
INTRODUCTION

CHINESE AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY:
WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS THE ASIAN
AMERICAN MOVEMENT MADE?



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From time to time, historians of Asian America have taken stock of the existing writings in the field. Roger Daniels, Shirley Hune, Sucheng Chan, L. Ling-chi Wang, and Gary Y. Okihiro have provided analytical overviews, whereas Shih-shan Henry Tsai, Sucheta Mazumdar, Charles J. McClain Jr., Gordon H. Chang, Chris Friday, Gail M. Nomura, Patricia N. Limerick, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, and Madeline Y. Hsu have discussed specific aspects of Asian American historiography. Daniels criticized historians of U.S. immigration for ignoring the migration from Asia;¹ Hune likewise faulted scholars for marginalizing Asian immigrants;² Chan argued that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of Asian immigration should be seen within the twin contexts of Western imperialism and the uneven development of capitalism in the United States;³ Wang pointed out that even the authors who were sympathetic to Asian immigrants had their own biases;⁴ and Okihiro proposed alternative periodizations, assessed key historical debates, and presented what he considered to be the most important emerging themes.⁵

In the more specialized essays, Tsai alerted colleagues to the existence and utility of Chinese-language sources as well as histories penned by Marxist scholars in China;⁶ Mazumdar called for a woman-centered perspective on Asian American history;⁷ McClain refuted the belief that nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants were contract laborers imported by the Chinese Six Companies or its component associations;⁸ Chang asked whose history scholars are talking about when writing Asian American history;⁹ Friday lamented the absence of studies of Asian American workers in the historiography of U.S. labor;¹⁰

Nomura wanted to know why European American scholars place the burden of proof on Asian Americans to show that their lives have historical significance;¹¹ Limerick proposed that treating Asian American history as an integral part of the complex history of the American West will enrich both areas of academic inquiry;¹² Tchen queried how Asian American historiography might be different if we paid more attention to regions other than the Pacific Coast;¹³ Yanagisako argued that nation, ethnicity, kinship, gender, and class should all be taken into account when investigating how an Asian American historical consciousness has been and is being constructed;¹⁴ and Hsu urged scholars to recognize that the “homosociality” (warm relationships among men, be they nonsexual or sexual) in the largely “bachelor communities” in America’s Chinatowns was, and is, a normative, and not a deviant form of social life. We need to move, she declared, beyond the false dichotomy between “bachelor” and family-centered societies.¹⁵

The scope of this introduction is narrower than the essays cited above. Instead of looking at the history of all Asian ethnic groups, I examine only selected books about Chinese Americans to illustrate how history writing and sociopolitical activism were inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive during the years when the civil rights movement and the black power movement and their offshoots energized peoples of color, including Asian Americans, in the United States. A revisionist historiography helped create an alternative, often oppositional historical consciousness. I discuss the earliest works in some detail because they set the terms of the public policy and academic debates that have continued to the present day. My analysis of post-movement works, however, is very brief as they are readily available and have been widely reviewed in academic journals and because Asian Americanists know them well.

In two historiographical essays published in 1996, I identified the salient features in four periods of Asian American historiography: (1) the 1850s to the early 1920s, when partisan writings dominated the literature; (2) the mid-1920s to the early 1960s, when social scientists produced most of the studies; (3) the late 1960s to the early 1980s, when Asian American and European American scholars attempted to debunk anti-Chinese notions; and (4) the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when university-based Asian American historians came of age, professionally speaking. In an article published in 2007, I discussed a fifth period that emerged in the late 1990s when social history gave way to cultural history and when transnationalism, diaspora, and globalization became the key tropes in the literature.¹⁶

In the present study, I examine only one turning point that occurred when the Asian American Movement was most vibrant. I discuss three genres of pre-movement works—partisan tracts, sociological studies, and Chinatown “guides” or exposés—but owing to space limitations, I regretfully must leave

out autobiographies, creative writings (except for a few nineteenth-century works), transcripts of state legislative and congressional hearings, books on Asian Americans containing sections on Chinese Americans (with several exceptions), and journal and newspaper articles. Despite its selectivity, this survey reveals that even though the militancy expressed by many participants of the Asian American Movement has long since dissipated, its legacy still resonates in multiple ways in both the community and the academy.

Partisan Writings

Journalists, missionaries, diplomats, labor leaders, publicists, and politicians started writing about Chinese immigrants almost as soon as they landed in the United States. Although some Chinese had appeared on the East Coast long before Chinese migrated in significant numbers to California and elsewhere in the American and Canadian West in search of gold and other means of sustenance, their presence along the Atlantic seaboard elicited curiosity more than hostility. In contrast, the large numbers who set foot along the Pacific Coast encountered opposition and discrimination early on. Partisan rhetoric tinged all the writings about the Chinese as Chinese immigration became a vociferously debated public policy issue, first in California and then in the nation.

Beginning in the early 1850s, short newspaper accounts, longer periodical articles, and pamphlets eventually burgeoned into a voluminous literature. Although the publications were numerous, they contained only a limited number of oft-repeated themes. Books published from the 1870s onward articulated these motifs in the greatest detail. Those written by missionaries William Speer, Otis Gibson, and Ira M. Condit, all of whom had served in China, and by diplomat George F. Seward, a former American minister (ambassador) in the U.S. legation (embassy) in China, exemplify the pro-Chinese arguments, whereas books by M. B. Starr, Willard B. Farwell, Pierton W. Dooner, Robert Wolter, and James A. Whitney reveal the anti-Chinese mindset. The authors in both camps based their arguments on their assessments of Chinese civilization and perceived the immigrants as representative bearers of that culture.

The bulk of Speer's hefty 681-page book is about the Chinese in China, but in six of his chapters he addressed the issues raised by Chinese immigration into the United States. He pointed out, in chapter 16, that the word *coolie* came from India, a caste society, but that castes never existed in China and that the Chinese in California were not "coolies" but "freemen." In chapter 17, he noted that although it was true that Chinese workers, in China as well as in the United States, received low wages, it was not their cheap labor but, rather, their industriousness, frugality, intelligence, and employability in a wide range of occupations that made them attractive to employers. Chapter 19 is devoted to a discussion of the Chinese Six Companies and the useful functions that organization performed.

However, Speer believed that when the Chinese became “secure in the possession of the ordinary rights of humanity, it is desirable that these companies should be discouraged.” In chapter 20, he observed that “the saddest feature of the terrible trials of the Chinese [was] that so many of them were inflicted in the name of the law” and reproached Congress for allowing such a situation to exist. While admitting that the Chinese were indeed heathens, in chapter 21 he discussed the syncretic intricacies of Chinese religion, thereby (perhaps unwittingly) legitimizing the beliefs and rituals associated with that religion. In chapter 22, he declared that American civilization was “divinely designed to be a School of the Nations.” For that reason, the Chinese who came to the United States could learn “our sciences,” “the incalculable importance” of democratic politics, and Christianity. He hoped that they would help spread the glories of American civilization not only among their fellow trans-Pacific migrants but also in their villages and districts of origin.¹⁷

Unlike Speer’s work, with its emphasis on China, all except the first chapter in Otis Gibson’s study discuss various aspects of Chinese life in the United States, including the journey to America; San Francisco’s Chinatown; the work the Chinese found in California; Chinese immigrant women; the impact of Christian missionary work on both the men and women; the antagonism against the Chinese; whether the Chinese Six Companies imported “slaves”; and the financial, moral, and political “facts and considerations bearing upon the Chinese Problem.” Highlighting the remarkable economic growth of California, Gibson pointed out that the Chinese had “performed a considerable part of the unskilled labor in all these industries,” which “could not have been developed” without them. He also asked, if Chinese labor were indeed as harmful to white working people as detractors of the Chinese claimed, “how is it that right here in California, where the Chinamen are the most numerous, the general condition of the white working-class is far better than in any other city of the United States, indeed of the world?” As for the charge that the Chinese presence was “demoralizing and ruining our boys,” he observed, “in every instance they have taken their first lessons in the path of ruin in the whiskey shops and drinking saloons of our Christian civilization.” Gibson saw only two valid objections to Chinese immigration: their slow rate of assimilation and their “overpowering numbers . . . coming from all parts of China.” Still, to “prohibit the Chinese from entering this country requires . . . a marked departure from the broad principles upon which our Government is established, and which have been our boast and glory for a hundred years. Is the cause sufficient to require such a sacrifice?”¹⁸ To him, the answer was no.

Ira M. Condit began his study with the premise that “one needs to see him [i.e., the Chinese] at home to fully appreciate him. . . . For capability, for reliability, for most of the sterling qualities which make for strength of character,

the Chinese easily excel.” He identified several prominent Chinese converts to Christianity in a chapter entitled “Acts of the Apostles in Chinese,” drawing a parallel between the evangelical work the converts did among fellow Chinese, both in the United States and in China, with the proselytization carried out by Christ’s original disciples. He argued that the “Chinaman” who came to the United States should be treated well because “he will never make America his permanent home. This is the very reason why we should give him the Gospel to take home with him. . . . To this nation is now being given one of the most wonderful opportunities that has ever been offered for helping forward the kingdom of God on earth.”¹⁹

George F. Seward’s work is a compendium of selected excerpts from the 1876 hearings before the U.S. Congressional Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration. As an advocate of the Chinese, however, he chose more segments that portrayed them in a positive light than in a negative one. Like Speer, he insisted that Chinese labor was free and that it did not displace but, rather, supplemented white labor; that Chinese vices were less dangerous than those of whites; and that “American race intolerance” impeded Chinese assimilation.²⁰ The issue of why the Chinese failed to assimilate would be debated over and over again in subsequent years.

Among the anti-Chinese authors, M. B. Starr, a “grand lecturer” for the People’s Protective Alliance—an amalgamation of the Workingmen’s Alliance of Sacramento, the Anti-Chinese League of San Francisco, and the Industrial Reformers that joined forces in 1873²¹—who traveled up and down the Pacific Coast giving anti-Chinese talks, began his book with a chapter entitled “Is the Coolie Trade Right When Viewed from a Scriptural Standpoint?” This was an apparent rebuttal to the writings of the pro-Chinese missionaries. He then listed all the evils brought about by Chinese immigration (including the corruption of public morals, finances, and paganism, as well as the reintroduction of slavery) and proposed such remedies as denouncing those who profited from the coolie trade, forming vigilante committees, “banishing . . . everything that is contaminating and impure,” and preventing “the introduction of a leperous hord [*sic*] of serfs.” He intoned, “This lovely land and glorious liberty of ours to enjoy, and then to transmit—to whom? to the heathen, to serfs, to a landed aristocracy, or to our posterity?”²² It is clear that while targeting the Chinese, he also took aim at capitalists and landowners who benefited from Chinese labor.

Willard B. Farwell directed his ire at Chinese immigrants and the Christian missionaries who defended their presence. “Their religious zeal,” he claimed, “blinds their ability to entertain a thought beyond making a Christian convert out of an idolator.” Worse, the missionaries “either ignorantly or otherwise falsified facts, and suppressed or distorted the truth.” Accusing them of “bigoted fanaticism,” he particularly resented the fact that they pontificated about Chinese immigration as something “ordained by God.” If people accepted that, he

said, “then the opposition to it . . . is an unpardonable sin . . . then are we, indeed, in danger of eternal damnation.”²³

The rabidity of anti-Chinese sentiments is also highlighted in two works of fiction published in the 1880s. Pierton W. Dooner fanned fears of a race war by combining fact and fantasy, characterizing the “coolie invasion” as a “poison that is slowly corroding the vital principles of our national life.” Citing China’s “traditions of universal domination” and its penchant to absorb other lands, he painted a horrifying futuristic picture of how the Chinese would conquer the United States unless their immigration was stopped.²⁴ Robert Wolter offered another fear-mongering account of a potential Chinese invasion and conquest that he predicted would occur by 1899 in a tale that combined nativism, racism, and fin de siècle anxieties.²⁵

James A. Whitney, a lawyer, while crediting Chinese civilization “from which have been drawn many of the discoveries without which the civilization of our western world would have been incomplete if not impossible,” and acknowledging the deleterious effects of Western imperialism on China, nevertheless insisted on the urgent need to “stay the eastward migration of the Yellow race” by abrogating all treaties, particularly the Burlingame Treaty, between China and the United States. He claimed that China had no right to object to U.S. actions because China, too, had long excluded foreigners. The United States would simply be imitating China’s example “in eliminating an objectionable element from a population characterized by the necessities, and imbued with the ideas, of an entirely different civilization.”²⁶

Unlike the authors of works that were either pro- or anti-Chinese, Charles R. Shepherd, director of Chinese Missions on the Pacific Coast for the American Baptist Home Mission Society, provided a dialectical view of the Chinese. In 1923, he published a book that spun out at length all the negative stereotypes of “Ah Sin,” a name he borrowed from Bret Harte, detailing the vices of the “unregenerate Chinese,” including gambling, smoking opium, killing, and prostituting women: “They have waxed fat, prosperous and powerful; and in addition to their own native wiles and cunning, have adopted many of the ideas and vices of the lower strata of American society. They constitute to-day the greatest single menace to peace, prosperity and social progress in every Chinese community in the United States.”²⁷ Fifteen years later, he offered a counterpoint by documenting what the Chinese could be like if they were schooled properly. He told the story of the Chung Mei Home for Chinese Boys that he had established, highlighting how a Christian education and character-building manual labor turned the boys into worthy American citizens. Eddie Hing Tong, the first Chung Mei alumnus to graduate from the University of California, Berkeley, went to China to provide “Christian leadership among boys.” Shepherd hoped that most of the other boys would follow Tong’s footsteps and devote their lives to “Christian service.”²⁸ The message conveyed by

the two books taken together was that, yes, the Chinese indeed had vices, but “Christian living” could rescue and civilize them.

Long before the Asian American Movement raised the political consciousness of Chinese Americans, Chinese in the United States actively confronted the malevolent and benevolent but patronizing images that these defining works projected about them. Chinese diplomats in the United States, as well as resident Chinese merchants and others who were fluent in English, defended their compatriots in English-language publications. K. Scott Wong summarized their strategies as follows:

They denied the anti-Chinese charges and paraded the virtues of Chinese history and culture; they sought equal treatment with other groups in America on the basis of class similarities; they defended the presence of the Chinese in America by comparing them favorably with others or by denigrating other immigrants and minority groups, often in Sinocentric terms; and they turned American democratic ideals back on their accusers, demanding that they live up to their own professed standards.²⁹

Not only were America’s democratic ideals in question; so was its Christian faith. As J. S. Tow, secretary of the Chinese Consulate General in New York, asked succinctly in 1923, was the prejudice against “the Mongolian race” a “Christian idea?”³⁰ One other form of self-defense that scholars who rely solely on English-language sources have failed to notice was the effects of exclusion on China itself. On the basis of a close reading of Chinese diplomatic correspondence, Shih-shan Henry Tsai concluded that anger over exclusion helped fuel modern Chinese nationalism.³¹

The themes in both these pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese writings continue to crop up in twenty-first-century writings, films, television, and radio. Today, China’s booming export trade and increasing military prowess are causing anxieties among Americans to such an extent that the old anti-Chinese bogies are being reincarnated in public discourse.³²

Social Science Studies

The partisan writings had a profound impact on research studies that appeared in their wake. Mary Coolidge, a sociologist who produced the first scholarly work on Chinese immigration, devoted her entire book to refuting the anti-Chinese arguments and offering her own explanations for why the anti-Chinese movement arose in California. Her reasons include the state’s boom-and-bust economy, the nearly equal strength of the two major political parties, and the presence of a significant number of Southern slave owners who brought their slaves and racial prejudices with them when they came to

California during the gold rush. Her work adopted some of the strategies that the Chinese community spokespersons had used: comparing the Chinese favorably to certain groups of European immigrants, particularly the Irish, and faulting working-class European Americans for the violent outbreaks against the hapless Chinese, in the process revealing her own upper-class bias, just as the well-educated, urbane, English-speaking Chinese elite had done. She also reiterated several points made by Speer some four decades earlier: China, unlike India, had no caste system; Chinese immigrant workers were free men—hardworking, patient, careful, well-behaved, and adaptable, doing work that people of other national origins disdained.³³

In the 1920s, social scientists associated with the Survey of Race Relations project directed by sociologist Robert E. Park published several volumes based on the data they had collected.³⁴ Although these studies by Roderick D. McKenzie, Eliot Grinnell Mears, and William C. Smith included the Chinese, they paid greater attention to the Japanese, whose presence in the United States was by then a larger public concern, and to the American-born second generation. Chinese exclusion having been in effect for more than four decades, the key issue was no longer Chinese immigration per se, but rather how the panoply of restrictive laws affected the legal status and economic opportunities of “resident Orientals.” McKenzie’s book is especially notable for placing the U.S. Chinese exclusion movement within the comparative context of similar efforts to exclude Chinese in “white” countries around the Pacific Rim, particularly Australia and Canada. He identified three major “problems” related to the exclusion laws and their enforcement: the creation of an incentive to enter the country illegally, a rise in the wages earned by immigrant Chinese workers as a result of their increasing scarcity in the labor market, and discrepancies in the interpretation and enforcement of the laws. The sociologists were also keenly interested in members of the second generation—U.S. citizens by birth—and their assimilation, or lack thereof. More important than the shift in topical emphasis, however, was the change in tone in these studies. Couched in the language and theories of sociology, the authors did not defend or attack Chinese immigration. Instead, they presented what they considered to be factual accounts and analyses in a manner approved by an ascendant positivist social science. The focus on assimilation, however, was not new: The partisan authors had already identified it as a problem half a century earlier.

Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer was the first professional historian to write about the Chinese. He revised his dissertation, completed in 1932, into a book published in 1939. Sandmeyer’s analysis was less impassioned and more heavily footnoted than the preceding works. Concluding that the anti-Chinese movement was fueled by both a fear of economic competition and racial antipathy, he picked up and reprised most of the themes that had been broadcast by earlier anti-Chinese propagandists.³⁵

Only a few books about Chinese Americans were published from the 1940s to the early 1960s, the output being dwarfed by writings about Japanese Americans. Milton R. Konvitz discussed the legal status of aliens in general and “Americans of Asiatic ancestry” in particular, bringing the earlier studies by Mears and McKenzie up to date. (Notice that the proper noun Konvitz used was “Americans,” and not “Orientals” or “Chinese”—signaling an important perceptual shift.) He examined the country’s right to exclude and expel aliens and the latter’s right to become naturalized citizens, to remain citizens, to own land, work, use the natural resources of the land, go to school, and marry white Americans. Because the book appeared in 1946, after World War II had ended, its last chapter is about the court cases related to the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans.³⁶

Fred W. Riggs chronicled the activities of a pro-China lobby that he called a “catalytic group” and the actions of the Roosevelt administration and the U.S. State Department to push Congress to repeal all the Chinese exclusion laws, which it did in December 1943. Congress also granted the Chinese a token immigration quota of 105 persons a year and the right of naturalization. The repeal was meant to allay the long-felt grievances of China, an ally of the United States during World War II, over the injustice of Chinese exclusion. Riggs saw the repeal as a “preparatory step” that would eventually lead to a fundamental reformulation of the country’s immigration laws after World War II. Among other changes, new legislation enacted in 1946 granted small quotas and the right of naturalization to immigrants from India and the Philippines. He also noted the congressional debates taking place when his book appeared in 1950—debates that led to the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952, which allotted immigration quotas and gave the right of naturalization to Japanese and Koreans. By examining the strategies and tactics of all the parties, both for repeal and against it, involved in the repeal campaign, Riggs, a political scientist, hoped to shed light on how pressure groups functioned in general and how the repeal campaign illustrated the manner in which the executive and legislative branches jockeyed for power.³⁷

Four books published in the early and mid-1960s are noteworthy for different reasons. The first book published (in Hong Kong) by a Chinese American scholar, sociologist Rose Hum Lee, came out in 1960. While paying tribute to her mentors in the sociology department at the University of Chicago, Lee’s framework was considerably broader than Robert E. Park’s formulation. Instead of confining her study solely to the question of assimilation, she discussed the history of U.S.–China relations; pointed out that American Chinatowns were part of a worldwide Chinese diaspora; used a Weberian ideal-type approach to analyze Chinese culture; explored community organizations and immigrant families, all of which showed the impacts of Chinese exclusion; and evaluated the economic lives of Chinese Americans,

their religious practices, and what she called “social disorganization” and “personal disorganization.” Social disorganization referred to the “slot racket” (the “paper son” route to entering the United States), the dilemmas faced by students and intellectuals from China who could not return there after a Communist government came to power in 1949, overcrowded and dilapidated housing, and health problems. Personal disorganization included the deprivations experienced by old men without descendants in America to care for them, mental health problems, gangs and juvenile delinquency, and the plight of neglected children. In the last section of the book, Lee looked at the images that Chinese and Americans had of one another and the changing nature of majority–minority relations.³⁸ Whether or not scholars today agree with her take on these issues (some have denigrated her work because of her support for assimilation), it cannot be denied that she offered the broadest and most thorough analysis of Chinese communities in America up to that point. In fact, few books published in later years have matched the scope of hers.

The University of Washington Press published the next book by a writer of Chinese ancestry in 1962. The author, S. W. Kung, was a scholar and a former official in China, who specialized in international trade and economics. Whereas Rose Hum Lee had devoted one chapter to the Chinese diaspora, Kung throughout his book compared the experiences of the Chinese in the United States with those of Chinese in Canada, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, dissecting the reasons for the similarities and differences he noted and exploring the influence of U.S. exclusionary legislation on restrictive laws enacted in other countries that also singled out the Chinese. In addition, Kung offered detailed discussions of various displaced-persons and refugee acts that had some bearing on the Chinese. Discussion also focused on what kinds of Chinese were deported, who received “relief through private legislation” (i.e., laws passed to benefit particular individuals), illegal entrants, and the second generation. The book ends with a recitation of Chinese American contributions and achievements in an effort to counteract centuries of negative portrayals.³⁹

In 1964, Harvard University Press published the work of Gunther Barth, a student of famed immigration historian Oscar Handlin. Barth’s book, considered authoritative by scholars with no specialized knowledge of Chinese American history, has been widely quoted. He resurrected anti-Chinese stereotypes—“cheap labor,” “sojourner,” and “unassimilable”—and blamed the Chinese refusal to assimilate for white Americans’ antagonism toward and discrimination against them. “The sojourners,” he wrote, “were obstacles in the road to the realization of the California dream.” In the eyes of many European Americans, he asserted, “California formed the pinnacle in the structure which reached from ocean to ocean and harbored the best form of human society.” He further claimed that the

credit-ticket system, by which the passage money was advanced to laborers in Chinese ports and repaid out of their earnings in California, became partly a disguised slave trade, managed chiefly by Chinese crimps and compradors who lured artisans, peasants, and laborers into barracoons and sold them to ticket agents. At Chinese ports and at San Francisco they were kept in confinement, watched, and terrorized by agents of Chinese societies who acted in the creditors' interest.⁴⁰

Barth's book has angered many scholars and not only those of Chinese ancestry. Linda Shin, a European American historian of China, for example, noted that Barth's sources are "laden with notions of white racial supremacy."⁴¹

Ping Chiu's 1967 study of Chinese labor in California stands in stark contrast to Barth's sweeping moral judgments. A research monograph rather than a broad survey, Chiu's study relied on the statistical methods used by economic historians to analyze, with care and specificity, Chinese engagements in mining, railroad building, agriculture, and light industries that manufactured woolen products, textiles, clothing, shoes, cigars, soap, candles, watches, brushes, brooms, bricks, glue, and gun powder in California. He incisively discussed how the Civil War affected the state's economy when it disrupted the flow of East Coast-manufactured goods to California, thus allowing nascent industries in the still-young state to thrive. However, after the war ended, when cheaper, mass-produced goods from factories in New England and the mid-Atlantic states again flooded the California market, the industries in the state that survived were either those owned and run by Chinese entrepreneurs employing their countrymen or those owned by whites who hired Chinese labor. Chiu also provided a nuanced analysis of the myriad reasons that European American employers, in the post-Civil War years and during the depression of the 1870s, gave for preferring Chinese over white labor. To understand fully his arguments, however, one must know some economic theory—a topic that is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss.⁴²

Chinatown "Guides" and Exposés

During the same period that the above academic studies were published, there also appeared more widely read popular writings about Chinatowns. Books in this genre clearly reveal the process of Orientalization. Instead of attacking or defending Chinese immigration as the partisan writers had done, the authors of these journalistic accounts accepted the Chinese presence in the United States as a given and took advantage of the public's appetite for exotica to titillate their readers with highly colored descriptions of various aspects of Chinatown life.

The earliest lengthy discussion of Chinatown is found in Benjamin E. Lloyd's 1876 book about San Francisco, in which he devoted ten of the

seventy-four chapters to the Chinese quarters. Lloyd touched upon all the topics that would reappear in later works. He began, in chapter 30, with a description of “the subjects of the Celestial Kingdom” and moved on to portray the Chinese population in San Francisco, the nature of their “town,” their business habits, the sights and sounds of Chinatown at night, how a Chinese newspaper was typeset and produced, the religion of the Chinese, the Chinese Six Companies, and the work that missionaries were doing in Chinatown. He declared, “In San Francisco, it is but a step from the monuments and living evidence of the highest type of American civilization, and of Christianity, to the unhalloved precincts of a heathen race.” According to him, the Chinese could take over the area that became Chinatown because “any building adjacent to one occupied by Chinese is rendered undesirable to white folks.”

Yet, Lloyd’s descriptions are not purely lurid, exoticized, or derogatory. In fact, he offered commonsensical explanations for why certain Chinese practices existed. He noted that the “Chinese are proverbially industrious and enterprising” and that “a Chinaman [will] cease to perform any work he has agreed to do, unless he receives his pay promptly at the appointed time.” This statement contradicted not only the allegations of those who considered Chinese “coolies” to be slaves, but also his own assertion later in the book that the “slavery that exists in California . . . is the system of ‘contract labor’ practiced by both Americans and Chinese.” Slaves receive no pay for their work, whereas contract laborers do earn wages. So one must assume that Lloyd used the words “slave” or “slavery” either as a metaphor or simply out of habit—a reflection of the zeitgeist in the latter half of the nineteenth century. He explained that the Chinese lived frugally because they were supporting “aged relatives at home, to whom they feel it is their most sacred duty to give their earnings. So great is their devotion to them that they deny themselves every luxury, and many times curtail the expenses for the actual necessities [*sic*] of life.” Furthermore, the “Chinese are very punctual in paying taxes, licenses, and all just public demands.” (Note the word “just,” which suggests that the Chinese might refuse to pay those taxes and fees that they considered unjust.)

In Lloyd’s opinion, “gambling seems to be the besetting sin of the Chinese,” whereas young girls who became prostitutes were “driven to this repulsive pursuit by the rigor of extreme poverty.” As for Chinese religion, “because they as a nation have advanced in many things that tend to a high civilization, though almost opposite to our own, they may naturally think that *they are right* [emphasis in original], and we are wrong—that we are the heathens and barbarians.” He thought that missionaries had not made much headway in converting the Chinese to Christianity because when the Chinese “see so many persons who disregard all religious teachings, they very naturally conclude that our religion is only a secondary matter at best.” In addition, instead of lam-

basting the Chinese Six Companies as a “tribunal,” as many writers and orators had done before and after him, he believed that the organization existed because the Chinese “fully understand the benefits of co-operation.”

Despite his reasonable tone in the first nine chapters, Lloyd apparently could not resist ending the section of his book devoted to the Chinese with a graphic portrayal that undercut everything positive he had said earlier. This portrait is a good example of American Orientalism at work:

Rival factions of the Chinese, sometimes come into hostile contact, and a bloody encounter ensues. . . . At such times the savage nature of the ‘Heathen Chinees’ is uppermost, and when wrought up to an ecstasy of wrath by the spirit of revenge, a devilish smile overspreads the face, and there is a sparkling in the eye, like unto the lurid flashes emitted from the fires of hell, that transforms John Chinaman’s celestial countenance into the visage of a demon.⁴³

In short, under the countenance of plodding, hardworking Chinese, there resided demons. Orientalism is both invidious and insidious because it uses non-European groups as foils for inscribing the superiority of European or American civilization and society: Anything non-Western is inferior and uncivilized.

Twenty-two years later, Louis J. Beck claimed that his book also painted an “impartial portraiture” of the Chinatown in New York City. However, like Lloyd, Beck could not help but let slip certain statements that contributed to the Orientalization of the Chinese as enticingly different beings, a people whose beliefs and behavior were totally incongruent with the American way of life. To Beck, it was not Chinese laborers but Chinese women, regardless of whether they were prostitutes or wives, who were “slaves” kept in bondage and seclusion by “their lords,” or, worse, sold to the highest bidders.⁴⁴

In 1899, Mary E. Bamford published a children’s story about a Chinese boy named Ti who lived in a fishing village along the shores of San Francisco Bay. A charming and whimsical tale accompanied by numerous line drawings, she used Ti’s adventures and misadventures as a vehicle to offer her readers glimpses of Chinese life in America. Most significant is the book’s ending that depicts Ti’s conversion to Christianity. Ti exclaims, “Teacher, great many little Chinese boys and girls in all Cal’forn’a! They don’t know ’bout Jesus! Nobody teach them! Oh, teacher, it makes me feel bad! . . . Teacher, someday when I grow big, I go everywhere! I go tell all little Chinese girls and boys ’bout Jesus!” In response, the teacher resolves, “They ought to be reached. They ought to be taught. . . . Dear Lord, send forth more laborers into this, thine harvest!”⁴⁵ The missionary passion to grasp all opportunities to “save” or, as Bamford put it, “harvest” Chinese souls thus cropped up in works of fiction as well.

Thirty years would pass before the next batch of Chinatown guides appeared in print. In his 1930 book, journalist Bruce Grant claimed that the “inside story” of the tong wars had been related to him by Eng Ying Gong, also known as Eddie Gong, a leader of the Hip Sing Tong, who was listed on the title page as a coauthor. The story is told in the first-person singular in Gong’s voice—obviously a narrative device to persuade readers that the story was authentic. The first battle between rival tongs occurred in 1875 over possession of a pretty prostitute; the wars would continue for another fifty years until the fighting tongs declared a truce mediated with the help of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (the so-called Chinese Six Companies).

The book contains spell-binding, racy details about the origins of the major tongs, including the Kwong Dock, Hip Sing, On Leong, Suey Sing, Suey On, Ong Yick, and Bing Kung tongs; the most colorful tong members (dubbed *hatchetmen*) and leaders, some of whom had Anglicized names like Little Pete and Big Queue Wai; the most famous battles; the weapons of choice and the ritualized protocols the fighters followed; and the tongs’ extortion schemes. One little-known aspect of tong history is that tong membership was open not only to Chinese but also to Japanese and Filipino immigrants and European Americans. This ecumenical approach enabled each tong “to recruit a formidable fighting group.” In the last chapter, Eddie Gong ponders the question “Will the tong survive?” His answer is a resounding yes because “all Chinese have a gift for organizing” and “the tong stands forth as the strongest organization to promote the welfare of the Chinese in America”—a view of the tongs that differed from that expounded by European American authors. Two kinds of Orientalizing touches in the book are easily discernible: The book uses dozens and dozens of sing-song Chinese names and weird-sounding terms and gives the chapter numbers both in Chinese characters that run horizontally from right to left and in English.⁴⁶

Of the two books published on the topic in 1936, the author of one remains unknown. The author’s name is given as Leong Gor Yun—a pseudonym meaning *two persons* (as pronounced in the Cantonese dialect). Some scholars believe the author was a man, others a woman; some think the author was Chinese, others non-Chinese. Regardless of who the author really was, the book claimed to turn Chinatown “inside out.” It opens with a chapter entitled “Fu Manchu Exterior,” which describes street scenes of shops bulging with disgusting merchandise: “The herb stores are perhaps the most oriental of all. Their windows are an anatomical nightmare with bears’ galls, deer horns, sea horses, rhinoceros hide and dried creatures of land and sea, all for medicinal use.” Chapter 23, the penultimate chapter, is entitled “Fu Manchu Interior” and delves into gambling, drug use (not just of opium but also of morphine, heroin, and cocaine, primarily by “Tong gunmen”), and various kinds of prostitution. Even though the author doubted “if there are more than 100 Chinese

prostitutes in San Francisco, and still fewer in New York,” he or she nevertheless felt compelled to discuss the brothels staffed by non-Chinese women, including a “particularly popular house in uptown New York . . . run by a white madam for the Oriental trade. . . . She always has over ten girls (so there is no traffic jam), between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, who are white American, negro, Spanish, and Mexican.” The author also takes note of the houses controlled by Chinese pimps employing white women and of white women who worked as “street pullers . . . [who] cruise around day and night . . . [going] to the laundries early in the morning or about noon-time, when the laundrymen are not busy.” Leong Gor Yun observed wryly that “the laundrymen liked ‘delivered goods,’” given their long hours of strenuous labor.

However, the book does contain some useful information not found in other contemporaneous writings. Long before historian Renqiu Yu introduced us to the history of the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance and its challenge to the traditionalistic establishment in New York’s Chinatown,⁴⁷ Leong Gor Yun had described this conflict in considerable detail (chapter 5) in a straightforward manner. The author also discussed a new kind of Chinese entering the country in the 1920s and 1930s—students from China pursuing higher education at American universities. Another topic he or she covered is the immigrants’ involvement in China’s republican revolution—not only the events of 1911 and 1912 that overthrew the Qing dynasty, but also Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s subsequent battle against Yuan Shikai, who had declared himself emperor of a new dynasty in China.⁴⁸

Charles C. Dobie, who first became acquainted with the Chinese when his parents employed Chinese domestic servants, wrote the second guide book published in 1936. Before launching into tales of Chinatown, he sketched the history of the Chinese in California in the first five chapters. In the final ten chapters, he painted vivid portraits of the Chinese Six Companies; the “high-binders” (another popular moniker for the hatchetmen) and the blackmail and assassinations these men perpetrated; prostitutes; “slaves—domestic and otherwise”; his own childhood memories; “the penchant of Chinamen for herding together like rabbits in a warren”; the comic efforts of officials in San Francisco to punish the Chinese; opium dens; street scenes; and Chinese festivals, theater, and religion. In short, even though he criticized other works that “chopped up a mess of exoticisms, stirred vigorously, added hot water and served a concoction as little fundamentally Chinese as a dish of chop-suey,” while admitting that “it is hard to determine which was the more impressive to the fiction monger—the squalidness or the color,” he himself nonetheless covered the same topics as the authors he chastised. He recognized that “it was [Chinatown’s] sinister aspects, its delinquent phases which allured” and that the more terrifying the scene or description was, the more it thrilled its audience. Thus, Dobie fell into the same trap of catering to the public’s yen for

Orientalized portrayals of a section of the city that he thought he had known well since his youth.⁴⁹

A shift in emphasis can be seen in the books published in the first half of the 1940s, when public perceptions of the Chinese—in China as well as in the United States—underwent a fundamental change. Two books by Carl Glick, a native of Iowa, appeared in 1941 and 1943. Glick came to know the Chinese while working as the athletic director of a boy's club in New York's Chinatown. However, his earliest memories of the Chinese dated back to his boyhood when he visited San Francisco's Chinatown before the 1906 earthquake. In his 1941 book about his personal encounters with the Chinese, he confessed, "the very mention of a hatchetman frightened me. And I thought of Chinatown as a place one should never go to unless accompanied by the police. I have since met one or two so-called 'hatchetmen,' and have found them quite charming persons." Hatchetmen charming? Moreover, "they are today . . . neither terrifying or sinister. One I know is something of a poet. . . . He buys his clothes on Fifth Avenue and his ties at Macy's." Apparently, men formerly considered fearsome gangsters had evolved into urbane, well-dressed Chinese gentlemen no different from other New York gentlemen.

Glick pointed out that there were in fact two Chinatowns: "one seen from the outside by the tourists and sightseers, the other unseen, the Chinatown that exists behind close [*sic*] doors and shuttered windows." On the surface, Chinatown "is a place of strange odors, of exotic foods piled high in shop windows, of joss sticks, of cheap souvenirs, of softly murmuring Orientals standing about in groups seemingly doing nothing at all, of waiters from restaurants carrying trays of food on their heads up winding flights of stairways, of fantastic sights and sounds." But in the "real Chinatown . . . you might find an anxious mother bending over the cot of her sick child; you might find a grandfather instructing his children in good manners. You would find, I know, the sane and sensible home life of a hard-working people—the same sort of well-ordered, well-balanced home life that lies behind the close [*sic*] doors of any Middle Western family."⁵⁰ Sane and sensible. Well-ordered and well-balanced. At last, Chinese Americans are seen as normal human beings!

Thus, the model minority image came into being long before the 1960s—the decade conventionally accepted as the birth of the "positive" stereotype. However, the intended impact of the 1940s image differed from the 1960s version because the politics of the two periods were not the same. In the 1940s, praising the Chinese was a way to ensure that they would fervently support the war effort. In the 1960s, the not-so-hidden message was that those minorities who worked hard, did not protest, and played by the rules would in time be fully accepted in American society, unlike African Americans whose militant actions allegedly disrupted societal peace as they demanded equal rights for themselves.

By 1943, when Glick's second book came out, thousands of Chinese Americans had joined the U.S. armed forces, so Glick's story revolved around a Chinese American in his thirties, one Private Kung, who declined deferment, responded to "the invitation of the President" to serve his country (yes, the United States was "his" country), and was inducted into the U.S. Army. As the jacket copy advertised, the book also "answers, in highly entertaining form, a demand for more intimate and accurate information about our Eastern allies in a world rapidly becoming China-minded."⁵¹

A short pictorial account by Elizabeth Colman, published in 1946, underscored Glick's point. "The war greatly changed the situation," she wrote. "Thousands of Chinese-Americans and Chinese residents enlisted in the armed forces. Thousands were absorbed by defense industries. . . . The present phase of re-conversion and the years to come will put to a serious test the sincerity of the will professed by the greater part of this nation to apply democracy at home. . . . Will we stick to our ideals and practice them, or will we let down those on whose help we relied when we desperately needed all able hands?"⁵² Even in the twenty-first century, there is still no unequivocal answer to this question.

Despite this shift to more positive depictions, Orientalism had by no means disappeared. No book illustrates its persistence more clearly than Alexander McLeod's 1948 work. McLeod began in a seemingly benign way by stating that "since the San Francisco fire in 1906 a great change has come over the Chinese in California. In San Francisco the merchant, realizing the fire had removed much of the filth incidental to the Chinese quarter, turned his face against re-establishment of the sinister and crime-breeding conditions of early days, so today the Chinese are a credit to the Pacific coast and to themselves." Yet, his book is peppered with words and phrases that reveal his true perceptions of the Chinese. Taking a random sample, one finds the following: "mystery," "intrigue," "plots," "counterplots," "picturesque," "smuggling," "black mail," "strange," "mysterious," and "horde" on page 17; "arcane," "tribal," and "quaint" on page 18; "human tide" on page 19; "hordes of locusts" on page 23; "milling multitudes of destitute China," "novelty," and "amusing spectacle" on page 25; "grotesque" and "queer" on page 31; and "unperturbable" on page 32.

The topics McLeod covered are also familiar: Chinese gold miners, the coolie trade, what work the Chinese found, Chinese-language newspapers, opium dens, gambling joints, "the great Chinese slave market," the Chinese Six Companies, the tongs and their hatchetmen, Chinese religion, and Chinese theater. In the conclusion, he proclaims, "Old Chinatown is gone! San Francisco's quaint, mysterious, gorgeous, hideous old Chinatown has become a thing of history and tradition." Why, then, resurrect the stereotypes of yore? Because, he says, "when the lights are dimmed at midnight, and the stars shine down brightly on Chinatown, it is then that the ghosts walk, ghosts of a spine-tingling mystic past of Old Chinatown."⁵³ One might ask what ghosts is he

talking about? The ghosts of intrepid Chinese pioneers who struggled to earn a living while facing immense hostility, or the piquant phantasmagoric images created by Orientalist writers exploiting Chinese “difference” to sell tabloids masquerading as serious books?

Richard Dillon, director of San Francisco’s Sutro Library, rehashed the same tired themes in his 1962 book about hatchetmen, which the publisher announced was based on in-depth research.⁵⁴ What difference does research make when the sources used are impregnated with age-old bizarre assumptions that impugn the dignity of the subjects the author was writing about? The longevity of Orientalism is further apparent in journalist Gwen Kinkead’s 1992 work, in which she bragged about her ability to penetrate the walls of Chinatown, “a closed society.” She focused on how Chinese in New York City earn their living and on gambling, drug trafficking, people smuggling, polygamy, Chinese cuisine, and the failure of post-1960s immigrants to assimilate. To Asian Americanists, perhaps the only chapter in this book that is of some value is an eleven-page discussion of the activities, in the United States, of several exiled leaders of the student protestors who were killed or incarcerated during the revolt at Tiananmen in Beijing, China, in June 1989.⁵⁵

So pervasive has been the urge to mark the Chinese as a feared alien “Other” that Chinese American authors themselves have not hesitated to exploit that image to promote tourism and to profit by the American public’s fascination with spine-tingling exotica. In his 1948 Chinatown guide book, Garding Lui took his readers on a walking tour of the new Chinatown in Los Angeles, pointing out all the attractions that might interest visitors and claiming that “China City has shaken Hollywood” as “one out of every fourteen Chinese men and women in Los Angeles have worked in moving picture studios.”⁵⁶ There are no hard statistics with which to evaluate the veracity of this claim, but if it is true, cinema must have by then become the most popular medium for circulating images that satisfy the desires of Europeans and Americans for the exotic. Why shouldn’t shrewd Chinese American entrepreneurs also cash in on the marketability of such depictions?

In 1962, Calvin Lee, a restaurateur, lawyer, administrator at Columbia University, and author of Chinese cookbooks, warned his readers not to “expect me to create for you the mysterious and sinister atmosphere of Chinatown which Hollywood has portrayed, because it never existed.”⁵⁷ Still, by calling Chinese ethnic communities “a country within a country” and titling his book *Chinatown, U.S.A.*—thereby robbing those communities of the specificities of time and place—he unwittingly helped propagate the incongruity, rather than the normalcy, of Chinese Americans. Finally, C. Y. Lee, author of *Flower Drum Song*, which Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein turned into a popular musical, saw fit to retell yet again in 1974 the story of the tong wars.⁵⁸

This, then, was the existing literature confronting Chinese American and European American community-based as well as university-based historians in the late 1960s when they set out to rewrite Chinese American history. The fruits of their labor, in the form of books, articles, museum displays, films, and other expressive arts, will long endure in products that preserve some of the more significant legacies of the social movements of that era.

The Movement as a Turning Point

What has been called the Asian American Movement did not begin with a particular event or set of events that retrospectively became iconic. Rather, the term refers to a series of separate efforts undertaken by various groups of Asian Americans of diverse ideological tendencies and social affiliations in different parts of the country. What linked them was their desire to throw off the yoke of the Orientalist past and the adverse consequences it had imposed on their ancestors and themselves. In short, they were impelled not only by the desire to demolish materialist forms of gross injustice but also by the politics of representation. They aimed to raze the offensive images as they refashioned identities based on the “true” history of Asians in America. (“True” was a popular word in the days before postmodernism taught us that there is no single “truth.”) In the most detailed study of the movement to date, William Wei concluded that it was “essentially a middle-class reform movement for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment.”⁵⁹ Wei’s pronouncement has angered many old-time activists who claimed that the movement was not what Wei has depicted. Steve Louie, for example, characterized the movement as a “mass movement” that “stood for struggle to achieve self-determination in all aspects of our lives, to end all forms of oppression, and to end imperialist aggression. It was a radical movement that had many currents—including revolutionary ones—and not everyone in the movement agreed on means and ends.”⁶⁰

I characterize the movement as a multiclass, multiethnic, and multisited conglomeration that combined efforts to improve the lives of workers and poor people, to raise the political consciousness of all its participants, to transform detrimental stereotypes, and to assault the institutions entrenched in American society that had oppressed and continue to exploit various groups of people on the basis of race, ethnic origins, class, sex, sexual orientation, and handicap. Because the military conflicts in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were the number one topic of public concern in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some Asian American activists, including me, also protested American involvement in these proxy wars that occurred during the cold war. The activists supported, at least rhetorically, national liberation movements in Third World countries or regions in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific that

had been colonized by European powers and the United States. In short, like other social movements of that period, the Asian American Movement encompassed both materialist and symbolic concerns.

For Chinese Americans, rewriting the history of their people in the United States was, and is, an integral part of the struggles to disprove or correct the distorted, sensationalist, and racist representations that have been imposed on them. However, these anti-Chinese images are so deeply ingrained in the American popular as well as scholarly imaginations that they continue to lie dormant, lurking just beneath the surface, and can instantaneously reappear when forces in the larger society create conditions conducive to their resurrection. They remain, despite the efforts of community-based and university-based historians to eradicate them. For that reason, even though many younger scholars who do research in Chinese American Studies today have had no direct experience in the movement, they are nonetheless heirs to this tradition of struggle and self-empowerment.

Community-Based Historians

Chinese American community activists, as well as European American local history buffs, began to excavate and recover fragments of Chinese American history in the 1960s. Some of the larger Chinese ethnic communities in the United States established organizations to preserve those aspects of their heritage they deemed worthy of retention, to publicize their role in building the United States, to introduce more accurate or balanced versions of their history to the general public, and to claim their rightful place in American society. One of the oldest such organizations is the Chinese Historical Society of America, founded in 1963 in San Francisco by journalist Thomas W. Chinn, H. K. Wong, a businessman, restaurateur, and public servant, and other like-minded individuals. The society publishes a newsletter and a journal, *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*; sets up traveling exhibits of photographs and texts; hosts seminars; organizes conferences; and cosponsors a program to help young Chinese Americans do genealogical research and make contact with family members in the historic emigrant districts in Guangdong Province.⁶¹

Although there are many community historians, three stand out: Him Mark Lai, an engineer; Philip P. Choy, an architect; and Chinn, founder of several notable Chinese American periodicals in addition to the Chinese Historical Society of America. Following the publication of their collaborative works in 1969 and 1971, each has gone on to publish other books.⁶² Him Mark Lai, in particular, has produced a seemingly endless stream of essays and books, presenting in-depth research based on Chinese-language sources that he searched for, found, gathered, archived, read, mulled over, and interpreted.⁶³ At age eighty-two, he remains marvelously productive. Nothing exemplifies the