

STUDIES IN ASIAN AMERICANS

# Diaspora and Class Consciousness

Chinese Immigrant Workers  
in Multiracial Chicago

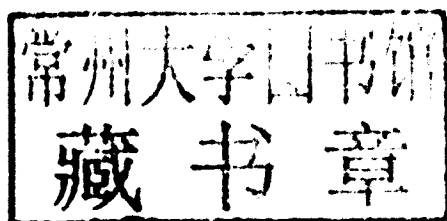
Shanshan Lan



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# **Studies in Asian Americans: Reconceptualizing Culture, History, and Politics**

FRANKLIN NG, *General Editor*

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Chinese Immigrant Workers in Multiracial Chicago

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**To My Family in China**

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# Introduction

## Is This What You Call Racial Discrimination?

“There are variants of racism in the United States and a textured complexity to the problems of race and ethnicity that escape unnoticed if—after noting the basic black-white dichotomy in American society—one probes no deeper.”

—Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*

“Challenging the dominant racial ideology inherently involves not only reconceptualizing one’s own racial identity, but a reformulation of the meaning of race in general.”

—Michael Omi and Howard Winant,  
*Racial Formation in the United States*

It was October 23, 2005, a Sunday afternoon, when I returned to my apartment in Bridgeport. Uncle Lu, my Cantonese landlord, told me that somebody had thrown eggs at our windows the night before. “It must be those white kids. I heard there was a ball game last night,” Aunt Lu said.<sup>1</sup> It suddenly dawned on me that the White Sox, a Major League Baseball team based in Chicago, had just won a game the evening before.<sup>2</sup> Having heard enough stories about Chinese immigrants being the victims of interracial harassment in Bridgeport, I told Uncle Lu firmly, “We need to report this to the police!” “What’s the use? We don’t speak English,” Aunt Lu replied. I requested that Uncle Lu not clean the window, telling him, “We need to leave some evidence for the police.” Uncle Lu took a hard look at me. Then he asked cautiously, “Is this what you call racial discrimination?” This was not the first time that Uncle Lu had unwittingly reminded me that it was I, the anthropologist, who had brought the term “racial discrimination” into their lives. Over the course of my one-year stay with this Cantonese immigrant family in Bridgeport, Uncle Lu prodded me with that term—which he thought of as “my term”—every time I got frustrated over some negative encounter in the neighborhood.

Despite my protest, Uncle Lu proceeded to clean the window. But this did not stop him from complaining, “There were at least 20 broken eggs

on the ground. When the policeman comes Monday, tell him how hard it is for two elderly people to clean this window.” Half an hour later, when the couple finally finished cleaning, Uncle Lu raised his right hand and shouted jokingly, “*Da Dao Meiguo* (Down with America)!” Uncle Lu’s dramatic performance reminded us all of a popular slogan from the Mao era, when the United States was denounced as the imperialist enemy of communist China. We all chuckled in unison. Since both Uncle Lu and his wife came of age during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, it is no surprise that they resort to Maoist slogans to express their frustration and disappointment with how white people treat Chinese immigrants in Bridgeport.

Uncle Lu’s hesitation to embrace the term “racial discrimination” and his performance of the Maoist stereotype reveal a major paradox in Chinese immigrant workers’ development of racial knowledge in the United States. Though they are the easiest and most likely targets for interracial harassment by whites in Bridgeport, Chinese immigrant workers seldom articulate their plight in racial terms. Why do immigrant workers like Uncle Lu not find the term “racial discrimination” useful for describing their daily experiences? What barriers do they encounter in naming racism in its particular form? How do they overcome these barriers? This book tells the story of a relatively invisible population within the Chinese American community, the working class, and seeks to answer some of these critical questions. Throughout the book I prefer to use the term “Chinese immigrant workers” because many of my research subjects do not really belong to the mainstream working class due to persistent racial segregation in the U.S. labor market. I define “Chinese immigrant workers” as Chinese immigrants with limited English-language skills who work primarily at low-skilled, blue-collar service jobs at the extreme margins of the U.S. economy. I focus on this group because of their doubly marginalized status: as perpetual foreigners in the eyes of mainstream U.S. society and as ignorant, childlike figures in need of constant guidance and discipline in the eyes of their middle-class co-ethnics.

In reality, the Lu family’s struggle to maintain a home in a multiracial Chicago neighborhood defies popular stereotypes of Chinese immigrants as either ethnic-enclave dwellers who are totally isolated from mainstream U.S. society, or the assimilated model minority who resides in an affluent American suburb. Surprisingly, a good body of recent literature on Chinese American communities is also polarized into enclave studies and middle-class suburban studies.<sup>3</sup> This book ventures to tell a different story of Chinese America. It moves away from the enclave paradigm by situating the Chinese immigrant experience within the larger context of the multiracial transformation of the urban U.S. landscape. I argue that Chinese immigrant workers’ racial learning is conditioned not only by their transnational migration experience, but by their various and contradictory racializations in relation to poor African Americans and Latinos in a multiracial urban environment.<sup>4</sup> I also reconsider the suburban/city divide by examining

middle-class Chinese Americans' role as cultural brokers in initiating new immigrants into the dominant U.S. race and class system.<sup>5</sup> Far from being a matter of personal choice, new Chinese immigrants' development of racial knowledge in the United States is a complex process that reflects structural constraints in the receiving country, as well as power relations between individuals, interest groups, and authorities at both the institutional and community levels.

## NOT JUST BLACK AND WHITE<sup>6</sup>

A Black-and-white framework has traditionally dominated popular understandings of race relations in the United States, and it still resonates powerfully in today's U.S. society. With the election of Barack Obama as the first African American U.S. president in 2008, the United States was celebrated as having ushered in the "post-racial" era. However, one year later, the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., the renowned Harvard Professor, in his own home by a white police officer served as a slap in the face to the post-racial argument. While the Black-and-white power struggle still looms large in American politics, the future of so-called "in-between" groups—Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans—is still unclear in the public imaginary.<sup>7</sup> Recently, scholars have come up with several new models to accommodate changing race relations in the United States; for example, the tri-racial system, the black/nonblack divide, and racial triangulation theory.<sup>8</sup> Although this literature adds nuances to understanding the Asian American and Latino experiences by acknowledging the existence of a continuum within the U.S. racial hierarchy, it does not fundamentally challenge the Black-white polarity in defining U.S. race relations. What I attempt to do is bridge the gap between a U.S.-centered understanding of race as based primarily on the Black-white binary and a transnational perspective generated by recent scholarship on migration and transnationalism.<sup>9</sup> While documenting both the limitations and the persistence of the Black-white dichotomy in framing the Chinese immigrant experience in Chicago, I also explore alternative racial-knowledge formation among Chinese and Mexican migrant workers based on their shared background of transnational migration and structural marginalization within the U.S. nation-state.

In the field of Asian American studies, scholars have been challenging the Black-white binary by emphasizing important connections between Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos.<sup>10</sup> Following this literature, my research uses an interracial perspective to explore Chinese immigrant workers' experiences of racialization in relation to poor African Americans and Latinos in a multiracial urban setting. Drawing from Omi and Winant's idea of "racialization" and Earl Lewis' idea of "overlapping diasporas," I propose to examine the Chinese American case study through a framework of "overlapping racializations"; namely, I acknowledge that



the racialization of Chinese Americans in Bridgeport is mediated by both the neighborhood's history of white racial violence against Blacks, and the stigmatization of Latino immigrants as the problem minority.<sup>11</sup> An "overlapping" framework is useful for at least three reasons. First, it draws attention to the interrelatedness of different minority experiences without losing sight of white domination. Second, it challenges the Black-white binary as a flat model by introducing multiple levels of racial formation based on class, gender, language, citizenship, and immigration status. Finally, it rejects a one-dimensional conceptualization of racism as based on the superiority/inferiority axis and points to new ways of theorizing race relations between immigrant and U.S.-born minorities.<sup>12</sup>

To a certain extent, Uncle Lu's playful evocation of a Maoist slogan in the opening vignette draws attention to the transnational and cross-cultural nature of racial knowledge production. With the recognition that new immigrants' racial learning starts long before their arrival to the United States, I examine how Chinese immigrants' development of knowledge about race is shaped by the geo-political environment in Mainland China (where the majority of my working-class informants come from), their pre-migration encounters with global media, and their post-migration experiences of multiracial politics in Chicago.<sup>13</sup> I find historian Eiichiro Azuma's "inter-National" perspective particularly helpful in describing the working-class Chinese immigrant experience in Chicago. Despite their desire to make the United States their permanent home, many Chinese immigrant workers are constantly reminded of their "foreigner" status by daily incidents, like what happened to the Lu family. According to Azuma, an inter-National perspective not only challenges the bounded meanings of nation and race, but emphasizes "the interstitial (not transcendental) nature" of immigrant lives between two nation-states.<sup>14</sup> Instead of a process of transitioning into full-fledged Americans, working-class Chinese immigrants' daily lives in Bridgeport are marked by an interstitial existence between two nation-states: China and the U.S. Although more privileged Chinese immigrants, such as the Hong Kong business elites Aihwa Ong has studied, also encounter limits to their upward mobility in the United States, it is primarily working-class immigrants, those struggling at the margins of the U.S. economy, who experience the most profound sense of interstitial existence.<sup>15</sup>

This book reveals that there are important class distinctions in Chinese American transnational practices. Unlike Ong's Hong Kong elites, who hold multiple foreign passports and whose possession of transnational capital enables them to practice flexible citizenship in the Western world, the Chinese immigrant workers in this study are part of the global process of transnational labor migration from the Third World to the United States. While U.S. citizenship may confer wealth and prestige to Hong Kong cosmopolitans, it can also impose serious legal restrictions on the daily lives of Chinese immigrant workers. Many of them cannot afford multiple trips to China due to financial concerns. Frequent travel outside the U.S. can also