

Introduction

Soon after my parents married in 1943 in Philadelphia's Chinatown, they left for Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, where my father, Henry Wong, was stationed as a second lieutenant in the army air force, one of the more than twelve thousand Chinese Americans who served in the U.S. armed forces during the Second World War. He soon received his orders for overseas duty and spent the rest of the war in the Third Air Cargo Resupply Squadron under the umbrella of the Fourteenth Air Force, flying in a C-46 airdropping supplies to American and Chinese troops in southwest China. When he departed for China, my mother, Mary (née Lee), returned to Philadelphia and lived with her in-laws. My parents' first child was born during this period, and my father would not meet his firstborn son for seventeen months.

Before the war, my parents were among a small number of American-born Chinese in their community. My paternal grandparents were unusual for their time. Wong Wah Ding, a native of China, was married to Emma, an immigrant from Czechoslovakia. They lived in Philadelphia Chinatown, and my grandfather, a merchant and herbalist, was considered its unofficial

mayor for much of the 1940s and 1950s. They raised their only child in an English-speaking household as it was the common language between them. My mother, in contrast, spent her early years in Salem, New Jersey, living atop the family laundry with her parents and six siblings, speaking mostly Chinese until she entered school. After her father, Kew Lee, passed away, her mother, Anne Lee, moved the family to Philadelphia and raised the children in Chinatown as a single mother. It was there that my parents met as teenagers and later married.

My grandparents belonged to the Chinese immigrant generation that suffered the pain and difficulties of exclusion policies. Families had been separated, relegating many men to lives akin to bachelorhood as immigration laws prohibited their wives from joining them. Thousands of “paper sons” had entered the country under assumed identities to find work and a means of survival. Despite the barriers and hardships, these immigrants gradually gave birth to a generation of Chinese American children that came of age as the United States was entering the Second World War.

In the years leading up to U.S. involvement in the war, many first- and second-generation Chinese Americans struggled to find acceptance in the wider society. Those with college degrees had difficulty finding jobs outside the Chinatown economy, and some even looked to China for possible employment. However, most American-born Chinese realized that their futures would unfold in the United States. While many received some kind of instruction in the Chinese language and spoke Chinese to their parents and peers, this generation was primarily English-speaking and American in outlook, having been educated in American schools. These Chinese Americans, while acknowledging their heritage and their familial ties to China, sought to carve out a legitimate position in American society and to be accepted as equals of all other Americans.

For Asian Americans, the generational conflicts common to many immigrant groups were exacerbated by U.S. immigration and citizenship policies. Immigrants from Asia were ineligible for citizenship by law. As their American-born children sought acceptance in the broader society, the worldviews of parents and children often diverged. Many parents were unsure whether their futures would lie in America or in Asia, and the children, though citizens, were often unable to safeguard their own rights in the land of their birth. These conflicts were most obvious for Japanese Americans during the war in which Japan was an enemy. They were forced into concentration camps despite the fact that two-thirds of them were American citizens by birth. Because of their internment and the attending issues concerning citizenship, racism, and the magnitude of the national crisis, the wartime experience of Japanese Americans has dominated the study of the impact of the war on Asian American communities. Most research on the war has focused on the hardships of internment and/or the military heroics of the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team and 100th Battalion. This almost exclusive focus on one group has narrowed the subsequent memory of the war to a bipolar discourse of injustice and achievement, ignoring the complex experiences of other groups of Asian Americans during this period of American social transformation.¹

Until recently, the Chinese Americans born in the 1910s and 1920s have not received the same sustained scholarly interest as earlier and later cohorts.² Many researchers have focused on uncovering the racist past of Asian American history and championing resistance to oppression. The generation born in the 1920s, many of whom by the late 1960s were well established in the American middle class, have been seen by some scholars as assimilationists and therefore as less relevant or less heroic than earlier railroad workers or later-born internees. It is as though

scholars of Chinese America had created their own version of the famous observation by Marcus Lee Hansen: “What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.” In the case of Chinese American studies, the grandchildren have tended to valorize their grandfathers and grandmothers while dismissing their fathers and mothers. But, as the historian David Yoo has argued, this tendency “has meant that many scholars have missed the opportunity to explore how identity formation developed in the lives of second-generation immigrants.”³ This book is an attempt to explore just that: the identity formation of Chinese Americans, particularly the second generation, as it developed and changed in the unique circumstances of the Second World War.

A perusal of books on the war and the years immediately after yields few references to Chinese American military personnel, defense industry workers, relief efforts, or even the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts. And yet Chinese Americans contributed to all aspects of the war effort and suffered and benefited as much as anyone from the deprivations and changes wrought by the war. One slogan on a recruiting poster for the Women’s Army Corps could easily apply to Chinese Americans as well: “I’M IN THIS WAR TOO!”

Although I speak Mandarin Chinese (not of great use when trying to interview Cantonese speakers) and can read Chinese, I decided to conduct the interviews for this book in English and to consult mostly English-language sources. The second generation was most comfortable speaking English and received most of its information from the English-language press, not from Chinese-language newspapers. Furthermore, this cohort produced a large body of written sources. They were consciously reflective on the social changes they were experiencing. Now, fifty years later, they are eager to share their thoughts on their

lives as second-generation Chinese Americans. In writing about these men and women I have attempted to place their voices at center stage. The story they tell is one of struggle and success: of the ways they supported the U.S. war effort while also aiding China; of the different racial cultures of Hawai'i and the mainland United States; of the soldiers and officers who served in the U.S. military, including the all-Chinese American 14th Air Service Group and 987th Signal Company; of racial segregation and ethnic pride; of American nationalism and Chinese American patriotism.