Americans First

Chinese Americans and the Second World War

K. SCOTT WONG

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Contents

	Introduction	1
1	Chinese America before the War	6
2	Chinatown Goes to War	45
3	The "Good Asian" in the "Good War"	72
4	Hawai'i's Local Warriors	125
5	The Fourteenth Air Service Group	162
6	Into the Mainstream	193
	Appendix: Employment Tables	213
	Notes	217
	Acknowledgments	243
	Index	247

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

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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.

I

Chinese America before the War

When the United States entered the Second World War in late 1941, Chinese immigrants had been present in the country for nearly a hundred years. However, because of restrictive immigration legislation, anti-Chinese sentiment, residential and occupational segregation, and language and cultural barriers, Chinese Americans remained marginalized in U.S. society. Long considered "perpetually foreign" and inassimilable, many Chinese Americans, in the mid-twentieth century, lived in segregated urban communities, often isolated from mainstream American life.

Although there is evidence that the first Chinese to arrive in the United States landed on the East Coast as a result of Sino-American trade in the eighteenth century, Chinese began entering the country in appreciable numbers soon after gold was discovered in California in 1848. The immigrants were drawn to America because of declining fortunes in China caused by internal disorder, overpopulation, poverty, and Western imperialism, along with the prospect of riches in California's Mother Lode or better wages in America's agricultural sector, small businesses, light manufacturing, or railroad construction. Not long after

their arrival in California, however, the Chinese became targets for white Americans' racial antagonisms and economic insecurities. They found themselves restricted by law from intermarrying with whites, forbidden to engage in certain occupations or live in certain areas, denied the opportunity to become citizens and the right to testify for or against whites in courts of law, and subject to fines and fees not levied against other immigrants or racial groups. They were also victims of frequent and large-scale physical violence and intimidation. As a result, they tended to live in close proximity to one another as much for mutual protection as for cultural familiarity.[1]

Chinese American urban communities, better known as Chinatowns, had long been under siege, and San Francisco Chinatown, historically the major settlement of Chinese in the United States, was a key site of the anti-Chinese movement. In 1876 San Francisco hosted federal hearings on Chinese immigration. By that time there was a history of anti-Chinese activity in the city, especially in the form of organizations such as the Workingmen's Party led by Denis Kearney. Kearney's shout at the end of his sandlot speeches—"The Chinese Must Go!"—became the slogan of the anti-Chinese movement. Many viewed Chinatown as an immoral, vice-infested district and the Chinese as mysterious people who could never become "true Americans." One witness at the federal hearings on immigration had this to say about the Chinese community in San Francisco: "An indigestible mass in the community, distinct in language, pagan in religion, inferior in mental and moral qualities, and all peculiarities, is an undesirable element in a republic, but becomes especially so if political power is placed in its hands."[2] The term "Chinatown" was often used in a demeaning manner to elicit images of filth, mystery, crime, disease, and moral depravity. These images became almost generic descriptions for any Chi-

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nese immigrant or Chinese American community, giving the impression that all "Chinatowns" were alike. Chinese immigrants often referred to their communities as *tang-ren-jie* (streets of the men of Tang) and more recently as *Hua-bi* (Chinese district), but "Chinatown" became the term most commonly used by Chinese Americans as well as the general public.

The first Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years and declared that Chinese immigrants were ineligible for citizenship. This was the first U.S. immigration law that specifically barred a group of people on the basis of race and class. Those Chinese allowed to enter the United States were of the so-called exempt classes, which included merchants, teachers, students, diplomats, and tourists. Over the next twenty-two years, the original exclusion legislation was repeatedly extended and strengthened. Measures passed in 1888, 1892, 1894, 1902, and 1904 expanded the definition of laborers and narrowed the definition of merchants. These acts dramatically reduced the number of Chinese entering the country.[3]

The exclusionary laws created a strong motivation for illegal immigration, and one feature of U.S. law facilitated it. American-born children of immigrants were U.S. citizens, and children born to a U.S. citizen, whether born in America or not, were also citizens. Thus if Chinese Americans who were citizens could prove that they had children in China, the children would be able to join the parents in America. This led to the development of what came to be called "paper sons": the practice of claiming fictional offspring. After the 1906 earthquake, which destroyed the immigration records in San Francisco, this ploy became especially common. The "parents" would have someone draw up false papers documenting the lives and identities of these chil-

dren, and the papers would be sold to people in China who could pass for the children. The purchaser would memorize his "paper life" and then attempt to enter the United States posing as the child of a citizen.

Many Americans believed that most Chinese who arrived in the country were entering illegally as such paper sons. San Francisco continued to be the major port of disembarkation for immigrants from China, and the Angel Island Immigration Station, situated in San Francisco Bay and in operation from 1910 to 1940, was the first American site where many Chinese encountered extreme hostility. Thousands were detained at Angel Island, sometimes for over a year, before they were allowed to immigrate. The validity of each would-be immigrant's story was determined by a series of tedious interviews involving verification by witnesses. These interviews were the reason for the long detentions on Angel Island. In spite of these rigors, the majority of those seeking entry into the United States were eventually admitted: in some years the rate was as high as 97 percent. Many who were admitted, after their terrifying experience on Angel Island, immediately sought refuge in San Francisco Chinatown or another U.S. Chinatown.[4]

Negative imagery, language and cultural differences, the fear of illegal immigration, and hostile racism kept many prewar Chinese Americans confined to Chinatown, unable to find jobs or homes elsewhere, and therefore distant from the broader American experience. For this reason, in the 1930s and early 1940s, the residents of Chinatown, especially merchants and members of the political elite, worked hard to transform Chinatown from its old image of a mysterious ethnic enclave into a tourist-friendly attraction with an economy based on restaurants and curio shops.[5]

Social Boundaries

San Francisco Chinatown was the cultural heartland of Chinese America. It was the national headquarters of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (also known as the CCBA or the Chinese Six Companies), an organization that oversaw relations between Chinese fraternal associations and often fought for civil rights causes on behalf of the Chinese in America. The community supported a number of daily and weekly publications, in both Chinese and English, and was generally regarded as the premier Chinese American community in the nation, followed by that in New York.[6] Despite the rigors of the Chinese exclusion acts and the long-term detentions on Angel Island, a steady stream of Chinese immigrants continued to bring new life into San Francisco. By the Second World War, a distinctively Chinese American culture had developed in San Francisco, a culture that was shaped by the residents' relationship to China and its role in the politics of Asia, their often hostile relationship with white America, and the coming of age of a second generation of American-born Chinese who were struggling to define their place in society.

As a result of various exclusion laws and cultural deterrents, far fewer Chinese women than men immigrated. Chinese women, if single, did not venture overseas alone, and if married, were expected to stay in China and care for their in-laws. Furthermore, since many male emigrants assumed they would return to the home village with the financial fruits of their labors, their wives endured long separations in anticipation of their return. With the passage of anti-miscegenation laws in California and other western states that specifically prohibited intermarriage between Chinese and whites, many men could not find

mates, and the development of Chinese American families was severely stunted.

It was not until the mid-1930s that Chinese America finally achieved a sizable adult second generation.[7] These men and women, American-born and thus U.S. citizens, often found themselves caught between their loyalty to and identification with Chinese culture and tradition and their desire to be fully accepted in American society. Because of the difficulty in finding jobs outside Chinatown, many Chinese Americans came to believe that their futures would be more secure in China than in America. It was not uncommon for families to send their children, especially sons, to China for part of their education so that they could perfect their use of the Chinese language, learn Chinese culture, cultivate professional contacts, and perhaps meet a future spouse. This was true not only in larger Chinese American communities such as San Francisco but across the country, including Hawai'i. For example, William Seam Wong and Joseph Yuu of Boston Chinatown went to China to receive a Chinese education. Wong, born in 1920, traveled to China with his mother in 1931 and stayed until the Japanese tightened their hold on that country in 1937. Yuu went to China with his family in 1927 and returned to the United States in 1935. Wong and Yuu, who had been born in the United States and were thus American citizens, had no trouble leaving and reentering the country.[8]

But for many of the second generation, especially those old enough to be worried about careers, the choice between remaining in America and trying their luck in China was fraught with conflict and ambivalence. The tension between the desire to claim a place in America and the feeling that one could have a more promising future in China found expression in a now-fa-

mous essay contest of 1936 sponsored by the Ging Hawk Club of New York. The essay topic was "Does My Future Lie in China or America?" The first- and second-place essays appeared in the *Chinese Digest,* a Chinese American periodical published in San Francisco under the editorship of Thomas Chinn. The winner, Robert Dunn from Somerville, Massachusetts, a student at Harvard University, placed his future in America, maintaining that one could serve China "by building up a good impression of the Chinese among Americans, by spreading good-will and clearing up misunderstandings, by interesting the Americans in the Chinese thru personal contacts and otherwise, and, if necessary, by contributing generously to the financing of worthy enterprises in China." He stated that he preferred American social values, asserting that his Chinese relatives "pour contempt upon religion, especially upon Christianity, and fail to see the preciousness and value of the individual life. This culture and attitude is contrary to mine, and I fear that I shall be unhappy in the process of yielding to it." He concluded that "[I] owe America as much allegiance as I do China; that it is possible to serve China while living in America; that remunerative employment, though scarce, is not impossible to obtain in either China or America; and [that] I would avoid the unhappiness and social estrangement due to conflicting cultures by staying in America."[9]

The second-place winner took the opposite position. Kaye Hong, a resident of San Francisco, focused much of his essay on the restrictions placed on Chinese Americans by American racism. He lamented: "I have learned to acknowledge that the better jobs are not available to me and that the advancement of my career is consequently limited in this fair land." Hong rejected the rhetoric on which many Chinese in America relied, which stressed the past accomplishments of Chinese civilization: "The ridicule heaped upon the Chinese race has long fermented

in my soul. I have concluded that we, the younger generation, have nothing to be proud of except the time-worn accomplishments of our ancient ancestors, that we have been living in the shadow of these glories, hoping that these arts and literature of the past will justify our present. Sad but true, they do not. To live under such illusions is to lead the life of a parasite."[10] Returning to China, Hong proposed, would allow him to serve China by aiding in its modernization, for only a modern China would garner the respect of the world. This sentiment had been prevalent among Chinese since they began immigrating to the United States. Many believed that a stronger Chinese government would be able to improve the position and treatment of Chinese in America. Unfortunately, this was not necessarily the case.

Dunn's essay drew a heated response from some readers of the *Chinese Digest*. Members of the Chinese Students' Club at Stanford University replied with a scathing letter that informed Dunn: "Your fallacies in reasoning, your ignorance of China's needs, your misconceptions of Chinese culture and civilization, your biased viewpoint, all reveal how poorly qualified you were to correctly evaluate the factors involved in this great problem that confronts the second-generation Chinese in America." They called Dunn's position "pathetic and misleading." Pointing out that their group consisted of both Chinese-born and American-born students, they chided Dunn for his characterization of China as backward and for seeing "our problem through the eyes of an unsympathetic American who has never lived in China. You judge China by American standards—political, economic, and moral." They then revealed their class and regional biases by stating: "We have reason to believe that your contacts have been restricted to Cantonese, who are by no means representative of the whole of China's people. Because some of these

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