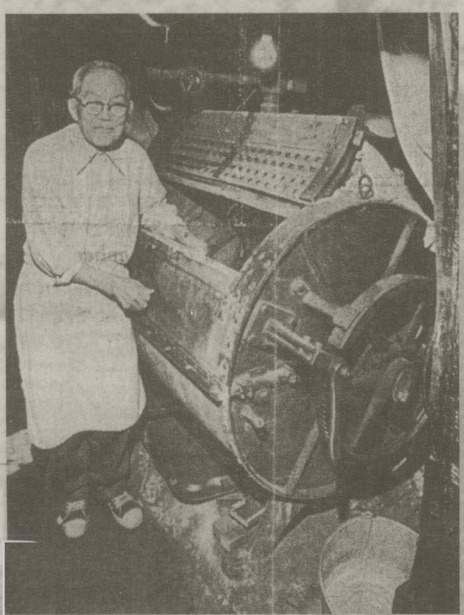
CHINESE ST. LOUIS

From Enclave to Cultural Community



HUPING LING

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Huping Ling is Professor of History at Truman State University and the author of *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives*.

Acknowledgments

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Contents

1 Introduction

In 1857, Alla Lee, a twenty-four-year-old native of Ningbo, China, seeking a better life, came to St. Louis, where he opened a small shop on North Tenth Street selling tea and coffee. As the first Chinese in St. Louis—and probably the only one for some time—he mingled mainly with immigrants from Northern Ireland; in fact, he eventually married an Irish woman.[1] Within a decade he had been joined by several hundred of his countrymen from San Francisco and New York, who came seeking work in the mines and factories in and around St. Louis. Most of them lived in boarding houses along or near a small street called Hop Alley. In time, Chinese hand laundries, dry goods stores, herb dispensaries, restaurants, and clan association headquarters sprang up in that neighborhood. In St. Louis, Hop Alley became synonymous with Chinatown.

Local records indicate that Chinese businesses—especially hand laundries—attracted a wide clientele. As a consequence the businesses run by Chinese immigrants contributed disproportionately to the city's economy. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Chinese provided 60 percent of the laundry services for the city, even though they comprised less than 0.1 percent of the population.[2] St. Louisans willingly patronized these businesses but did not welcome the Chinese themselves, regarding them as "peculiar" creatures. Hop Alley was perceived as an exotic part of town and as a hotbed of criminal activities such as murder, tong wars, and the opium trade (manufacturing, smuggling, and smoking). Despite frequent police raids and the biases of many white St. Louisans, Hop Alley showed remarkable resilience and energy until 1966, when bulldozers of urban renewal leveled the area to make a parking lot for Busch Stadium.

The old Chinese settlement around Hop Alley disappeared. However, by then a new, suburban Chinese American community was quietly yet rapidly emerging. Over the next few decades

the city's ethnographic distribution changed considerably; more and more Chinese were residing in St. Louis County—specifically, in the suburban municipalities to the south and west of the city. The U.S. censuses indicate that in the St. Louis area, the number of suburban Chinese Americans increased from 106 (30 percent of the total Chinese in the St. Louis area) in 1960, to 461 (80 percent of the total) in 1970, to 1,894 (78 percent of the total) in 1980, to 3,873 (83 percent of the total) in 1990.[3] Since 1990 the Chinese population of Greater St. Louis has been increasing rapidly—to 9,120 according to the U.S. census of 2000.[4] Various unofficial estimates, however, give the figure as between 15,000 and 20,000, with the great majority scattered through suburban communities and constituting 1 percent of the total suburban population of Metropolitan St. Louis.[5]

The Chinese population of St. Louis has grown substantially. There is no easily discernable commercial or residential Chinese district; even so, evidence of a Chinese American presence is visible enough. A Chinese American engineering consulting firm, William Tao & Associates, has helped design more than half the city's buildings and structures. Two weekly Chinese-language newspapers serve the community. Three Chinese-language schools offer classes in Chinese language, arts, and culture. A dozen Chinese religious institutions are heavily attended. More than forty community organizations sponsor—independently or jointly—a wide variety of community activities ranging from cultural gatherings to the annual Chinese Culture Days. The latter are held in the Missouri Botanical Gardens and attract more than ten thousand visitors each year. More than three hundred Chinese restaurants cater to St. Louisans, who clearly enjoy the ethnic cuisine.

How are we to understand this phenomenon of a not quite visible yet highly active and productive Chinese American community? How did that community evolve, and how is it unique? After I settled in Kirksville, Missouri, in 1991 to teach at Truman State University, I found myself intrigued by these questions whenever I visited St. Louis for business or pleasure. Longing for answers, I conducted a series of oral history projects among Midwestern Chinese Americans, in both metropolitan areas and small towns. I spent my sabbatical year 1998–99 in St. Louis researching the city's Chinese American community. For more than a decade, I have had ample opportunity to observe and participate in this community, to interact with its members in many activities, and

to research its history. My work has taken me to libraries and archives, to public and private agencies, to Chinese burial grounds, to Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, and florists, and to Chinese law firms and acupuncture clinics, as well as into Chinese homes. I hope this book will show the process by which St. Louis's Chinatown gave way to a suburb-based Chinese American community. To explain this transformation, I propose a "cultural community" model that will define St. Louis's experience since the 1960s and place it in the context of other multiethnic and multicultural American communities.

The Chinese Community in St. Louis from the Perspective of Migration and Assimilation Theories

Among American academics, interest in migration and assimilation is nearly as old as the country itself. The literature on this topic is vast. Scholars have developed countless theories to explain how these processes have shaped the American character and how that character can account for the experience of various groups in their efforts to become part of American society.

As urbanization and immigration came to dominate American life, academics expanded their purview to include immigration and cultural assimilation. Robert E. Park, the University of Chicago sociologist, in his essay "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," argued that a migrant inevitably tried to live in two different cultural groups. This condition produced a "marginal man," and in the mind of the marginal man these conflicting cultures met and fused.[6] Park's writings strengthened the influence of the "melting-pot" theory. This theory—which was popularized by a play, *The Melting Pot*, written by Jewish writer Israel Zangwill and presented on Broadway in 1908—emphasizes the idea that as different ethnic groups interact, different groups of immigrants blend together, thereby creating "Americans" with American characteristics.[7] To test his hypothesis, Park launched a massive project, the Survey of Race Relations, on the West Coast. It ran from 1925 to 1927 and provided abundant data for later research on race relations and Asian American studies.

A postwar incarnation of the melting-pot theory is the "assimilation" theory developed by Milton Gordon in his classic work *Assimilation in American Life*. Gordon suggested that assimilation

in America has typically involved seven stages: cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, marital assimilation, identificational assimilation, attitude receptional assimilation, behavioral receptional assimilation, and civic assimilation.[8] However, there is no single model of the assimilation theory, as Jon Gjerde noted in his book-length study of important problems in American immigration and ethnic history.[9] Oscar Handlin portrayed immigration as an experience characterized by uprootedness—by sadness, death, and disaster.[10] Unlike Handlin, John Bodnar looked at transplantation as a dominant feature of immigration. When confronting capitalism, individual immigrants "had to sort out options, listened to all the prophets, and arrive at decisions of their own in the best manner they could."[11]

Since the 1990s the "whiteness" of European Americans has been emerging as a controversial subfield of assimilation studies. David R. Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* was one of the first historical works on whiteness. Roediger discussed how white workers in the antebellum United States came to identify themselves as white. He argued that in a racist republic in which slaveholding was legal, white workers identified themselves by what they were not: blacks and slaves. In another important study of whiteness, *Whiteness of a Difference Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobson declared that race ought to be recognized "as an ideological, political deployment rather than as a neutral, biologically determined element of nature."[12]

Scholarship on Chinese immigration has focused largely on the causes and effects of the Chinese exclusion laws during the exclusion era. Most European immigrants assimilated into the "white" American culture after generations of hard work and sacrifice; in contrast, the Chinese—along with the Japanese and Koreans—were perceived by the public as members of a peculiar and debased race and therefore as "unassimilable." For this reason the study of the peculiarity of the East Asians was long categorized as the "oriental problem."[13] Perceptions that the Chinese were "nonassimilable" contributed to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred Chinese laborers from the United States. This law was not repealed until 1943.[14] Mary Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration*, the first important study of this subject, attributed the enactment of the Chinese exclusion laws to antiforeign sentiment in California[15]—an explanation later supported by Stuart Creighton Miller.[16] More recently, Lucy E. Salyer has written about how, as soon as it was passed, the Chinese fought doggedly

to overturn the Chinese Exclusion Act.[17] Andrew Gyory regards the Chinese Exclusion Act as the precursor of the more far-reaching exclusion laws against Japanese, Koreans, and other Asians in the early 1900s, and against Europeans in the 1920s.[18]

Paul C. P. Siu was perhaps the first Chinese American scholar to propose the controversial "sojourner" hypothesis.[19] Gunther Barth similarly claims that the Chinese immigrated only to accumulate wealth and return home; thus they lacked the motivation to involve themselves in the mainstream culture.[20] In the 1960s the sojourner theory became the basis for most American scholarship on Chinese exclusion.[21]

Two decades later, scholars challenged the sojourner theory with evidence that the Chinese had been settlers from the very beginning—that in both Hawaii[22] and the continental United States they established permanent settlements and integrated into host societies. Scholars have documented that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Chinese settled around Monterey Bay, in the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, in the Rocky Mountains, and in Midwestern cities.[23]

In the postwar era, Chinese settlements have been overwhelmingly family-oriented. In the 1970s, after a century of imbalance, the male/female ratio of the Chinese American community finally achieved balance.[24] Moreover, inspired by the civil rights movement, millions of ethnic Americans began reassessing their cultural heritage and demanding that their cultures be represented more fairly in mainstream America. Academics have reflected on the demographic and social changes and have begun incorporating family and community issues into their scholarship. Rose Hum Lee studied Chinese family organization and social institutions in Chinese communities of the Rocky Mountains.[25] Stanford M. Lyman has examined family, marriage, and the community organizations among Chinese Americans.[26] One of my own studies has examined the changing roles of Chinese immigrant women in the context of marriage.[27]

Recent studies of Chinese immigrant communities have renewed interest in nationalism and ethnic identity, focusing on the impact of political, cultural, social, and economic conditions in the sending countries and on immigration and settlement patterns. Some anthropologists note that immigrants have lived their lives across geographical borders and maintained close ties to home; the term "transnationalism" has been used to describe such cross-national,

cross-cultural phenomena.[28] A number of historians have endorsed this idea in their monographs;[29] among these, Adam McKeown's recent work is exemplary.[30] Ling-chi Wang's study classifies five types of Chinese identity in the United States, all epitomized in the following Chinese phrases: (1) *luoye guigen* (the sojourner mentality), (2) *zhancao-chugen* (total assimilation), (3) *luodi shenggen* (accommodation), (4) *xungen wenzu* (ethnic pride and consciousness), and (5) *shigen qunzu* (the uprooted).[31]

Meanwhile, Asian scholars and American sinologists have associated the identity of Chinese overseas with their host countries. Wang Gungwu notes that the postwar Chinese overseas preferred to see themselves as "descendants of Chinese (*huayi* or *huaren*)" rather than as "sojourners" (*huaqiao*), and their communities as "new kinds of local-born communities."[32] Harvard scholar Tu Wei-ming proposes a broad and tripartite division of China as "cultural China," including not only "societies populated predominantly by ethnic and cultural Chinese"—Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—but also the 36 million Chinese in diaspora as well as "individual Chinese men and women . . . who try to understand China intellectually and bring their conception of China to their own linguistic community."[33]

How does the Chinese community in St. Louis fit the above models? Transnationalism emphasizes two-way or multidirectional movements of migrants; in this context, the Chinese community in St. Louis seems to stay mainly within its own social boundaries. The diasporic paradigm and the idea of cultural China remain as workable methodologies, yet they lack specificity and precision in defining a Chinese community that has integrated economically into the larger society while clinging culturally to Chinese heritage. So it is clear that we must develop a new theoretical model to interpret the Chinese American community in St. Louis since the 1960s.

THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN ST. LOUIS IN THE CONTEXTS OF CHINESE URBAN COMMUNITIES AND URBAN STUDIES

The preceding discussion of migration and assimilation theories points to the need for a new approach to examining the Chinese American community in St. Louis since the 1960s; a scrutiny of that community in the context of Chinese urban communities and urban studies underscores the need for a new theory.

Since the early twentieth century, Chinese immigration to the United States has been a mainly urban phenomenon. Table 1.1 shows that in 1930, 64 percent of the 74,954 Chinese in the United States resided in urban centers. A decade later the Chinese population was 77,504 and 71 percent lived in large American cities. By 1950 over 90 percent of the Chinese population resided in cities,[34] and the trend continues upward. Obviously, then, Chinese American studies must have a large urban-studies component, and scholars across all disciplines now realize it.

Like other immigrant groups, Chinese immigrants settled mainly in entry ports and major urban centers. In these urban settings they established their communities, known as Chinatowns. Chinatowns have evolved as integral components of the North American urban socioeconomic and cultural landscape, yet scholars have not been able to define "Chinatown" precisely. Historians and sociologists have studied Chinatowns in terms of their socioeconomic and cultural functions. When discussing the San Francisco Chinatown as it existed in 1909, historian Mary Coolidge described it as a "quarter" of the city established by the Chinese to "protect themselves and to make themselves at home."[35] Sociologist Rose Hum Lee offered a similar description of Chinatown: an area organized by Chinese "sojourners for

TABLE 1.1 Percentage of Chinese population in the United States by urban and rural residence, 1930–2000

Year	*Total*	*Urban*	*Rural*	*Percentage of Urban*
1930	74,954	47,970	26,984	64
1940	77,504	55,028	22,476	71
1950	117,140	109,036	8,104	90.5
1960	236,048	225,527	10,557	95.5
1970	431,583	417,032	14,551	96.6
1980	812,178	787,548	24,630	97.0
1990	1,648,696	1,605,841	39,631	97.6
2000	2,432,585	2,375,871	56,714	97.7

Source: Figures of 1930 and 1940 are computed according to Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America*, 105. The rest of the table is tabulated according to the U.S. Census, 1940–2000.