



Chinese  
San Francisco,  
1850–1943

A TRANS-PACIFIC COMMUNITY

*Yong Chen*

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press

Stanford, California

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Leland Stanford Junior University

Printed in the United States of America

CIP data appear at the end of the book

Published with the assistance of the Edgar M. Kahn Memorial Fund

*Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943*

## ASIAN AMERICA

*A series edited by Gordon H. Chang*

The increasing size and diversity of the Asian American population, its growing significance in American society and culture, and the expanded appreciation, both popular and scholarly, of the importance of Asian Americans in the country's present and past—all these developments have converged to stimulate wide interest in scholarly work on topics related to the Asian American experience. The general recognition of the pivotal role that race and ethnicity have played in American life, and in relations between the United States and other countries, has also fostered this heightened attention. Although Asian Americans were a subject of serious inquiry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were subsequently ignored by the mainstream scholarly community for several decades. In recent years, however, this neglect has ended, with an increasing number of writers examining a good many aspects of Asian American life and culture. Moreover, many students of American society are recognizing that the study of issues related to Asian America speak to, and may be essential for, many current discussions on the part of the informed public and various scholarly communities. The Stanford series on Asian America seeks to address these interests. The series will include work from the humanities and social sciences, including history, anthropology, political science, American studies, law, literary criticism, sociology, and interdisciplinary and policy studies.

| To my parents

## Acknowledgments

I was able to write this book thanks to the generous support that many people in both the United States and China have offered me since 1989, when I first started working on it as a Ph.D. dissertation at Cornell University. The dissertation benefited from the thoughtful comments of my dissertation committee members Nick Salvatore and Mary Beth Norton, who both read it in its entirety, and of Richard Polenburg and my fellow graduate students at Cornell: Timothy Billings, John Fousek, and Michael Bussel, who read parts of it. I remain deeply indebted to Michael Kammen, my advisor at Cornell. He has been an exemplary and inspiring teacher ever since I first met him in Beijing in 1983. Gary Okihiro, who joined the Cornell faculty and my dissertation committee in 1988, read not only the dissertation but also drafts of the book manuscript. Both the perceptive comments that he has offered me and his own work have been critical for the development of my study.

I could not have completed the book without the support of my colleagues in the History Department and the Asian American Studies Program at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). Many—including Karl Hufbauer, John Liu, Spencer Olin, Ken Pomeranz, and Bin Wong—read parts of the project at its different stages and extended valuable advice.

Another colleague and a dear friend, Anne Walthall, closely read and perceptively critiqued first the dissertation and later the book manuscript, both in their entirety. Teaching and working with my students in Asian American Studies courses at UCI has increased my understanding of critical historical issues that I deal with in my written work.

My thanks also go to people at other institutions, including Hong Cheng, Zhenghua Dong, Mario Garcia, Qitao Guo, Pat Keats, Him Mark Lai, Xiaohe Ma, Dayong Niu, Wei-chi Poon, Shichang Ouyang, Ronald Takaki, Emily Wolff, and Maochun Yu. My heartfelt thanks go to Gordon Chang for his encouragement and detailed suggestions. His intellectual insights have helped me to improve and better contextualize my book. I owe much to my editors at Stanford University Press. Muriel Bell impressed me not only with her kindness and professionalism but also with her intellectual wisdom, and Stacey Lynn was consistently patient and helpful. My copy editor, Ruth Barzel, did an extremely fine job in assisting me to improve the manuscript.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Elizabeth Abbott, Sandy Yee Man Leung, Dr. Thomas Quin Kong, and Cynthia Soo for allowing me to use their private collections. For their help with my research, I am grateful to the staff at numerous libraries, including the Olin Library of Cornell University; the library of the San Diego Historical Society; the Library of Congress; the East Asian Library of Columbia University; New York City Public Library; the East Asian Library of the University of California, Los Angeles; the library of the California Historical Society; the National Archives in Laguna Niguel; and the Asiatic Library, the Bancroft Library, and the Asian American Studies Library of the University of California, Berkeley. I also thank the hardworking employees at the interlibrary loan departments of the Olin Library and UCI's main library for their superb service.

I received several fellowships from Cornell University and a predoctoral fellowship from UCI for the writing of the dissertation. Two career-development awards from UCI gave me valuable release time from teaching so that I could focus on this book and other research projects.

I would also like to thank the *Western Historical Quarterly* for allowing me to use parts of an article originally published there. Portions of chapter 1 were first published, in slightly different form, as "The Internal Origins of



Chinese Immigration to California Reconsidered," *Western Historical Quarterly* (winter 1997): 520-46. Copyright by the Western History Association. Used by permission.

My parents' support and love, which they provide from their home across the Pacific Ocean, have been a key source of strength and served to put the notion of "trans-Pacific community" in perspective for me. Their frequent questions about my progress on the book helped drive me to complete it. Most important, I thank my wife, Rosalind, for her careful and critical reading of early drafts of the study and for her immeasurable support and patience.

Y.C.



## Note on Translation and Transliteration

In translating sources originally written in Chinese, I have made every effort to retain the authenticity and integrity of the original text. In a study of the world of early Chinese Americans as they understood and lived it, the need for and significance of respecting textual authenticity are self-evident. Chinese was the primary language of Chinese San Francisco during this period and constituted a crucial part of Chinese American culture. The linguistic notions constructed therein reveal, and at the time reinforced, people's mentality, values, customs, and social relations.

Not all the features and subtleties of the original text can be retained in translation, however. For instance, many Chinese documents used in this study appear in classical or semiclassical forms that are condensed, concise, full of references to ancient legends and historical events, and often without punctuation. To retain the original style of these texts would be beyond even Jack Kerouac (who wrote his 1957 novel *On the Road* without punctuation). I have made no attempt to match the original text with Chaucerian or Shakespearean English. Citations from Chinese texts are rendered in simple, straightforward language. Several rules for translations and transliterations that I have followed are explained below.

The issue I have had to deal with most frequently involves converting the names of people, places, and organizations from Chinese into English. Many of these names are Chinese versions, including translations or

transliterations, of identical names in English. When the Chinese version of an English term contains new meaning or sentiment, such as “the barbarian language” (meaning English) or “the ‘Flowery-Flag’ Country” (the United States), it is translated into English exactly as it is phrased in Chinese. Other Chinese translations without cultural alterations and additions in the Chinese text, such as “Theodore Roosevelt,” and “the Workingmens’ Party,” have been restored back to their proper English forms.

Most Chinese names of people and places are transliterated in pinyin, a modern system of romanization, which has been used in post-1949 China and is gaining increasing acceptance in the West. For academic reasons, these names are romanized according to their pronunciation in present-day Chinese (Mandarin) rather than in any Cantonese dialect. The names of people are transliterated according to their original order in Chinese, that is, the last name comes first and is separated from the rest of the name with a space. The given name (which often contains two characters) is transliterated as one word. There are a few exceptions, however. Certain old forms of transliteration or romanization of certain Chinese names, such as “Sun Yat-sen,” “Taipei” and “Canton,” remain unchanged, because they have been widely used and accepted for a long time. Romanization of the names of some relatively anonymous people, such as Ah Quin and Ng Poon Chew, also reflect the form of the name adopted by these people themselves. The titles of most Chinese-language sources are transliterated with their meaning explained in English. The names of a few sources are translated in order to capture their important meaning in Chinese. For example, the most important Chinese American newspaper during the first half of the twentieth century is cited as “The Chinese-Western Daily,” (translation) rather than “Chung Sai Yat Po” (Cantonese transliteration). Those sources that already have English titles, such as several Chinese-language newspapers, are not given new translations.

Finally, the Chinese used a different calendar, a lunar calendar, before the 1911 revolution. In most cases Chinese dates, which appeared in the order of year-month-day, are converted to their corresponding Western-style dates. In doing this I have consulted various reference books, especially Zheng Hesheng’s *Jinshi Zhongxishiri Duizhaobiao* (Modern Chinese and Western historical dates in contrast).

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Note on Translation and Transliteration</i>	<i>xv</i>
Introduction	I
1. Revisiting the Pre-Emigration Old World	II
PART ONE   THE RISE OF CHINESE SAN FRANCISCO	
Introduction	45
2. The "First City": Locating Chinese San Francisco	49
3. The Social Landscape of Chinese San Francisco	70
4. "China in America": The World of Ah Quin	96
5. Collective Identity	124
PART TWO   THE ARRIVAL OF A TRUE TRANS-PACIFIC COMMUNITY	
Introduction	145
6. A Time of Anger and a Time of Hope: The 1905 Boycott	148
7. A Changing Mentality, 1906 to 1913	162
8. The American-ness of the Trans-Pacific Community Between the Wars	186
9. Persistence of Trans-Pacific Ties	217
10. The Road to 1943	239
Conclusion	261
<i>Notes</i>	<i>269</i>
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	<i>337</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>379</i>
<i>Photographs follow pages 142 and 216</i>	

## Introduction

In the summer of 1995 I spent a great deal of time in the microfilm reading room of the National Archives in Laguna Niguel, California, collecting data for this book. One day a white woman in her sixties sitting next to me asked me what I was working on. I told her that I was reading nineteenth-century census schedules regarding the Chinese in San Francisco. "Are you also trying to find information about your ancestors?" she asked, thinking I was doing the same kind of genealogical research on my family as she was on hers. I hesitated, not knowing how to respond. I would have to say no, I thought, because I am not Cantonese (most of the early Chinese immigrants to the United States came from the Pearl River Delta Region near Canton) and no one in my family had come to the United States prior to my arrival at Cornell University in 1985 to attend graduate school. Yet the history of those early immigrants has so profoundly shaped my own American experience that they have become more than ancestors to me. At that moment, I realized more consciously than ever how much what I was writing was also about myself. In the words of Stuart Hall, "the 'I' who writes here must also be thought of as, itself, 'enunciated'." We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', *positioned*.<sup>1</sup>

Conceived during the early part of my graduate career, this work had a humble and simple genesis. It was not driven by any theoretical ambition or

preoccupation (I had just arrived from a society where such a preoccupation reduced many allegedly historical writings to temporal, petty ideological, jargon-infested exercises). Nor did it start with much historiographical knowledge of Chinese American history. The initial intellectual stimulus came from Alexander Saxton's *The Indispensable Enemy*, which I read for a graduate seminar taught by the historian Nick Salvatore. The failure of this otherwise excellent study of anti-Chinese racism in California's white labor movement to allow for any Chinese voice inspired my desire to know more about the feelings of the Chinese. At a more personal level, my choice of topic represented a longing to make sense of my existence in Chinatown-less rural upstate New York by connecting with immigrant pioneers from China.

I finally decided to focus my work on Chinese San Francisco from 1850 to 1943. After the first major wave of Chinese immigration to the United States during the Gold Rush, San Francisco's Chinese population emerged quickly as the most significant and largest Chinese American community, and it remained so for the rest of the period. Almost all Chinese Americans had left their footprints there. Many used it as a gateway between the Old World and the New. Others went there to work, recreate, and socialize. Its important social institutions, like the Zhonghua [Chinese] Huiguan (which eventually adopted a formal English name, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, and was commonly known as the "Six Companies"), once organized a majority of the Chinese American population. Chinese immigrants (especially those in the West) called Chinese San Francisco *dabu* (meaning "the big city," or "the first city"), a term that captured its significance in Chinese American life.

In this volume the reader will hear competing voices that tried to define Chinese San Francisco and, ultimately, Chinese America. As the most visible Chinese community in America, Chinese San Francisco also occupied a prominent place in white American consciousness. Its conspicuousness did not come about just as a result of its demographic size. Enhancing its visibility was its rich cultural distinctiveness. The old-timer San Franciscan Charles Dobie observed in 1939, "There are Chinatowns in other American cities still. But it must be conceded that San Francisco's Chinatown always has been the most significant expression of this alien people dwelling in our midst. It ranks first in numbers and in wealth of transplanted traditions. To know the Chinatown in San Francisco is to know every other Chinatown in the United States."<sup>2</sup> Dobie's statement undoubtedly fails to acknowledge the

richness and complexity of the experiences of Chinese Americans living in different communities across the nation. It nevertheless helps to reveal the extent to which public attention focused on Chinese San Francisco.

Just as important as Chinese San Francisco's cultural distinctiveness is its physical location in the heart of San Francisco. Chinatown's location augmented the perception that it was a direct threat to the city's social and racial order. In 1906 the *New York Times* expressed a widely held view that San Francisco's Chinatown took up public space where it did not belong:

The old Franciscan Chinatown was a much greater blemish and absurdity than that of New York. For it occupied the slope of the hill at the base of which is the chief commercial quarter, and the top of which is the chief residential quarter. No Franciscan of those parts could pass from his business to his home or back again without passing through it. What is more, his womankind could not "go shopping" without traversing it.

"Our little Chinatown on the other hand," the report went on, "modestly withdraws itself where nobody need ever enter it who does not betake himself to it for that express purpose."<sup>3</sup> The history of Chinese San Francisco tells us a great deal about white America's efforts to designate the proper space for the Chinese in society—not only geographically but also in its emerging racial hierarchy.

My primary goal in this study is to revisit the world of Chinese immigrants as they knew and experienced it themselves, instead of viewing their history from non-Chinese perspectives and contexts. A notion that vividly captures the essence of early Chinese life is "China in America." Although originally coined by the nineteenth-century anthropologist Stewart Culin, "China in America" was not an exclusively white term. Chinatown's residents themselves recognized the community's multilayered ties to China. An editorial in *The Chinese-Western Daily*, Chinese Americans' major newspaper, called Chinatown "the epitome of China." In reference to the popular phrase "China in America," the editorial continued: "Although the Chinese and outsiders used the same expression, they each see different things." "For Westerners," it noted, "the notion refers to the outward appearance of China."<sup>4</sup> The editorial clearly expressed an awareness of the differences between Chinese and white observers' perspective and comprehension with regards to recording and interpreting Chinese life. I must point out that my emphasis on such differences should not be construed as a rejection of the



objectivity of history. It is simply a recognition that historical objectivity exists in multiple dimensions.

Therefore this study is not focused on how Chinese Americans were victimized or exploited by non-Chinese outsiders. Much has been written on those topics, as we will see. More important, Chinese Americans did not live just to serve as footnotes to socioeconomic and political developments and forces in the New World. This study seeks to understand things that motivated them to live, work, and persevere. It attempts to demonstrate how they comprehended and articulated the meanings of their American experiences based on their own backgrounds and historical memories. It is a story of how they built a community in the largest metropolis of the American West between 1850 and 1943.

To achieve this goal, I have made a conscious attempt to uncover and make use of Chinese-language sources.<sup>5</sup> During the entire period of my study, Chinese remained the primary language for a majority of Chinese Americans. Although such sources are not as comprehensive as are those in English in their accounts of certain aspects of Chinese American history, they give access to the meaning of Chinese Americans' existence as parents and children, as theatergoers and gamblers, and as clan and *huiguan* members. *Huiguan*, or home-district associations, were known as "companies" among white Americans. Those sources also enable us to appreciate Chinese Americans' efforts to control their own lives, and they reveal how they viewed the world and people around them.

There were common cultural systems (in both ideology and practice) constructed and communicated in linguistic codes, which the entire community, instead of just a few privileged members, could understand. Recognizing the existence of such systems is central to comprehending the importance of Chinese-language sources, especially those in the public domain such as editorials, advertisements, and announcements. After all, we must recognize that the different dialects spoken by various immigrant groups all originated from and shared the same written form—a written language that had taken shape in China many centuries before. The issue of written language invites questions about literacy. As we will see later, in the 1880s Stewart Culin asserted that a majority of the Chinese American population could read. While we do not have statistics to prove that assertion, it is perfectly clear that the written language was of enormous significance for