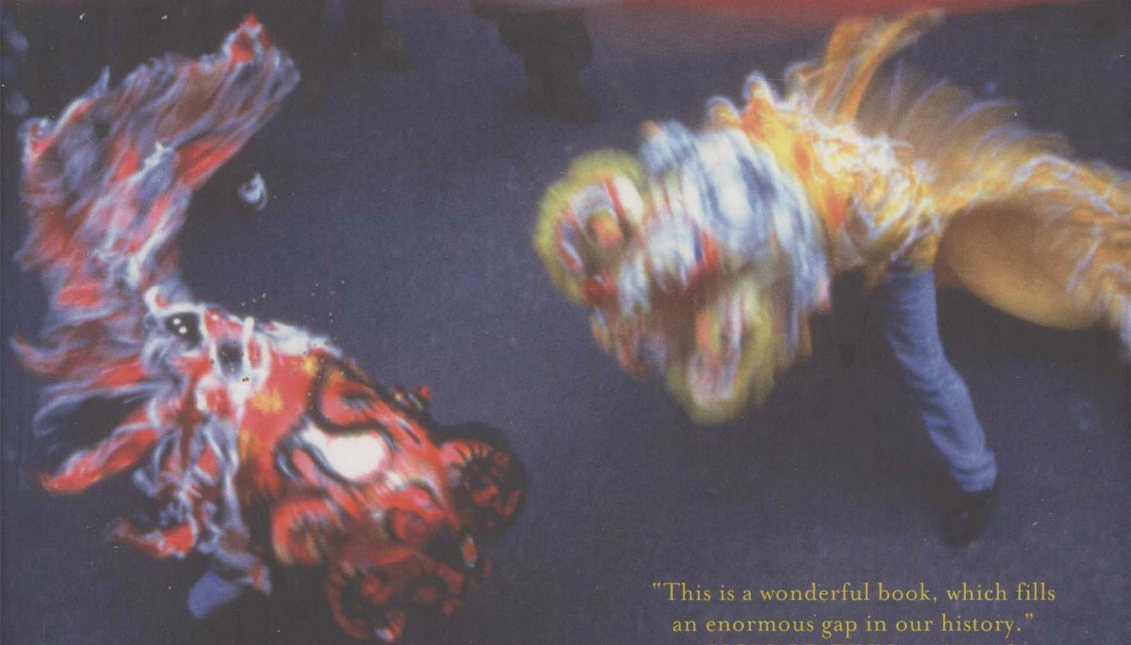


CHINESE AMERICA

The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community



"This is a wonderful book, which fills
an enormous gap in our history."

—HOWARD ZINN, author of
A People's History of the United States

Peter Kwong &
Dušanka Mišćević

CHINESE AMERICA

*The Untold Story of
America's Oldest New Community*

Peter Kwong and Dušanka Mišćević



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CHINESE AMERICA

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Introduction

In recent years a blasé attitude has taken hold about Chinese Americans. Many point out that though the Chinese were victims of racial violence and exclusion in the past, they never suffered as much as African Americans. Besides, say others, European immigrants, too, had to endure hardship and discrimination when they first came to America. They made it. Now the Chinese are making it. End of story.

Statistics to prove this are readily available. The median family income of Chinese Americans is higher than that of Caucasians. Chinese Americans complete college at a rate twice as high as that of white Americans. A larger percentage of them live in upper-middle-class suburbs. Their children are overrepresented in the best schools. The problems they *still* have, such as the glass ceiling at the workplace, ethnic stereotyping, profiling as disloyal aliens, and exploitation in Chinatown ghettos, are chalked up to “paying their dues” for membership in the exclusive club that is America. Most members of the affluent white opinion-making class can even produce a relative or friend who is married to a wonderful young Chinese woman, or at least an acquaintance who has just adopted a beautiful baby girl from China. In short, not only are the Chinese a beloved model minority; their example can be used to show that the American paradigm of immigrant assimilation works universally.

The emphasis on recent success stories obscures the fact that

Chinese are one of the oldest immigrant groups in this country. They came long before the “new immigrants” (eastern and southern Europeans, who didn’t begin to arrive until after the 1890s), at about the same time as the “old immigrants” (Germans and the Irish), in the late 1840s. They were greeted with animosity by competitors for jobs and opportunities, who battered and segregated them until they forced the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Very few Chinese were legally allowed to enter the United States after that; those who were already here were attacked and pushed out of the workforce, until the only place most found a way to survive was in isolated ghettos. American laws prevented them from becoming U.S. citizens; they were not allowed the right to vote. In legal terms, they were protected even less than African Americans. American society, in short, wanted them to go away, die off, or disappear from view. When normal Chinese immigration resumed in the mid-1960s, after a new U.S. immigration act eliminated racial and ethnic barriers in the law, the Chinese had to begin again as “new immigrants.” Most Americans still see them, collectively, as “foreign”—even those whose families that have spent several generations on this continent. In the meantime, the people who came here after them—Poles, Greeks, Italians, Russians, Hungarians, and Jews—were assimilated in fewer than fifty years.

It is easy to attribute this attitude toward the Chinese to racism. American understanding of racism, however, is infused with the specifics of the historical experience between African and European Americans, with slavery at its core and continued discrimination as its legacy. Minority experience is expected to follow one of two paradigms: either the African American experience of racial exclusion or the ethnic European experience of assimilation. The Chinese are often reduced to props in the battle over responsibility for the continued problems faced by African Americans and in the debate over whether the American system works. Arguing against this line of reasoning is like getting involved in a family squabble between African Americans and whites. This perhaps explains why narratives about Chinese American experience all too often focus on one of the two dominant themes: victimization, with authors seeking redress for past injustice, or celebration of success despite the hardships. The experience of the Chinese in America cannot be fully understood if presented from either of those two angles. The specificity of their racial and ethnic encounters in America,

like those of other Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans, must not remain subsumed by the dominant black/white debate.

Asian American, Hispanic, and other minority movements that emerged in the late 1960s as offshoots of the civil rights movement, placed race at the center of their awareness of themselves as minorities and used it to define their place in American society. Chinese, who previously had little in common with Japanese or Filipinos, merged with the two groups in a new construct—the “racialized” category of Asian America. Before then, white America saw all Asian immigrants as an indistinguishable “Oriental” mass; now the activists among them hoped to use this given identity as the basis for a broad coalition of national groups from Asia, and to use this new, American, pan-ethnic identity to fight against racism. To maintain unity, unfortunately, the activists often avoided addressing class, gender, and national divisions within the Asian American community. At the same time, by focusing on discrimination, the minority movement continued to participate in the squabble between the two dominant races (as a not very effective junior partner, at that). The tactic created a culture of victimhood and projected an unintended image of group passivity and lack of individuality.

This book wants to break through the confines such inadequate models have placed on the interpretation of the Chinese experience in America and look at the people who came to the New World in the light of their ambitions, passions, conflicts, unique solutions, and all the roads they took or could not travel. It wants to understand their weaknesses and contradictions on their own terms—not judge them as victims or as failures of assimilation. It wants to present their experience in America as a function of their own motivations and objectives, not just within the parameters of what white America wanted of them and what it gave them. (The book, however, deals only with the experience of Chinese immigrants to the continental USA; their experiences in Hawaii were different on account of the islands’ unique history.) The biggest challenge of this approach is finding the voices of Chinese Americans to tell the story; especially when it comes to the nineteenth century, only a few snippets are preserved, while there is no shortage of records that deliver the sting of a prejudiced, largely misinformed, white perspective.

Another challenge is the application of different “tools” in taking measure of Chinese experience. Discrimination against the Chinese

was rooted in white America's westward expansion and its encounter with people who did not quite fit existing categorization. American lawmakers struggled to define the exact nature of the Chinese "race" until economic, social, and political forces determined the Chinese immigrants' place within the social hierarchy imposed by white America. One of the factors that influenced this decision was white America's perception of China as a nation, which changed from admiration for the mighty civilization to scorn when the collapsing Qing Empire could no longer protect its borders from foreign intrusion. By the time Chinese started immigrating to America in large numbers, China was a weak, subjugated nation.

It was another misfortune for the Chinese, though no coincidence, that they began arriving in America at the height of the national debate on slavery that led to the civil war, having been recruited from across the Pacific to supply the workforce needed to develop the West. This was the time when the advent of large-scale manufacturing and unprecedented industrial development pitted monopoly capital against an emerging labor movement. White employers, in desperate need of reliable workers for the rapidly growing economy, looked to the Chinese as a replacement for the coercive type of labor that was disappearing with slavery, while also using them to undermine white workers' growing militancy. What emerged was an early form of a "guest worker" program for the Chinese, enforced through laws that allowed them to come to the United States without granting them the right of citizenship, and thus depriving them of all legal and labor protection.

Instead of welcoming working-class Chinese into the fold of the American labor movement, white labor leaders fought the employers on the grounds that Chinese were "coolies" working under conditions of indentured servitude. They accused the Chinese of undermining the value of white labor and demanded that employers not hire them. Their racial prejudice trumped their class consciousness, but it helped them unite among themselves and win the battle against their employers. The white labor movement became so strong, in fact, that it succeeded in pressuring the U.S. Congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned further immigration of Chinese laborers.

The factors that brought on the exclusion legislation reveal that the basis for discrimination the Chinese experienced in America was far more complex than just race. By the same token, the exploitation they

endured as working-class people was often not directly inflicted by white society. During the nineteenth century, the shipping of poor Chinese immigrants to America was big business, and Chinese merchants quickly jumped in to make profits from advancing the cost of tickets, contracting jobs, or acting as subcontractors and supervisors of Chinese workers for white employers. While the laborers entered into this arrangement with Chinese contractors voluntarily, they had to pay dearly for the contractors' services. It also made their fight against exploitation difficult, because they had to confront both Chinese subcontractors and white employers.

Despite the odds, Chinese workers in America in fact continuously fought for their rights. Class conflicts within the Chinese community simmered throughout Chinese American history and flared up sporadically, especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They are currently on full display in the sweatshops and workplaces inside Chinese urban enclaves. That they have been largely unnoticed by the society at large and kept submerged under the rubric of internal Chinese affairs is an index of the indifference of white society.

It would be a mistake, however—and this is frequently a problem with minority studies—to look at the ethnic and racial experiences of the Chinese only within the domestic American context. It is a common misconception that new immigrants happily abandon cultural and institutional attachments to the country of their origin soon after they arrive in America. In the case of the Chinese, where they came from and what happened in China had an enormous impact on their life in America. Because of the hierarchy among nations, as citizens of a weak state that could offer them no protection, they were treated poorly. America would not let them assimilate. As aliens ineligible for citizenship and unable to vote, they could not fight for their rights like Irish or Italian immigrants did with their ethnic voting blocs. The only political action they could take was to help make China into a strong and prosperous nation, so that an influential China would make their life in the United States easier. Instead of giving up on China, they supported a score of reform movements and modernization efforts with generous contributions.

At times this strategy paid off. China stood up against Japanese aggression in the late 1930s and became an ally of the United States after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The image of the Chinese in

this country improved dramatically; almost overnight they were transformed into brave fighters for righteous causes. Their community was no longer seen as a hotbed of indecency, immorality, and juvenile delinquency. More to the point: Congress saw fit to repeal the sixty-year-old Chinese Exclusion Act, while Japanese Americans, 75 percent of whom were American-born, were sent to America's very own concentration camps.

At other times, a connection to the motherland was understood as a direct affront to American principles. During the cold war, especially after direct military confrontation between American and Communist Chinese troops in Korea, the loyalty of Chinese Americans became suspect. During the McCarthy era, Chinese known for progressive or liberal views were investigated by the FBI as possible communist sympathizers or even as enemy agents. A harrowing "confession program" was instituted to induce Chinese Americans to inform on their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. The experience of that period silenced a whole generation of Chinese Americans politically for decades to come.

Having been in America since the 1840s, Chinese have witnessed its many changes—from a divided nation torn by the question of slavery to a confident, westward-expanding continental power, a budding trader with Asia, a dominant industrial post-World War II superpower, and now, a global empire. At each step of the transformation, America has imported immigrants to serve its needs. At each step, the Chinese have played a significant, occasionally even critical, role. This book will chart the effects that the changing needs of American economic development and foreign policy have had on the shaping of Chinese American history.

In America's conquest of the West, Chinese provided the necessary muscle power: they mined its riches, built dikes and dug ditches, reclaimed wilderness, and built the transportation infrastructure that enabled the leap into the industrial age. After World War II, when the United States ascended to the position of the leader of the free world, Chinese scientists and engineers provided the brainpower so it could compete against the Soviet Union. America's shortage of high-caliber specialists was so acute that for the first time it relaxed immigration restrictions to allow "colored" professionals with needed skills from third world countries, such as India and China, to become citizens. The

superbly educated, urbanized, English-speaking representatives of the upper stratum of Chinese society who availed themselves of this opportunity formed an Uptown Chinese community, at the opposite end of the social hierarchy from the early working-class immigrants from rural southern China. The liberal 1965 immigration reform opened the door to a two-pronged migration of Chinese from both ends of the spectrum: the professionals at the top, and relatives of early immigrants at the bottom. The latter provided cheap labor for the service and declining industries, particularly garment manufacturing. Chinese America became a distinctly bipolar entity. The two groups, the Uptown and the Downtown Chinese, have little in common. Their different experiences make classification under a single model of integration in America meaningless.

In the early 1990s, at the end of the cold war, America emerged as the only global power with the ambition to dominate the rest of the world. To exercise this ambition and maintain supremacy, it has had to import foreign capital and talent. In addition to immigrant scientists and engineers who give it an advantage in high-tech industries, America now enlists the best in almost every field from all corners of the world—including entrepreneurs, managers, intellectuals, artists, entertainers, and even athletes. It also sends its emissaries abroad in search of cheap resources and acquisition opportunities. Because of the familiarity Chinese immigrant professionals have with Asia and because of their contacts there, they now play a vital role in helping American corporations establish production facilities in Taiwan, mainland China, and elsewhere in the region. They serve as agents and subcontractors enabling American businesses to gain access to the huge China market.

Investment from Hong Kong and Taiwan has been migrating to the United States since the 1970s, with financiers looking for shelters against Asia's political uncertainties and an opportunity to diversify their portfolios. This capital has helped revive America's failing industries, revitalize decaying urban centers, and create jobs. Since the end of the cold war, Chinese financiers have taken on new responsibilities, as America endeavors, in its assumed role as chief defender of freedom in the world, to defend the freedom of finance capital. All nations are encouraged to take part in this free movement by opening up their markets and natural resources in exchange for foreign investment and trade opportunities. Those who refuse are effectively locked out of

the international community and denied access to international loans, capital investment, and low-tariff trade relations through the actions of American-dominated international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Chinese American investors and entrepreneurs, along with those from Hong Kong and Taiwan with considerable capital holdings and know-how, have become transnational partners in this American enterprise. Other Chinese Americans act as advisers and educators to Taiwanese and Chinese government and institutions, advancing free-enterprise ideology and American values. Chinese Americans have, in fact, become a vital instrument of American expansion into Asia.

Their affluence and increasingly important role in American society have given Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs new self-confidence. Not only do new immigrants of this profile move straight to the suburbs these days; they also transplant the amenities of the metropolitan lifestyle they were used to in Hong Kong, Taipei, or Shanghai. Chinese concentrations with Chinese supermarkets and bilingual services have transformed American suburbia. No longer just bedroom communities for urban centers, the neighborhoods they move into, even when they are not the majority, sprout clusters of ethnic businesses—high-end mall versions of Chinatowns. Sociologists call these new suburban ethnic enclaves without strictly defined space but with clear ethnic character “ethnoburbs.”

Chinese ethnoburbs are but one manifestation of the selective adaptation that marks the new Chinese American immigrant experience: conforming to certain American ways and values, but rejecting others—particularly in the areas of education and child rearing. Chinese-language schools, for instance, are used to create a community of like-minded families that emphasize hard work and discipline. Alumni associations and professional associations are used to promote business contacts and to erect Chinese versions of old-boy networks, better to confront problems of discrimination and the glass ceiling. Chinese churches, Chinese opera, mahjong and social dancing clubs, as well as the widely circulated Chinese-language papers—many of them published regionally—give shape to the residentially scattered groups and their activities.

With the great strides in economic and social development achieved recently by many Asian countries came America’s increasingly tolerant

view of “Asian values” and a growing consumer taste for Asian products. Also, its ambition to remain in the forefront of globalization means that it can no longer insist on the same level of conformity that it expected of its immigrants in the past. This calls for a reevaluation of the traditional assumption that all immigrants eventually follow the same trajectory of assimilation in America. What constitutes a successful model of integration may now, more than ever, be an open question.

Whatever model of integration Chinese Americans are currently evolving, the state of the relationship between China and the United States continues to be an important but uncertain factor. The current U.S. administration has used minority political appointments to enhance America’s influence abroad. Should Chinese Americans and other minorities rejoice in political appointments that serve America’s aggressive, unilateral foreign policy? Or should they continue to struggle to find a voice that truly represents their community interests, safeguards the rights of all minorities, and works to transform America from an imperialist power into a true model of democracy for all nations? Chinese Americans can easily give in to the temptation to bask in the glow of the model-minority myth, but they can also remember the xenophobic hostility experienced by their ancestors and work to ensure that it does not happen to others. They can remember that not so long ago their community was collectively suspected of disloyalty, and speak out against the similar predicament of others. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, they are in a position, more than ever before, to leave a mark on America. This book, of course, hopes to suggest what kind of a mark it might be. Framed as a narrative that asks the question, “Where are you going?” rather than, “Have you arrived?” it leaves the story of Chinese America open-ended, for it is a history in the making.

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