

STRANGERS IN THE CITY
The Atlanta Chinese, Their Community,
and Stories of Their Lives

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RECONCEPTUALIZING CULTURE,

HISTORY, AND POLITICS

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*I would like to dedicate this book to the courageous
Chinese who pioneered the American South.*

FOREWORD

The Chinese have lived in the United States for almost a century and a half. This population, however, is rarely associated with the South in general and the state of Georgia in particular, where the relationships between the blacks and the whites have been the center of attention. In fact, the Chinese have lived in Georgia for almost as long as they have lived in other parts of the country, and today, their number has increased dramatically, thanks to the 1965 Immigration Act, which substituted hemispheric quotas for the national origins system. The majority of the Chinese living in Georgia, therefore, are those who came after 1965, commonly referred to as "the new immigrants."

Atlanta is the biggest city in Georgia and has the largest concentration of new immigrants from Taiwan, mainland China, Hong Kong and Southeast Asian countries. At least 30,000 Chinese live in Atlanta in the mid-1990s. Some of them work as professionals in American companies; others have become small business entrepreneurs; and still others work in traditional ethnic occupations such as restaurants and groceries. The diversity of the community is characterized by the dozens of Chinese social, religious, academic and business associations in the city. The largest among them is the Atlanta Chinese Community Center, which was founded in 1980 and claims to have 3500 members in 1996.

This study is an attempt to analyze the life of the Atlanta Chinese by talking to the immigrants and presenting the stories they tell about their lives and their community. Although a brief history of the Chinese in the South is presented, the emphasis of this study is cultural, looking mainly at their ways of life in Atlanta, the adjustments they have to make, and the ways in which ethnic and other community institutions function in their lives. It is not a comprehensive study of the history of this community. By telling the stories of a people whose stories are not familiar to the American public, I hope to give the immigrants a voice, a voice that will eventually bring to them attention, understanding, and recognition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For a project that has taken almost eight years to complete, I have accumulated enormous debts to so many people that it is impossible to acknowledge them all here. Let me begin, however, by thanking my dissertation committee, Professors Richard A. Long, Dana F. White, and Irwin T. Hyatt, for their patience, their inspirations, their understanding, and their promptness in reading the chapters that I dumped on their desks mostly at the last minute and usually demanded immediate reply. Thanks are especially due to Professor Long, for his continued interest in my research and for agreeing to direct this dissertation at short notice. I would also like to thank Professor Allen Tullos, who served as my advisor and committee chair in the first few years of this project, and who first introduced me to the field of community studies in general and ethnic community studies in particular. Dr. Tullos' critical comments laid the foundation of this project.

Two people who deserve very special thanks are Drs. M. Rebecca Sharpless and Thomas L. Charlton of Baylor University, Waco, Texas, not only because of their friendship, their constant reminders, and their faith in me throughout the years, but also for editorial support and for volunteering their time proofreading the final chapters.

The immigrant voices heard in this volume resonate from the true authors of this dissertation. I am deeply indebted to the many people who willingly and unhesitantly shared their experiences with me. An oral history interview is a partnership between an interviewee and an interviewer, and I acknowledge with gratitude my co-authors.

I would also like to mention with appreciation my friends Joel M. Bowman, Bela Gazdy, and Lowell Ramsey at the Chemistry Department of Emory University, where I held a part-time job while working on this dissertation, for their interest in my research, their encouragement, and for saving my life by providing computer-related technical support.

Last but not least, I want to express my debt of gratitude to my husband, Zhen Qin, for his support and understanding, especially toward the final stages of this dissertation, for making it possible for me to quit my job and concentrate on completing this project. Although we have been under great pressures at this time mentally and financially, both of us are happy that the project is finally complete and that we can go on with our lives. For all that, let me simply say "Thanks, Zhen!"

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INTRODUCTION¹

*I*n Chinatown Square Shopping Center in Chamblee, northeast Atlanta, a Chinese woman who prefers to be called Zhuang-Tse owns and runs, with the help of her two sons, “Little Mandarin,” one of the six fast-food services in the food court, the only one featuring Mandarin cuisine. Barely five years ago, Zhuang-Tse was still working as a director engineer in one of China’s largest petroleum instrument and equipment factories, located in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. A geophysicist since 1958, Zhuang-Tse was quite successful as an engineer in China. Promoted to director engineer in 1987, she was making over ¥200.00 a month,² definitely “middle-class” according to Chinese standards. “I really enjoyed my work,” Zhuang-Tse repeatedly emphasized in an oral history interview in the spring of 1992. “Other people may think it was hard work for a woman to go all over the country. I thought it was not bad at all. I actually liked my job very much. . . . It was my first choice of major when I went to college. I wanted to study geology and prospecting. I wanted to be able to go here and there. That way I would be able to see all of China.” And she did.

But at age fifty-two, Zhuang-Tse was planning to emigrate to the United States. Her elder sister, Zejun, a U.S. citizen, with whom she had lost contact for almost forty years, wrote and asked her to move to America. Zhuang-Tse first came in 1982. She stayed for about one year and decided she did not like living in the U.S. “I was not used to life here,” she recalled ten years later. “I liked what I was doing at home and my job. So I went back after a year and one month.” She went back, but sent her twenty-year-old son, Xiao-Qi, to live with her sister in the U.S. while he attended Queen’s College in New York. “I believed it was better and easier if you were younger. I mean, the younger the better. You wouldn’t carry any kind of unnecessary cultural baggage with you. He had just graduated from junior college. Only three months after that.” But Zhuang-Tse decided to come herself anyway, after five years, and this time, she stayed. Just how

and why Zhuang-Tse has decided to move to the United States in her early fifties remains to be discussed. But her life in the U.S. after she migrated tells the story of many Chinese who moved to Atlanta. Her story is that of the Woman Warrior³, a woman who gives up more than just her career in order to bring her sons to the United States, where, she believes, they will have a brighter future.

Xiao-Qi, age twenty-nine, is the younger son of Zhuang-Tse. He came to the United States in order to pursue a better education. Like many students from China, Xiao-Qi had to work a full-time job as well as a part-time job while taking full courses at Queens College in order to pay for his college education and living expenses. Years later he still remembers all the little details of his life then. "That was the hardest time of my life. I used to get up at seven in the morning, take the eight to nine class, and then go to work at the school computer center at nine. I made use of the one-hour lunch break and took another class. I would finish work at five in the afternoon and take one evening class, which usually lasted until eight." His reward was a bachelor's degree in information systems management within three years' time.

Xiao-Qi considers himself an optimist. He moved with his mother to Atlanta in 1989. Despite his degree in computer science, he worked for three and a half years as a cook in the fast-food service that his mother started in Chinatown Square in Atlanta. He did not enjoy doing it, but he said it was not a bad experience. "Working in a restaurant has three advantages. First, you can make fairly good money. Second, you save money because you don't really have time to go out and spend money." Xiao-Qi and his mother worked in the food court twelve hours a day, and he said the only other thing they did beside working in the restaurant was watching the eleven o'clock news. The final advantage of working in the restaurant, according to Xiao-Qi and his mother, was that "you learn to appreciate every meal that you eat in a restaurant." The family goes out to eat (mostly at a Chinese restaurant) once every week when they have half a day off.⁴ "Many people do not understand why we go out and eat. 'You run a restaurant,' they say. Well, if you don't work in a restaurant, you won't be able to know how enjoyable it is to eat in one." During an interview in the summer of 1992, Xiao-Qi recalled that "for the past three and half years, I have never had one meal without interruptions. You eat whenever you get a chance. And usually, right after you sit down and start eating, a customer walks by and you have to stand up right away. It is like that every day, seven days a week. And I have developed stomach problem as a result of that. Eating in other people's restaurant gives me the only chance to take my time and eat at my own pace. The environment is also nice. And eating in the kitchen in a hot summer noon is definitely different."

Besides going out to dinner from time to time, Xiao-Qi said the one thing he enjoys most is driving. He loves cars. He likes living in the United States, too. "I will stay here at least until I retire," he declared. As for future plans, Xiao-Qi wants further education, maybe a master's degree in business, and finally to start his own business, not a restaurant, "but in trade, or something of that sort." Despite his nine years in the United States and the fact that he speaks fairly fluent English, Xiao-Qi said that his biggest difficulty living in the United States is still language. He still goes to English classes whenever he gets a chance. "I pick up something every time I go, this time a new word, and maybe next time a new phrase." Xiao-Qi finally got his "green card," permanent residency certificate from the U.S. government,⁵ on August 20, 1992. The first thing he did after getting his green card was to go back to China and get married. He married a Chinese woman his father picked for him in China, a woman whom he had never met before.

The Chinese who came to Atlanta before the 1960s are referred to in the Chinese Community as the "old immigrants," mostly Cantonese who came from or by way of Hong Kong. The Kwan family is one of them. Hoi Lau Kwan and Sue Kwan run the only Chinese laundry in Atlanta that has operated continuously since before the 1960s. "My father came to the United States in 1932, or probably 1934. I am not sure," Hoi Lau Kwan started his family story. "He first worked for his brother, who owned a laundry in Macon [Georgia]. Father later started his own laundry business in Atlanta, about a year later." Kwan inherited the laundry from his father when he arrived from Hong Kong in the mid-1960s. During the thirty years that he has been running the business, Hoi Lau Kwan has used an old Chinese abacus for all his calculations. In an interview with the Kwan at their laundry, I asked him why he did not buy a calculator. "But people will come in and grab it," Kwan replied. "No one wants this old abacus. They come in, I say, 'Take it! Take it!' No one wants it. I give it to them, no one want it. No use for them. But I can use it," and this is followed by a hearty laugh.

Running a laundry in the neighborhood for almost thirty years, the Kwans have not only witnessed changes in their neighborhood but have also developed their own way of dealing with these changes. Their establishment, "Joe's Laundry & Cleaning," is located at 56 Georgia Avenue in southeast Atlanta, in a predominantly black neighborhood. The neighborhood, the Kwans recall, used to be all white, "and then white people moved out. . . . Well, about ten years ago. I think after the stadium [Fulton County Stadium] was built. Maybe early 1980s." At present, none of their customers are Chinese. They are mostly blacks and a few whites, who, according to Sue Kwan, are old customers who have "moved out of the neighborhood but still drive back every weekend to have their clothes washed here." Despite the changes in the neighborhood, the Kwans have

kept their business there, put in long hours and worked hard, and adjusted their service according to the changing needs of their customers. They have developed over the years a friendly relationship with their customers and managed to run a very profitable business. Like the Chinese immigrants who settled in the Mississippi Delta, the Kwans have found a niche of survival between black and white.

The Kwan laundry provides the family with more than simply a means of survival. They have managed to put all six of their children through college. None of the children, however, works in the laundry. "We don't need their help," explained Sue Kwan. At the same time, she admitted that "they don't want to come. They go to school. Now they have their own families and children...." What the Kwans do require from their children is to show up every weekend for a Sunday Dim Sum brunch⁶ at one of the Chinese restaurants in town, a tradition the family has kept for many years. "Father pays the bill every time," their fourth son, Michael, told me. "He simply wants everyone to come." If keeping a Chinese abacus at his laundry counter serves the practical need of doing calculations, insistence on a Sunday get-together of all family members, including the grandchildren, represents the Kwans' conscious effort to keep part of their Chinese tradition, and particularly in this case, a unique Cantonese tradition. They want to keep that family tie, even though they can no longer keep all their children in one household.

Armed with a doctoral degree in polymer science engineering from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Wenjian Yang worked for two years in the American Polymer Research Corporation in New York before he joined the Atlanta branch of W. R. Grace Company in January 1976. Like many Chinese professionals working in an American company, Yang enjoys his work. But at the same time, he is also experiencing the frustration that many Chinese professionals confront when competing with their American colleagues. "Occasionally, . . . I would feel sad when I did not get the kind of recognition that I deserved for special achievements in science and technology," Yang admitted in an oral history interview in 1989. "We do not usually get the reward that we should get." Parallel to this frustration over lack of recognition in the work place is a sense of not belonging in the society. "I am by nature an active person," said Yang. "But there are many things in this country that I cannot become an active participant simply because I am Chinese. For example, if I were in China, I believe I would be much more actively involved in things happening in the society there, whether it is politics, environmental protection issues, or education. I believe I can be of much more service to our country and our people. But here in the United States, there are things that I simply cannot do. Many a time, I feel ability falls short of ambition. I feel that I am unable to reach my ideals."