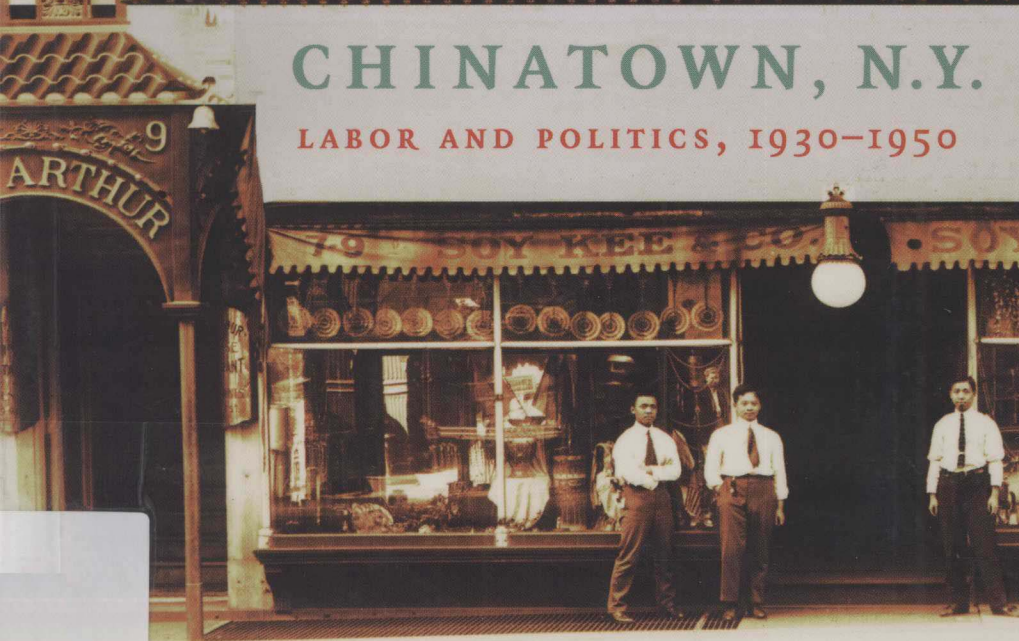


CHINATOWN, N.Y.

LABOR AND POLITICS, 1930-1950



Updated with a new Introduction and Epilogue by the author

**CHINATOWN,
NEW YORK**

ALSO BY PETER KWONG

The New Chinatown

Forbidden Workers

Chinese Americans: The Immigrant Experience

CHINATOWN, NEW YORK

Labor and Politics, 1930-1950

PETER KWONG

**Revised with a New Introduction and
Epilogue by the Author**



The New Press New York

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INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW PRESS EDITION

Written a quarter century ago, my book *Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* argued that the experience of the Chinese in this country should be approached as a national question. National differences are the primary and most conscious way people differentiate themselves. Since not all nations are equal, a hierarchy emerges among the citizens of a strong state, buoyed by an ideology of “national chauvinism,” discriminating against the citizens of weaker ones. It can also be assumed that there will be a close correspondence between a group’s treatment within the United States and the international standing of that group’s homeland. Even an American-born child of immigrants, or an immigrant who has lived here for decades, tends to be viewed as a national of his or her country of origin. National identity is thus not merely symbolic but has an enduring impact on a group’s experience in the receiving country. The fact that China had been defeated in the Opium War at the hands of a Western power, Great Britain, meant that the first wave of Chinese who arrived on the West Coast of this country in the late 1840s, soon after that war, were seen as inferior people and were treated as such.

The national approach does not challenge the primacy of race in the analysis of the American social order. However, the extraordinarily brutal history of African American slavery has com-

pletely overpowered the American understanding of race. Racial discourse in America is almost exclusively focused on conflicts between blacks and whites, rendering it inadequate for explaining the racial experiences of other groups. Moreover, the use of racial analysis alone often obscures subtle differences in the way the U.S. social system operates vis-à-vis racial subgroups. Consider the experiences of Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans. In 1941, when Japan became our enemy, Japanese Americans, 75 percent of whom were U.S.-born citizens, were sent to internment camps. China, on the other hand, was hailed as an ally, and American attitudes towards China underwent a dramatic change from contempt to admiration: in the 1920s Chinese American youngsters had been depicted in popular magazines as opium-smoking hatchet men and singsong girls, but during World War II, American sociologists began to marvel at the absence of juvenile delinquency within Chinese American communities—due, supposedly, to the Confucian upbringing of the youth. The long-standing Exclusion Act against working-class Chinese immigrants was repealed in 1943.

By the early 1950s, the relationship between China and the U.S. had changed again, after mainland Chinese troops confronted the U.S. army in the Korean War. The People's Republic of China replaced the Soviet Union as the U.S.'s most hated enemy, and the loyalty of Chinese Americans became suspect. Many were persecuted by federal authorities during the McCarthy era for their critical views of the Nationalist leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, while their political opinions and activities were kept under strict control by Chinatown's anti-Communist elite.

In the decade following this book's publication in 1979, the lives of Chinese in this country improved. At least in part, the improvement had to do with the rapprochement between the People's Republic of China and the U.S., which stemmed from their shared interest in limiting the influence of the Soviet Union. For a time, the loyalty of Chinese Americans ceased to be

an issue. But the honeymoon did not last long. In the 1990s, at the end of the Cold War, a new era of tension emerged between the two nations. While American businesses enjoyed a flourishing trading relationship with China, many Americans began to see China as the most dangerous threat to U.S. global dominance. This new twist has once again pulled relations between the two countries in another direction, affecting the position of Chinese Americans.

During President Clinton's 1996 campaign fund-raising scandal, several Chinese Americans were accused of funneling campaign money from Chinese government sources to the Democratic National Committee in an attempt to influence American politics. "Chinagate" became the focus of campaign finance investigations, despite the fact that very few Chinese Americans were involved, a very small number of soft money donations was in question, and that most of the "treasonous" Chinese connections were never established. Still the Clinton administration, ever in search of spectacles to divert public attention from its own scandals, chose not to defend the Chinese American community. The political integrity of Chinese Americans was irreparably damaged as the media and the Republican party pounded away at the issue. Many Americans assumed there were links between corrupt fund-raising practices and foreign interests after footage of Vice President Gore attending a fundraiser in a Southern California Chinese Buddhist temple was broadcast on television hundreds of times.

American mistrust of Chinese Americans has unfortunately only deepened with the Wen Ho Lee espionage case. Lee, a Chinese American physicist born in Taiwan, worked in the weapons section of the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory in New Mexico. Officials there suspected him of passing nuclear secrets to the People's Republic of China, but after three years of serious investigation, not a shred of evidence was found against him. Still, the Energy Department, which is in charge of the lab and was under intense political pressure to uncover spies in its midst, was so

frustrated by its inability to find a culprit that it decided to reveal the “ongoing investigation” of Lee to the press. Lee was put on “public trial,” but after months of scrutiny there was still no evidence against him. By then, of course, his reputation and career were in total ruin. Yet despite Lee’s innocence, the Clinton administration, fearing accusations of appeasement of China, indicted and arrested him—not on charges of espionage but for improper handling of top-secret computer files. Lee was shackled and held in solitary confinement for nine months and was freed only after expression of intense public outrage, especially from Chinese Americans and from the wider scientific community. Even James Parker, the presiding judge over the case, publicly apologized to Dr. Lee, just before releasing him, for the government’s embarrassing “racial profiling” tactic.

The callous manner in which the press treated this racially sensitive issue and the cowardly way the administration handled the case have sent chills through other Chinese Americans who work in defense-related or other sensitive industries. Many complain of harassment by suddenly suspicious superiors; others have had their top-secret clearance status revoked for no apparent reason. Lee’s experience recalls the worst days of the Cold War era, when Americans simply could not separate their private attitudes about Chinese Americans from the national policy towards China.

Still, the main objective of writing this book is to fill in a critical gap in understanding Chinese American experience. Much of Chinese-American history, like the history of all oppressed groups, remains hidden or has been misconceived. While there is ample documentation of the discriminatory treatment meted out to the Chinese in this country, scant acknowledgment has been made of the popular response and resistance to such measures. The result has been to perpetuate a stereotype of Chinese passivity that is very much at odds with historical reality, particularly in the turbulent years from the mid-1930s to the early

1950s. This book, then, will attempt to reconstruct the history of the labor movement in New York's Chinatown during this crucial period, to recount a story of activism and struggle that has too long remained untold.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, many Chinese in New York banded into labor organizations in an attempt to win employment opportunities and job security. Traditional social and political associations controlled by the local merchant elites had long dominated Chinatown; now new organizations, formed by laundrymen, seamen, restaurant workers, and the unemployed, increasingly posed a challenge to the existing power structure. This labor movement was not, of course, purely a response to internal conditions. Against the background of the most severe depression in U.S. history, the U.S. labor movement as a whole had launched a drive to unionize the unskilled, the minorities, and the unemployed in a program that had much in common with the ideological and political thrust of the Chinese workers' organizing efforts and was bound to influence them. Then too, New York's Chinatown received a certain revolutionary impetus from China itself, where progressive forces were struggling to establish a new nation free of feudal autocracy and corruption.

Why the specific focus of the labor movement in Chinatown? Because the overwhelming majority of Chinese emigrants, fleeing oppressive political and economic conditions in their homeland, came to the United States in search of a better future as *workers*. Hence, the history of the Chinese as a group in this country is largely a history of their experiences as part of the working class—but a part so marginal, exploited, and vulnerable to economic fluctuations that no genuine improvement in their status was possible as long as they were denied freer access into the U.S. labor market. The labor movement of the 1930s represented the first organized attempt by Chinese workers to move into the mainstream of the U.S. labor force and away from the low-paying, labor-intensive jobs—in laundries and restau-

rants, for example—to which they had been traditionally restricted. This attempt proved unsuccessful, yet its very failure is instructive, demonstrating the crucial role played by public attitudes toward the Chinese immigrants and thus ultimately addressing the reality of the extent of their integration into U.S. society.

But ultimately, the motivation for writing this book was a personal one. After years of activism in the antiwar and civil rights movements, and later in organizing the working people of New York's Chinatown, I felt I needed to reflect in order to understand the problems of my political work. The residents of Chinatown, whom other community activists and I had been trying to organize, were interested in our social service programs but were not responsive to our political messages for social change. They were angry at discrimination against the Chinese, but were unmoved by the call for Third World unity. They were curious to learn about mainland China, especially through Chinese-produced films, but their interest derived from a sense of national pride and not from their support of Chinese socialism. My need for reflection became even more intense in the mid-1970s when activities had begun to ebb. By then, the movement had turned against itself—it became plagued by self-consuming polemical attacks, mutual accusations of incorrect political lines, and the labeling of traitors to the cause. We had been too close to each other and too emotionally involved with our work to be able to evaluate our own political practices objectively.

Through my academic research, and quite by chance, I discovered an earlier period of American activism between the 1930s and the 1950s when a similarly high level of political mobilization had occurred both domestically and internationally. Moreover, it was a period when earlier radicals, influenced by socialist ideology, had attempted to organize there as well. My

research was aimed at gaining insights from the 1930s to help me understand my work in the 1970s.

The radicals of the 1930s had also failed because they had tried to graft abstract Marxist class theory onto the Chinese community. They could see the oppression and the exploitation only along the lines of a two-class struggle—capitalists versus workers. However, due to discrimination and legal exclusion, American Chinatowns had developed a highly distorted class structure. Forced to live and work in Chinatowns, few Chinese had become members of the industrial working class, since there were no large-scale industries there. When Chinatown residents, enlightened about the benefits of class struggle, failed to react politically, the radicals accused them of passivity. Meanwhile, Chinese laundrymen were waging a powerful campaign against Chinatown's traditional feudal associations, which were controlled by business owners and landlords—but conventional Marxists could not see the potential of this movement.

Learning about the mistakes made by the leftists of the 1930s taught me to be a better political analyst and a more mature activist. I hoped that this book would provoke fellow activists to engage in serious debate and self-evaluation.

At the present time, when public discussion focuses on post-Cold War globalization, the Internet, and the market economy, it might seem odd to reissue this book—which, in deference to history, has not been changed, save for an epilogue and this new introduction. Yet class struggles, racial conflicts, and national liberalization movements are still very much a part of our present global realities, although they remain in a quiet state of germination in this country. Having the book in print again is also a way to challenge the growing urge to revise history. Both in the U.S. and in China, a much-promoted and very popular view is that the repression unleashed by the Cold War was not really that great. There are even those who are attempting to whitewash the image of Senator Joe McCarthy, who led the vicious political persecution of thousands of innocent Americans. This revisionist posi-

tion argues that McCarthy was essentially right, given the fate of the left and Communism. Such interpretations attempt to erase the enormous strife faced by the oppressed not only here at home but around the world. We can only counter that erasure by documenting the heroic day-to-day struggles of common people, as I tried to do for the working people of New York's Chinatown.

RESEARCH SOURCES

Written material relating to New York's Chinatown during the 1930–1950 period is scarce but there is considerable information to be found in several local Chinese newspapers of the time, and it on these that this research is primarily based. The four newspapers used as major sources cover the full political spectrum: *Chinese Nationalist Daily* (*Min-ch'i jih-pao*) (1928–1938), a conservative paper and chief representative of the official Kuo-mintang press; *Chinese Vanguard* (*Hsien-fung pao*) (1930–1937), a radical Marxist weekly; *Hsin Pao* (1942–1948), a liberal but politically neutral newspaper; and *China Daily News* (*Huach'iao jih-pao*) (1940–1955), a left-wing paper which at one point had the largest circulation in Chinatown.

As for oral sources, interviews with old residents of New York's Chinatown yielded insights into the labor movements there, while the recollections of activists of the period—leaders from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), National Maritime Union (NMU), International Workers' Order (IWO), Communist Party–USA (CP-USA), and many other groups—provided data on Chinese involvement in U.S. labor and political movements. Since any interviewer may lack “objectivity,” and since the subjects were being asked to recall events that had occurred some forty years earlier, the oral information is used primarily to verify written materials and to help reconstruct events. Oral sources are cited only when written ones were unavailable;

because of the political sensitivity of the topic, the participants had to remain anonymous.

For more general information, many Chinese and English secondary sources were consulted, including historical texts, trade journals, organizational periodicals, political pamphlets, court records, and even contemporary novels that helped construct an accurate picture of the period.

