. They can also function much better to reach and educate the general public. The two could very well function to complement each other and facilitate development of the field. However, the experience of the past seventeen years has shown that, despite the rhetoric about the desirability and necessity for Asian American Studies to work together with the ethnic community to develop an agenda, such cooperation has occurred only when both parties have specific common interests. Beyond that, other factors have prevailed against cooperation. Campuses, for example, are frequently located at some distance away from Chinese American communities. Between the academically trained professionals on campuses and the amateur his-

torians in Chinese American communities, differences in expertise and perception as well as political and social outlooks remain. Hence, under normal circumstances each group has tended to go its own way.