IRIS CHANG

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE RAPE OF NANKING*

THE CHINESE IN AMERICA

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A NARRATIVE HISTORY

IRIS CHANG

VIKING

THIS BOOK IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED TO
MY PARENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The story of the Chinese in America is the story of a journey, from one of the world's oldest civilizations to one of its newest. The United States was still a very young country when the Chinese began arriving in significant numbers, and the wide-ranging contributions of these immigrants to the building of their adopted country have made it what it is today. An epic story that spans one and a half centuries, the Chinese American experience still comprises only a fraction of the Chinese diaspora. One hundred fifty years is a mere breath by the standards of Chinese civilization, which measures history by millennia. And three million Chinese Americans are only a small portion of a Chinese overseas community that is at least 36 million strong.

This book essentially tells two stories. The first explains why at certain times in China's history certain Chinese made the very hard and frightening decision to leave the country of their ancestors and the company of their own people to make a new life for themselves in the United States. For the story of the emigration of the Chinese to America is, like many other immigration stories, a push-pull story. People do not casually leave an inherited way of life. Events must be extreme enough at home to compel them to go and alluring enough elsewhere for them to override an almost tribal instinct to stay among their own.

The second story examines what happened to these Chinese émigrés once they got here. Did they struggle to find their place in the United States? Did they succeed? And if so, how much more difficult was their struggle because of the racism and xenophobia of other Americans? What were the dominant patterns of assimilation? It would be expected that the first-arriving generations of Chinese, like the first generations of other immigrant groups, would resist the assimilation of their children. But to what degree, and how successfully?

This book will also dispel the still pervasive myth that the Chinese all came to America in one wave, at one time. Ask most Americans and even quite a few Americans of Chinese descent when the Chinese came to the United States, and many will tell you of the mid-nineteenth-century Chinese laborers who came to California to chase their dreams on Gold Mountain and ended up laying track for the transcontinental railroad.

More than one hundred thousand Chinese laborers, most from a single province, indeed came to America to make their fortunes in the 1849-era California gold rush. But conditions in China were so bad politically, socially, and economically that these émigrés to California represented just a small part of the single biggest migration out of that country in history. Many who left China at this time went to Southeast Asia or elsewhere. Those who chose America were relying on stories that there was enough gold in California to make them all rich quickly, rich enough to allow them to return home as successes, and the decision to leave their ancestral homeland was made bearable only by the promise they made themselves: that no matter what, they would one day return. But most stayed, enduring prejudice and discrimination, and working hard to earn a living, and their heritage is the many crowded Chinatowns dotting America from San Francisco to New York. Of their descendants, however, very few are still laborers or living in Chinatowns; many are not even recognizably Chinese because, like other immigrant groups, their ancestors intermarried. If we restrict the definition of Chinese American to only

full-blooded Asians with an ancestral heritage linking them to China, we would exclude the many, many mixed-race descendants of Chinese immigrants.

This is just the beginning of the story. In terms of sheer numbers, the majority of Chinese in America probably have no forty-niner ancestors; they are, as I am, either part of later waves or children of those who arrived here more than a century after the gold rush. Life in China had changed dramatically over those one hundred years and sent a second, very different wave of immigrants. After the 1949 Communist revolution, many bureaucrats, professionals, and successful businessmen realized that their futures were not in China. They packed their belongings, often in extreme haste, and left the land of their ancestors. My own parents and grandparents belonged to this group of refugees. For some the destination was America, for others it was Hong Kong, but for most people, such as my family, the next stop would be Taiwan. These émigrés were devoted anti-Communists who longed to return to their homeland. Indeed, many Nationalist legislators considered themselves the official ruling body of China, now forced by wartime expediency to occupy a temporary capital on an offshore island. However, their children were different. For many young Chinese in Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, nothing was more prestigious or coveted than a scholarship to a top American university. The Nationalist government in Taiwan imposed a restriction on those who wanted to study in the United States—they had to be fluent in English.

Thus making up the second major wave of Chinese coming to America were not just the anti-Communist elites but their most intellectually capable and scientifically directed children. Like many of their peers, my parents came to the United States on scholarships, obtained their doctoral degrees, and later became professors. And across the country, their friends—doctors, scientists, engineers, and academics—shared the same memories and experiences: a forced exile from the mainland as children, first in Taiwan and then in the United States.

Most of these newest émigrés did not find their way to the old Chinatowns, other than as tourists, but instead settled in the cities and suburbs around universities and research centers. Because they saw themselves as intellectuals rather than refugees, they were concerned less about preserving their Chinese heritage than with casting their lot with modern America, and eventual American citizenship. It is in connection with these immigrants, not surprisingly, that the term "model minority" first appeared. The term refers to an image of the Chinese as working hard, asking for little, and never complaining. It is a term that many Chinese now have mixed feelings about.

Not all of those who arrived here during the mid-twentieth-century second wave were part of this success story, however. Many entered not as students but as political refugees, and often they did end up in American Chinatowns, only to be exploited as cheap labor in factories and restaurants. The arrival of these two disparate contingents in the 1950s and 1960s created a bipolar Chinese community in America, sharply divided by wealth, education, and class.

The story does not end here either. A third wave entered the United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Interestingly, this large wave encompassed Chinese of all socio-economic groups and backgrounds, who arrived as Sino-American relations thawed and as the People's Republic of China (PRC) began its rocky transition from a pariah communist state to a tenuously connected capitalist one.

Although the three waves came at different times and for different reasons, as Chinese Americans they shared certain common experiences. In the course of writing this book, I discovered that the Chinese in general brought distinctive cultural traits to America—such as reverence for education, hard work, thriftiness, entrepreneurship, and family loyalty—which helped many achieve rapid success in their adopted country. Many Chinese Americans, for example, have served an important "middleman minority" role in the United States by working in occupations in which they act as intermediaries between producers and consumers. As economist Thomas Sowell has noted,

middleman minorities typically arrive in their host countries with education, skills, or a set of propitious attitudes about work, such as business frugality and the willingness to take risks. Some slave away in lowly menial jobs to raise capital, then swiftly become merchants, retailers, labor contractors, and money-lenders. Their descendants usually thrive in the professions, such as medicine, law, engineering, or finance.

But as with other middleman minorities, the Chinese diaspora generally found it easier to achieve economic and professional success than to acquire actual political power in their adopted countries. Thus the Chinese became, in the words of historian Alexander Saxton, "the indispensable enemy": a people both needed and deeply feared. Throughout history, both the U.S. government and industry have sought to exploit Chinese labor—either as raw muscle or as brain power—but resisted accepting the Chinese as fellow Americans. The established white elite and the white working class in the United States have viewed the Chinese as perpetual foreigners, a people to be imported or expelled whenever convenient to do one or the other. During an economic depression in the nineteenth century, white laborers killed Chinese competitors and lobbied politicians to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act. Later, in the twentieth century, the United States recruited Chinese scientists and engineers to strengthen American defense during the Cold War, only to harbor suspicions later that some Chinese might be passing nuclear secrets to the PRC.

The great irony of the Chinese American experience has been that success can be as dangerous as failure: whenever the ethnic Chinese visibly excelled—whether as menial laborers, scholars, or businessmen—efforts arose simultaneously to depict their contributions not as a boon to white America but as a threat. The mass media have projected contradictory images that either dehumanize or demonize the Chinese, with the implicit message that the Chinese represent either a servile class to be exploited, or an enemy force to be destroyed. This has created identity issues for generations of American-born Chinese: a sense of feeling different, or alien, in their own country; of being

subjected to greater scrutiny and judged by higher standards than the general populace.

Another important theme has been the struggle of Chinese Americans for justice. A long history of political activism belies the myth that Chinese Americans have stood by and suffered abuse as silent, passive victims. Instead, from the very beginning, they fought racial discrimination in the courts, thereby creating a solid foundation of civil rights law in this country, often to the benefit of other minorities. But with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, large-scale Chinese immigration ceased entirely for eighty years, and at one point the ethnic Chinese population in the United States dwindled to only a few tens of thousands of people. Only new legislation in the middle of the twentieth century permitted the second and third waves of Chinese immigrants to arrive, forcing these newcomers to start almost from scratch as they built their own political coalitions. But build them they did.

The stories in this book reveal the ever precarious status of the Chinese community in America. It has historically been linked to the complex web of international politics, and more recently to the relationship between two of the world's great powers, the United States and China. When Sino-American relations are excellent, the Chinese Americans benefit as goodwill ambassadors and role models, serving as cultural and economic bridges between the two countries; but when Sino-American relations deteriorate, the Chinese Americans have been vilified as enemies, traitors, and spies—not just in the United States, but in mainland China. To describe the vulnerability of his people, one Chinese American aptly called them "an egg between two big plates."

Throughout history, some Chinese immigrants and even their American-born children adopted the naïve and misguided notion that if things turned sour for them in the United States, they could always "go back to China." But as some would learn the hard way, to do so could be dangerous: during the Korean War and the Cultural Revolution, a number of returning Chinese were persecuted in mainland

China because of their former association with the United States. Ronald Takaki, an ethnic studies professor at the University of California at Berkeley, once called the Chinese and other Asian Americans "strangers from a different shore." I propose to take this a step further. At various times in history, the Chinese Americans have been treated like strangers on *both* shores—a people regarded by two nations as too Chinese to be American, and too American to be Chinese.

When I was in junior high school in the early 1980s, a white classmate once asked me, in a friendly, direct manner, "If America and China went to war, which side would you be on?" I had spent all of my twelve years in a university town in Illinois and had never visited either mainland China or Taiwan. Before I could even answer the first question, she continued, "Would you leave and fight for China? Or try to support China from the U.S.?" All I could think of at that moment was how disastrous such a scenario would be for the Chinese American population, who would no doubt find themselves hated by both sides. I don't remember my exact response, only that I mumbled something along the lines that, if possible, I would try to work for some kind of peace between the two countries.

Her question, innocently put, captures the crux of the problem facing the ethnic Chinese today in America. Even though many are U.S. citizens whose families have been here for generations, while others are more recent immigrants who have devoted the best years of their lives to this country with citizenship as their goal, none can truly get past the distinction of race or entirely shake the perception of being seen as foreigners in their own land. Not until many years later did I learn that this very question has been posed to numerous prominent ethnic Chinese throughout American history, ranging from a brilliant aeronautics professor to a political candidate for Congress. Indeed, the attitudes and assumptions behind this question would later drive much of the anti-Chinese antagonism I have had to describe to make this book an honest chronicle of the Chinese experience in the United States. My classmate unwittingly planted the seed in my psyche that grew into this book.

But it was not until the mid-1990s, when my husband and I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, that I really became interested in the history and complexity of the Chinese American population. I learned about a nonprofit organization that would later be known as the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia, whose mission was to educate the world about the unrecognized wartime horrors committed by Japan in the Pacific theater. For the first time in my life, I met Chinese Americans who were not simply academics or scientific professionals, but committed activists, driven by idealism I had seen only in organizations such as Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union. These Chinese Americans, working with leaders of other ethnic groups, were outspoken on a wide range of human rights abuses around the globe. Learning from them led me to write *The Rape of Nanking,* about the rape and massacre of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians in the former capital of China.

As I toured the United States and Canada giving talks on the subject, I encountered vibrant Chinese American communities that I had not even known existed. The people I met ranged from descendants of transcontinental railroad workers to new immigrants studying here on scholarships, from illiterate factory workers to Nobel laureates at leading universities, from elderly survivors of Japanese wartime atrocities to baby girls adopted by white parents. I had the privilege of talking with several Chinese Americans whose work had transformed entire industries or intellectual disciplines, such as David Henry Hwang, the Tony Award–winning playwright of *M. Butterfly;* David Ho, a preeminent medical researcher whose antiviral drugs have helped thousands of AIDS victims; and David Chu, head of the Nautica fashion empire.

Soon I learned that all across the United States, Chinese American groups were busy organizing to talk about themselves, their history, and their future, and to make their presence heard in American society. The Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles was preparing a huge exhibit about the Chinese in America. A new

museum of Chinese American history was scheduled to open also in Los Angeles. The Chinese community in San Francisco was lobbying for better preservation of the poetry written on the walls of Angel Island, where newly arrived Chinese immigrants were detained and interrogated during the early decades of the twentieth century. Chinese American researchers were demanding full access to the immigration case files stored in the National Archives in San Bruno, California. And new ethnic magazines geared toward younger Chinese and Asian Americans, such as *A, Monolid, Face,* and *Jade,* proliferated. It seemed to me there was a big, exciting story to be told.

At first, I feared the subject might too broad, but I couldn't let go of the idea of exploring the history of my people. Moreover, I believed I had a personal obligation to write an honest history of Chinese America, to dispel the offensive stereotypes that had long permeated the U.S. news and entertainment media. Saturday morning cartoons flattened the Chinese into buck-toothed, pigtailed caricatures, with slanted dashes for eyes. Elementary school libraries were still carrying racist, out-of-date textbooks, with images and descriptions of the Chinese eating meals of fermented snails with long, claw-like fingernails. Hollywood films depicted Chinese men as bowing sycophants, spies, or crime kingpins; Chinese women as sex toys or prostitutes. The lack of strong Chinese American role models in popular culture—or even of realistic images of Chinese Americans as diverse and multifaceted human beings—bothered me deeply. People tend to perform at a level society expects of them, not their actual potential, and I imagined there must have been many young Americans of Asian descent who suffered a crisis of confidence as a result of coming to see themselves as they thought others saw them. But worse, I also knew that, based on my knowledge of the literature on genocide, atrocities are more likely to occur if the perpetrators do not see their victims as real people. The first, essential, step toward getting a population to visit torture and mass murder on a group is to dehumanize the group, to reduce them to alien *things.* This is what those books, films, and television programs were doing; they were far

from depicting the kinds of fascinating, complex, accomplished people I knew.

There is nothing inherently alien about the Chinese American experience. In the end, the Chinese shared the same problems as all other immigrants—universal problems that recognized no borders: The eternal struggle to make a living and provide their children with food, shelter, and a good education. The exhaustion of striving to sustain cherished values in a changing world. The loss of a place once called home. And yes, the initial reluctance of all people in a new land to drop their cultural habits and risk new associations—only to discover, years later, that they have already done so.

If the Chinese American story is a journey, then the writing of this book has been a journey for me as well: one that has taken me deep into a voluminous body of records, including oral histories, autobiographies, Chinese-language newspapers, diaries, court transcripts, immigrations records, and more, all showing the vast range of experiences of a people that have truly helped shape America. Ultimately, in this book, I try to show the Chinese Americans as they really were and are: real, and diverse, flesh-and-blood individuals in search of a dream. All I ask of the reader is to look past ethnicity and see the shared humanity within us all.

Note on usage and spelling

Most names of places and other Chinese terms in this book are spelled according to the Hanyu Pinyin system. Exceptions have been made for certain Cantonese terms, or the more familiar Wade-Giles term by which a person, place, organization, event, etc., may be known. In the Chinese system of naming, the family name precedes the person's given name. This practice has been followed except for those individuals who have adopted the Western system (given name followed by family name) or are better known by the Western version of their names.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

The Old Country: Imperial China in the Nineteenth Century

"A journey of a thousand miles begins where you are standing," says an old Chinese proverb. And so the story of the first wave of Chinese emigration to the United States properly begins not in nineteenth-century America but rather in the world these immigrants left behind.

Perhaps no country exudes a greater air of mystery to Westerners than China. It is remote (from the West, at least), and it is vast. The territory of China today (almost 3.7 million square miles) comprises the third largest country in the world. Though it only just surpasses the size of the continental United States, its diversity is breathtaking. Its borders stretch from the mountains of Siberian Russia to the Himalayas of India, from the densely populated coastal lands that border the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas to the almost uninhabitable Gobi Desert of north-central China, then farther west to the isolated plateaus of Central Asia.

China's true grandeur, however, is not vested in its size or distance, but in its age—five thousand years of continuous civilization and intact practices and traditions. The Chinese state is considered by many historians to be the oldest functioning organization on earth. It is also the world's most populous country. China is home to more than one billion people—fully one-fifth of humanity.

. . .

In the mid-nineteenth century China was still an imperial state, ruled by the surviving members of the Qing dynasty. The Qing, originally from Manchuria, a region north of China, had held power for two hundred years, but that power was waning. Monumental changes were about to take place that would transform not only the lives of people inside China, but also their entire relationship to the world beyond China's borders.

Westerners of the time, when they thought of China, imagined a genteel and exotic land filled with quaint pagodas, curved stone bridges, and lotus blossoms—images popularized by the paintings and poetry and observations of the handful of writers, missionaries, travelers, and merchants who had come there. But few outsiders who traveled in China could understand the language or the culture around them. While most noted—accurately—that it was a culture in whose bedrock was respect for social, economic, and family traditions—the culture that also invented paper and printing, rocketry and gunpowder, and introduced to the West exquisite foods, silks, and spices—the real China was far more complicated.

Few visitors were able to travel the length and breadth of the country, so they failed to grasp how dramatically the geography itself shifted, and along with it, cultural customs that were often in great conflict from region to region. Within the boundaries of this one nation were divisions as dramatic as you would find crossing border after border in Europe.

In western China, a remote area encompassing more than half of the nation's territory, in a shifting landscape of deserts, rugged mountains, and grassy valleys, lived some of the many ethnic minorities of China, most notably the Mongols and the Tibetans. In the desert were scattered oasis cities on what was once called the Silk Road, along which Marco Polo traveled in the thirteenth century to find marvels so dazzling, so magnificent, that when he put together a record of his travels Europeans thought it all a creation of his imagination. Over