

SHAPING AND RESHAPING CHINESE AMERICAN IDENTITY

JINGYI SONG

NEW YORK'S CHINESE DURING THE
DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II

D634.371.2

E20112

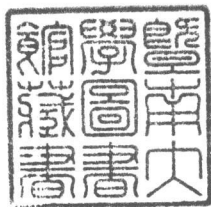
42

华人中心

Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity

*New York's Chinese during
the Depression and World War II*

Jingyi Song



LEXINGTON BOOKS
A division of

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Published by Lexington Books

A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

<http://www.lexingtonbooks.com>

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

Copyright © 2010 by Lexington Books

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Song, Jingyi, 1950—

Shaping and reshaping Chinese American identity : New York's Chinese during the Depression and World War II / Jingyi Song.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7391-4307-0 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-7391-4309-4 (electronic)

1. Chinese Americans—New York (State)—New York—History—20th century.

2. Chinese Americans—New York (State)—New York—Social conditions—20th

century. 3. Chinese Americans—New York (State)—New York—Economic

conditions—20th century. 4. Chinese Americans—Societies, etc. 5. Chinese


Americans—Ethnic identity. 6. Depressions—1929—New York (State)—New York.

7. World War, 1939–1945—Chinese Americans. I. Title.

F128.9.C5S67 2010

305.895'10747109043—dc22

2009053701

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Shaping and Reshaping
Chinese American Identity

To my father, Professor Jingying Song, who encouraged
me to fulfill my goal but never got the chance to see my work



Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the completion of this project and I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to them.

I am immeasurably indebted to Dolores Greenberg for her intellectual guidance and constructive suggestions when the project started. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Thomas Kessner for his critical comments. I also want to extend my thanks to Pyong Gap Min for his helpful advice and inspiration.

I am grateful to other professors and to my friends for their knowledgeable suggestions and emotional support, particularly Susan Newman, Duane Tananbaum, Hans Trefousse, Carol Gee, Binita Mehta, Pia Mukherji, Lori Lohman, and Kathy Johnson. I am indebted to the librarians and staff at the Mina Rees Library of the Graduate School of CUNY for their professional assistance in my research. I also owe special gratitude to the archivists at the Union Theological Seminary, the Municipal Archives of New York City, and the Museum of Chinese in America in New York's Chinatown, who made it possible for me to explore the materials needed for my research.

My gratitude also goes to my colleagues who offered advice and constructive suggestions when the project was being transformed into the book. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to James Llana for his generous support. The project could never have been completed without those who provided help. My thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers, who endorsed the manuscript enthusiastically while making useful suggestions. I am deeply

grateful to Julie E. Kirsch, editorial director, and Joseph Parry of Lexington Books for their efficiency and editorial suggestions.

My deepest thanks and appreciation go to my family and relatives and for their support, especially my daughter, Jie, and her husband, Adam Cataldo, whose academic achievements inspired me in a special way.

Breinigsville, PA USA
24 May 2010

238518BV00003B/10/P





Contents

	Acknowledgments	ix
	Introduction	1
Chapter 1	New York's Chinese Community before the 1930s	9
Chapter 2	The Great Depression and Economic Organizations	33
Chapter 3	The Great Depression and Cultural Organizations	63
Chapter 4	The Great Depression and Political Organizations	91
Chapter 5	War and New York's Chinese Community	115
Chapter 6	Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath	145
	Conclusion	173
	Bibliography	179
	Index	195



Introduction

According to the most recent historical scholarship, the emergence of a “new” Chinese immigrant community in New York City dates from the federal immigration law of 1965, which lifted restrictive quota provisions.¹ College graduates and technical personnel comprised a large portion of the influx of new Chinese immigrants.² Their educational sophistication and technical skills, it is said, enabled them to adapt themselves to modern American society and to inject a dynamic element that significantly changed the community they found in New York City.³ Few studies have investigated the Chinese community of the 1930s and 1940s, when the groundwork for the dramatic transformation of the 1960s and 1970s was actually laid.

Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity: New York's Chinese during the Depression and World War II focuses on the remaking of the Chinese community in New York City from the Depression years to the end of World War II. Daniel J. Elazar suggests that community “is an exceedingly complex organism. It is not a highly integrated structure but a loosely knit system of institutions, organizations, groups, families, and individuals whose roles and areas of concerns are relatively specialized, often overlapping, and not infrequently shifting.”⁴ Benjamin B. Ringer and Elinor R. Lawless believe that the formation of an ethnic community is a distinctive societal phenomenon. These scholars see community as a consequence of the interplay of power, polity, and policies of the larger society imposed upon racial minorities. Membership in an ethnic group is “primarily a function of birth—a matter of ascription rather than of voluntary choice.”⁵ Emphasizing the shared belief

system and common national origin, Ringer and Lawless apply the theories of “we-ness” and “they-ness” to analyze the dynamics within an ethnic community and the impact of the political-economic order of society upon ethnic communities.

I find these theories useful as I am particularly interested in exploring the diversity of experiences among different interest groups of the Chinese in New York City and how their changing perspectives contributed to transformations in the attitudes of the larger non-Asian community. Among the questions I will address, for example, are: What changes and continuities occurred within the city’s Chinese community in the years of the Depression and World War II contributing to its transformation? How did different groups of Chinese react in these years to the persistent discrimination perpetuated in American society? Racism was rooted in the Anglo-Saxon white supremacist culture of the United States. Social scientists have shown how it penetrated the life of Americans. Like other racial minorities, the Chinese in New York experienced sanctions, segregation, prejudice, and discrimination. They were racially labeled as Mongolians, a yellow menace, and heathens. However, they did not passively accept the stamp of racial inferiority. Instead, they resisted.

Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity investigates the experiences of Chinese New Yorkers in their varied struggles for racial equality. It also examines the development of institutions created by the Chinese to integrate themselves into mainstream activities as a means of claiming their rights as American citizens. This institutional analysis will demonstrate how second-generation immigrants’ conscious decisions regarding their future in a hostile environment helped to form a new dual identity for themselves and change the way other New Yorkers saw them.

The Chinese community in New York City has been a social mosaic since its formation in the 1840s. Sailors and merchants, together with a labor force that either came from Cuba, Peru, and Canada or remained after the completion of the first transcontinental railways in the 1860s, made up a large part of the pioneer generation. Scholars and professionals constituted the gentry that provided community leadership as they had at home.

Seeking opportunities and a better life, these people worked hard to attain their goals. However, the hostile political and social climate, specifically the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law that barred Chinese immigrants from entering this country and prohibited their naturalization on the basis of race, made it difficult, sometimes impossible, for them to achieve their goals. Excluded by society, many preferred to stay in their own ethnic enclave for self-protection.

For decades after the enforcement of the exclusion law, New York's Chinese, like the Chinese in cities in the West, fought for their survival as well as for legal recognition of equality in this country. They filed civil suits against the unequal treatment. They participated in demonstrations to ensure that their protests would be publicly heard. The shared experience of being Chinese and living under the shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Law brought Chinese of different ages and classes together to fight for racial equality.

Before the 1930s, struggles for justice had traditionally been confined within the frame of the elite in the Chinese community. When the Great Depression plagued the country, demands for change took a completely different course. Traditionally, New York's Chinese had turned to charitable organizations and local district associations for help during hard times. The Great Depression was so severe and persistent that traditional ethnic institutions could not meet the needs of thousands of people who had lost their businesses and jobs. Instead, desperate unemployed laborers, restaurant workers, and self-employed laundrymen organized to protect their interests. The formation of labor organizations such as the Lien Yi Society and the Chinese Unemployed Council and small business associations such as the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance and the Chinese American Restaurant Association of Greater New York were new to the Chinese community. Independent of elite control and local district affiliations, these groups challenged longstanding Chinese community authorities.

In their efforts to survive, these new organizations integrated their activities into the larger society. The creation of labor alliances with other American labor unions and the demands of Chinese small businessmen for equality demonstrated their desire for change. The activities of New York's Chinese labor organizations, in particular, resulted in the development of a new class consciousness. As important, the Chinese in New York called for government relief during the Depression, indicating a growing awareness of both the government's role in aiding the needy and their own right as citizens to request such assistance.

New York's Chinese had been forced to withdraw into their own community to protect themselves from unnecessary risks since the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882. Their reactions and activities in the Depression demonstrated shifting attitudes toward society. In coping with prejudice and hostility, the 1930s marked a turning point from isolation to involvement.

Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity points to the importance of a politically mature second generation. The younger generation of Chinese Americans saw the United States as "the land of the free and the home

of the brave," but the realities of racial intolerance intruded upon their dreams and efforts to improve their lives. They were stereotyped, lumped together as opium smokers, cheap labor, and filthy heathens who ate rats and cats. The Depression made it even more difficult for them to survive.

After repeated rejection of their status as Americans, the young increasingly turned to political participation as a means of protection against discrimination. Growing political consciousness accounts for such organizations as the New York Chinese American Voting League and the Chinese American Citizens Alliance and their significant participation in local and national political activities. Their involvement in both the 1932 and the 1936 presidential campaigns demonstrated their insistence on political democracy and their intention to be included in the system.

Recent publications about Chinese American identity in the 1930s such as Wayne Hung Wong's book and Gloria H. Chun's article concluded that racism alienated Chinese Americans and reinforced their identity as Chinese rather than American.⁶ Yet the experiences of Chinese New Yorkers demonstrated a complexity in search of identity with a desire for racial equality as they pursued recognition as Americans. In addition to participating in mainstream politics, young Chinese New Yorkers also involved themselves in social and educational activities as a means of self-expression and a way of shaping their Chinese American identity. Evidence of their growing self-awareness can be found in the cultural and educational activities of clubs such as the Ging Hawk Club and the Chinese Athletic Club, as well as essay contests, musical performances, art exhibitions, and bilingual Chinese- and English-language learning programs. Team sports, especially those that required opponents, provided a new mode of contact between Chinese American youths and other ethnic groups. The principle of "play to win" encouraged both pride in their Chinese heritage and confidence in integrating themselves into society as Americans.

Identity gained as Chinese Americans during the Depression paralleled international events of the 1930s that also contributed to a newly found sense of Chinese American identity. Identification with their ethnic heritage escalated in 1937 when Japan invaded China. Calling their support "American spiritual and material help," New York's Chinese contributed \$56 million to civilian relief work in China during the nine years from 1937 to 1945. Advocating for China's military defense, Chinese New Yorkers established military personnel training institutions such as the New York Chinatown Naval Academy and the Association of Chinese American Youth to Support China and the War, and Chinese American volunteers went to the war front.

In the studies on the Chinese American search for identity, Him Mark Lai and Shih-shan Henry Tsai maintain that the enthusiastic support for China's defense came out of the desire to have a strong nation to back overseas Chinese.⁷ However, evidence reveals the need for a different, more inclusive perspective. We need to take into account that Chinese Americans joined the American military to defend the United States. A Chinese American identity is a more accurate explanation of support for both China and the United States. After two and three generations, the Chinese in the United States developed strong patriotic feelings for the land where they lived and worked. War activities for both the United States and China also contributed to the cohesion of New York's Chinese community, exemplified in the work of organizations such as the New York Overseas-Chinese Anti-Japanese Association and the Chinese War Relief Association of America.

World War II provided the opportunity to intensify efforts to repeal the exclusion laws and legalize the status of all Chinese immigrants. Chinese American women, stereotyped as passive and obedient, played an important role. They took the lead in intensified lobbying efforts. Their organization, the Chinese Women's Association of New York, initiated a campaign to lobby Congress for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Law. During the war, they assumed nontraditional roles; in addition to their activities to raise money in support of both the Chinese and American war efforts, Chinese women joined the American army.

In 1943, Congress passed the repeal bill that terminated the sixty-one years of Chinese exclusion legislation. Scholars generally agree that the repeal bill of 1943 was a consequence of American war considerations to combat Japanese war propaganda and to keep China as America's war ally.⁸ This book explores the efforts of New York's ordinary Chinese Americans. Their commitment to racial equality and their dedication to the American war effort also contributed to the repeal, and in the process changed the attitude of Americans. American organizations such as the Citizens Committee in New York were established to support the Chinese. When the war was over, New York's Chinese were no longer viewed as docile, apolitical, or uncommunicative. Instead, they had established themselves as loyal and valuable members of society and altered mainstream perception.

The Great Depression and World War II provided a tremendous impetus for the Chinese in New York to realize their goals of integrating themselves into mainstream American life as citizens. But it was the Chinese themselves who finally brought change.

Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity consists of six chapters. The first chapter provides background information. It examines the forma-

tion and experiences of the Chinese community in New York prior to the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882. It also investigates how racism created and perpetuated the isolation of New York's Chinese. It details how segregation and discrimination were inextricably linked in their experience from the 1880s to the 1930s.

Chapter 2 describes Chinese unemployment in New York in the years of the Great Depression. It also discusses the responses of New York's Chinese, particularly the newly founded labor unions and small businessmen's associations, to the devastating situation. One of the consequences of their efforts was the decline of the traditional structure of the Chinese community as people took more responsibilities for the welfare of their own.

Chapters 3 and 4 seek to understand the impact of the Depression on the second generation of Chinese immigrants. Economic hardship intensified racial discrimination. As a consequence, they found it difficult to get jobs in a society where they were stereotyped as aliens. The findings of these two chapters demonstrate their awareness of the intensified racial discrimination and how they were actively involved in mainstream political and cultural events as a means of protesting racial inequality. Chapter 3 focuses on their organized cultural activities in search of Chinese American identities, while chapter 4 emphasizes their growing political consciousness demonstrated in their active participation in federal and local elections as a means of claiming their rights as American citizens.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the experiences of New York's Chinese in the war years before and after Pearl Harbor. New York's Chinese support of China in wartime reflected their identity of being both Chinese and Americans. Like other ethnic groups, Chinese Americans appealed for support of their country of origin. As we will see, they participated in varied organized activities in support of China's military defense and they raised money for civilian relief. As Chinese Americans, they joined American military forces to defend this country. *Shaping and Reshaping Chinese American Identity* also examines their participation in wartime production. It argues that their contributions to the war front and to the home front eventually brought up the issue of the Chinese exclusion laws for reconsideration. The book concludes by relating the active participation of the Chinese in New York during the war years to the national movement for racial equality that resulted in new federal legislation.

The conclusion summarizes the themes based on the findings of the ways in which the Depression and World War II created the momentum for Chinese Americans to break down the barriers of exclusion. Engagement rather than disengagement in American society became a major shift in the politi-

cal behavior of Chinese Americans in New York. This political strategy assisted the growing consciousness of Chinese Americans and brought them together to improve the life of the Chinese community in New York.

The reader should keep in mind that New York's Chinese lived in different geographic locations such as Brooklyn and Queens, not just in "Chinatown" in Lower Manhattan, as is sometimes implied. Therefore, I use the term "Chinese community" in discussing this ethnic group. For the "second-generation Chinese immigrants," I mean the generation born in the United States around the 1910s and 1920s, to distinguish them from foreign-born Chinese.

Many of the primary sources for my research were in Chinese and I have used Pingyin, a popular phonetic system for the translation of names and geographic locations. But I also keep some popular names as they were translated according to the Wade-Giles phonetic system more familiar to English readers.

Notes

1. Hsiang-Shui Chen, *Chinatown No More* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy 1850–1990* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993); Jan Lin, *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Franklin Ng, *Asian American: Re-conceptualizing Cultures, History, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Huping Ling, *Chinese St. Louis: from Enclave to Cultural Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

2. Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 195; Bernard Wong, "The Chinese: New Immigrants in New York's Chinatown," in *New Immigrants in New York*, ed. Nancy Foner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 246; Pyong Gap Min, *Asian Americans Contemporary Trends and Issues* (New York: Sage Publications, 1995).

3. Sue Fawn Chung, "Fighting for Their American Rights," *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era*, ed. K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 119; also see Herbert R. Barringer, Robert W. Gardner, and Michael J. Levin, *Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1993), 37–38; Leon F. Birvoer and Anthony J. Agresta, "The Future Asian Population of the United States," in *Pacific Bridges: The New Immigration from Asian and the Pacific Islands*, ed. James T. Fawcett and Benjamin V. Carino (Staten Island, N.Y.: Center for Migration Studies, 1987).

4. Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), 9.

5. Benjamin B. Ringer and Elinor R. Lawless, *Race-Ethnicity and Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 5.

6. Wayne Hung Wong, *American Paper Son: A Chinese Immigrant in the Midwest* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Gloria H. Chun, "Go West . . . To China': Chinese American Identity in the 1930's," in *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities during the Exclusion Era*, ed. K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 174.

7. H. M. Lai, *The Chinese of America: 1785–1980* (San Francisco: Chinese Cultural Foundation, 1980); Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

8. John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); Fred Riggs, *Pressures on Congress: A Study of the Repeal of Chinese Exclusion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1950)