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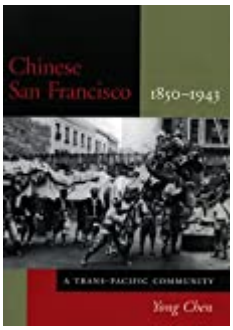

Yong Chen. *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943: A Trans-Pacific Community.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. xvi + + 392 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3605-3.

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In *Chinese San Francisco*, Yong Chen investigates life within the largest and most significant Chinese American community before the Second World War. His study of the quotidian rests upon creative readings of newspaper items, personal diaries, and other sources generated by the residents themselves. In addition to reconstructing Chinatown from the perspective of the immigrants, Chen explores the trans-pacific links they established with their ancestral homeland and the shaping of a Chinese immigrant mentality. Whenever possible, he also notes how the discourse of nineteenth-century Chinese immigration contributed to misinterpretations of Chinese immigrant life.

The book begins with a look at the factors encouraging migration in the first place. Emphasizing the migrants' status and agency, Chen refutes a conventional depiction of immigration as a panic-stricken flight from hunger and poverty. Although they were disparaged in anti-Chinese propaganda as members of the lowest social class, the immigrants arriving in America were seldom from the poorest segment of Chinese society. The Pearl River Delta, the region sending the overwhelming majority of the immigrants, actually had a thriving market economy characterized by diversified commodities production and extensive maritime trade. This economic vitality and prosperity, according to Chen, "gave rise to individuals willing to venture away from home to pursue money-making opportunities" (12). Moreover, contact with American traders and missionaries in the treaty port of Canton contributed to Chinese knowledge concerning the United States and helped draw California within the constellation of potential sites for overseas migration. They may have possessed only a limited understanding of their future in America, but Chinese immigrants still chose to make trans-Pacific journeys to enhance their lives.

San Francisco's Chinatown played a prominent role in the lives of these immigrants. It was a gateway for their travels between China and America, and it was where many of them lived and worked. The community's large immigrant population supported an ethnic economy filled with considerable entrepreneurial and employment opportunities. Business directories from the late nineteenth century listed restaurants, drugstores, and over one hundred and thirty grocery stores. While some Chinese-owned businesses catered to immigrant consumers, other firms employed immigrant labor to manufacture garments, shoes, and cigars for the general market. An 1878 directory listed thirty-nine cigar factories and forty-six footwear factories operating in the enclave.

In addition to economic opportunities, Chinatown

provided solace to Chinese immigrants. Its district and family associations helped immigrants adjust to their new surroundings and enabled the interaction of those emigrating from the same region. As a result, immigrants socialized with one another, often sharing their knowledge of America and keeping each other updated on news about China. The growing ethnic community also allowed immigrants to retain aspects of their distinctive culture. Immigrants ate Chinese food, read Chinese newspapers, visited Chinese temples, watched Chinese operas, and observed Chinese holidays. They purchased Chinese goods such as rice, tofu, and medicine from their neighborhood stores. Offering familiar sights, sounds, and tastes, Chinatown reconnected immigrants with their Chinese heritage and affirmed their Chinese identity.

Throughout his portrayal of life in Chinatown, Chen asserts that nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants kept many of their traditional attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Even immigrants who learned the English language and adopted American ways did not sever their strong bonds with Chinese culture. Chen refuses, however, to interpret the immigrants' affiliation with their ancestral homeland as evidence of a sojourner mentality. He criticizes the bipolar paradigm of sojourners and settlers, itself an outgrowth of an outmoded Anglo-conformist definition of assimilation, for failing to recognize that immigrants can simultaneously plant roots in America and remain closely tied to China. Chinese immigrants, Chen writes, "did not have to make a choice between being settlers and sojourners or between China and America" (57). He ultimately concludes that the Chinese immigrants' world transcended national boundaries.

Chen describes how China continued to have a profound influence on the immigrants' lives in America. To give an example, familial relationships represented an important connection to the ancestral homeland. Immigrants knew their travels abroad were not simply realizations of individual aspirations but also an economic strategy to support the families they left behind. The wealth they sent home was substantial: during one span of roughly five years, they transferred remittances amounting to an estimated fifty million Chinese dollars. Despite the great distance separating China and America, immigrants preserved ties and fulfilled obligations. They relied on mail services and trusted friends to deliver remittances and messages.

They also made reverse migrations, many of which were temporary visits, to take wives, produce descendants, or perform other important duties. Some immigrants moved family members across the Pacific or formed additional family branches in America. Nineteenth-century census figures for Chinatown reveal an increasing number of foreign-born and native-born children. The presence of these children, Chen claims, suggests that immigrants began to view San Francisco as a second home shortly after they arrived. In the end, the immigrants built and maintained familial relationships on both sides of the ocean.[1]

Political life in Chinatown was similarly trans-Pacific. Before the 1920s, Chinatown's political leaders were all scholars who passed Chinese civil service examinations and subsequently migrated to take their posts in America. This system of appointments bolstered China's authority over the community, ensured the continuity of Chinese political traditions, and led immigrants to look to China for political remedies. At the same time that China played a role in the politics of its immigrant communities, Chinese immigrants demonstrated concern for Chinese national politics.

When they began to believe a stronger Chinese nation could better protect their interests in America, the immigrants became more deeply involved in overseas politics. They gave financial support to reform and revolutionary groups advocating different programs for political change. The money contributed to these rival factions and to the Chinese economy as a whole, elevated the immigrants political clout, and made the plight of immigrants a salient political issue in China. The economic importance of the "Gold Mountainers" was so widely recognized that fellow Chinese in China helped organize a 1905 protest against America's anti-Chinese policies and provided relief funds to Chinese San Franciscans after the earthquake and fire devastated Chinatown in 1906.

The connections between China and its immigrant communities grew closer and increasingly reciprocal in the early decades of the twentieth century. One added dimension in the trans-Pacific relationship was the emerging spirit of Chinese nationalism. Excited by changes occurring abroad, Chinese immigrants decided to participate in the so-called "awakening of China." They helped finance China's economic development with investments in manufacturing industries and railroads. In 1911, they enthusiastically embraced the Republican revolution and raised money for the new government. At home in America, they formed schools to teach their children Chinese language and culture. These institutions reinforced a national identity which celebrated Chinese

civilization while stressing the need to incorporate Western ideas and practices. Some Chinese in America began adopting the ways of the dominant culture and discarding those traditional customs they considered "obstacles to evolution" (180). Chen cautions against interpreting the period's cultural changes, e.g. voluntary queue cutting and the anti-opium campaign, as either signs of assimilation or rejections of China. Given the nationalist sentiment, these social reform measures were strategies for self improvement and expressions of national pride in a modernizing Chinese republic.

Chen concludes his presentation by describing how the trans-Pacific relationship with China permitted Chinese Americans to improve their status in the 1930s and 1940s. As several scholars have pointed out, Chinese Americans actively supported China's war against Japan. They disseminated propaganda and collected money and supplies for their homeland. According to Chen, "Rice Bowl" parties and other fund raising efforts did more than provide donations and generate sympathy for China. The events brought white Americans into the Chinese enclave and introduced Chinese culture to these visitors. In doing so, they subverted the negative images associated with Chinatown and stimulated tourism in the ethnic economy. Coupled with the media focus on China's rising international stature, the emphasis on favorable representations of Chinese Americans contributed to a better race relations environment. Furthermore, Chinese Americans took advantage of wartime employment opportunities and built upon their reputations as hardworking, patriotic Americans. With attitudes concerning the Chinese changing, a movement to repeal the racist Chinese exclusion laws gained momentum, especially after the government publicized the Second World War as a global campaign against intolerance. To stave off charges of hypocrisy and to advance its alliance with China, America eventually modified its restrictions on Chinese immigration.[2]

Chinese San Francisco is a valuable addition to the burgeoning field of Asian American history. Drawing from Chinese language sources and using a transnational approach, Chen broadens the understanding of immigrant experiences and conveys an insider's view of the Chinese immigrant world. Recovering the immigrant's voices and perspectives is especially important because much of what is known about Chinese immigrant communities is based on the observations of white Americans. In addition, white Americans left historical records that often reflected the discursive strategies of the anti-Chinese movement. Chen points out, for example, how contemporary accounts inflated the number of Chinese prostitutes to further depict Chinese immigration as a moral and physical danger. Even nineteenth-century census takers assumed that households where only females resided were brothels.[3]

The most refreshing part of the study is the portrayal of everyday life in Chinatown. Chen pieces together evidence from restaurant menus, newspaper advertisements, school textbooks, and other sources. He makes extensive use of the diaries kept by Ah Quin, an immigrant who lived in San Francisco from December 1878 through October 1880 before moving to San Diego. Chen admits that the diarist's Christianity and English language abilities made him an atypical Chinese immigrant and that his brief stay in San Francisco forced Chen to extrapolate from later experiences in San Diego. Nevertheless, the diaries provide a rare glimpse at one immigrants daily activities and concerns. Early diary entries revealed Ah Quin's strong feelings of obligation toward his family and friends in China. Other entries chronicled mundane aspects of Ah Quin's life, including the time he spent eating meals, playing chess, visiting brothels, and attending shows.

While it effectively illuminates aspects of Chinese immigrant life, Chens reconstruction of community and mentality contains a few minor shortcomings. For instance, Chen mentions episodes of labor organization within Chinese immigrant communities but does not investigate thoroughly the importance of class and ideology in Chinatown. Other scholars have used a transnational framework to discuss the political orientations of Chinese newspapers as well as to describe the merchant domination of enclave politics and the establishment of Kuomintang hegemony. Apart from obscuring class and ideological differences, Chen does not show how Chinese immigrants related to the rest of San Francisco. Shifting between China and Chinatown, Chen's approach exposes transnational links and ethnic subculture but says very little about San Francisco and the role Chinese Americans played in the city's development.[4]

Chen also pays less attention to race relations, presumably because the numerous studies addressing the anti-Chinese movement and white perceptions of Chinese immigrants make including this discussion unnecessary. Further exploration of interactions among Chinese immigrants and other non-white minorities, however, would enhance significantly our understanding of local race relations. Oral history accounts and contemporary writings indicate some cross-cultural encoun-

ters. To his credit, Chen cites ethnic newspaper articles containing negative statements about African Americans and hostile attitudes toward the Japanese. He notes one intriguing case of Chinese employers trying to replace striking Chinese laundry workers with African Americans. Though evidence of substantive relations is fragmentary at best, Chen could have mapped out the city's racial geography, examined patterns of interaction, and suggested why San Francisco's ethnic worlds barely touched. Quintard Taylor's study of the African American community in Seattle provides one model for representing race relations in a multi-ethnic city.[5]

The subordination of the aforementioned themes does not diminish the value of Chen's scholarly contribution. In *Chinese San Francisco*, Chen synthesizes creative readings of Chinese language sources with the existing literature on Chinese American communities. The result is an original description of Chinatown that captures the voices and perspectives of Chinese immigrants. Together with recent examinations of the American-born generations, Chen's study of the world and mentality of Chinese immigrants rounds out our understanding of Chinese American life before the Second World War.

Notes

[1]. An analysis of Chinese immigrant families can be found in Adam McKeown, "Transnational Chinese Families and Chinese Exclusion, 1875-1943," *Journal of American Ethnic History* (Winter, 1999).

[2]. Two noteworthy studies of Chinese American communities during the 1930s and 1940s are Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley, 1995) and K. Scott Wong, "War Comes to Chinatown: Social Transformation and the Chinese in California" in Roger Lotchin (ed.), *The Way We Really Were: The Golden State in the Second Great War* (Urbana, 2000).

[3]. Although he provides little evidence to support his conjecture, Chen suggests that some of these all-female households could have been "girls houses," an unorthodox tradition of independent young women living together as "sworn sisters" (83).

[4]. Studies showing internal divisions within Chinese American communities include Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia, 1992) and Him Mark Lai, "The Kuomintang in Chinese American Communities before World War II" in Sucheng Chan (ed.), *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943* (Philadelphia, 1991).

[5]. Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era (Seattle, 1994). Victor Nee and Brett de Bary Nee,* Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown *(New York, 1973) and Judy Yung,* Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco_ (Berkeley,1999) share a few episodes of cross-cultural interaction.

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