

BEING CHINESE

BECOMING CHINESE AMERICAN

SHEHONG CHEN

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*Being Chinese,
Becoming Chinese American*



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BEING CHINESE,
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THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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A list of books in the series appears at the end of this book.

Foreword

Shehong Chen is one of the growing cohort of scholars from the People's Republic of China with American doctorates who are transforming Chinese American studies. In this book she asks the primal question, first asked by the French sojourner Crèvecoeur in 1782, "What then is an American?" And although her research examines only one specific group of people at a particular time—American Chinese in the early twentieth century—her answers have relevance for the whole question of identity and loyalty in an immigrant-based society.

Unlike many of those who came to the United States in the great century of immigration that ran from 1820 to 1924, most Chinese had a clear sense of who they were. They called themselves *gamsanhaak*, or "gold mountain guests." (The Chinese characters for *San Francisco* also mean "gold mountain.") In other words, despite residence in America, they continued to think of themselves as Chinese sojourners in an alien land. By the end of 1920s, Chen argues, this was no longer the case. Her work seeks out evidence for the process by which this fundamental change took place.

She finds her answers chiefly in the faded pages of three Chinese American newspapers published in San Francisco, the cultural center of Chinese America. These publications were not so much commercial enterprises as organs for different sectors of the community. All of the papers were concerned with a modern China; all saw republicanism as the ideal, the only possible future structure of China's government; but each defined it—and China—in a different way. As Chen puts it, "For *Young China*, only a republican form of government could realize the

three principles of the people, namely nationalism, democracy, and people's livelihood. For *Chung Sai Yat Po*, only republicanism would guarantee liberty or freedom, equality, and universal love. For *Chinese World*, constitutionalism was the essence of modern China."

But all three newspapers also paid an increasing amount of attention to Chinese in the United States, and what Chen demonstrates most effectively are the ways in which these concerns went hand in hand. Without losing their focus on China—a focus that was heightened during the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s—American Chinese became increasingly aware that their lives and, perhaps more importantly, the lives of their children were going to be played out in the New World, not in the Old.

This theme resonates throughout the American experience. Contemporary nativists are uneasy about the sometimes intense homeland ties of recent immigrants. They complain that many Mexican Americans pay closer attention to Mexican than to American politics, for example, and that they root for a Mexican soccer team even when (especially if?) it is playing an American opponent. What Chen demonstrates once more is the fatuity of Crèvecoeur's notions about acculturation. Rather than a total and seemingly instant shift from one set of allegiances to another, what usually occurs, as Chen shows us for the Chinese American case, is a gradual, sometimes all but imperceptible accretional change from one set of values and loyalties to another.

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Contents

<i>Foreword by Roger Daniels</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	i
1. <i>A Search for a Modern China and Challenges to Traditional Chinese Identity, 1911</i>	9
2. <i>Defending Chinese Republicanism and Debating Chineseness in the United States, 1912–14</i>	43
3. <i>Constructing a Chinese American Identity, 1915</i>	76
4. <i>An Ideological Foundation of the Chinese American Identity, 1916–24</i>	112
5. <i>Building Permanent Chinese American Communities and Displaying American Chinatown Culture, 1920–27</i>	146
<i>Appendix: Political Events in China, 1898–1924</i>	179
<i>Notes</i>	185
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	229

Introduction

This is a study of the transformation of Chinese identity in the United States between 1911 and 1927. My research interest in this subject matter began when I was a graduate student at the University of Utah. In the early 1990s, I interviewed four Chinese Americans in Salt Lake City for a graduate paper. Three of my interviewees were American-born Chinese, and one came to the United States with her parents when she was a baby. My interviewees showed pride in their Chinese heritage. They told me stories of how they practiced Chinese rituals and celebrated Chinese traditional festivals at home. They also described different encounters of racially oriented prejudice and discrimination and various efforts they had made in fighting for equal rights and opportunities as minority people in the United States.

When I asked them about their thoughts of and connections with China, they became hesitant and worried. One of them said that China could have done better without communism; another asked me whether it was safe to make financial investments in China; still another remembered his experience as an American soldier in the Korean War and how "we were pushed back by them [the Chinese] to the 38th parallel"; and the fourth interviewee expressed disapproval of the Chinese government's action in the 1989 student democracy movement. However, they all expressed their desire to see a strong China and hoped they could do something to help strengthen their ancestral land.¹

The findings from the interviews were not surprising; they actually reinforced an observation I had been making. I visited Chinatowns, made a few friends among Chinese Americans, and was entertained at Chinese

American homes. Having grown up in the People's Republic of China, I sensed that the Chinatown atmosphere and Chinese American homes embodied elements of traditional Chinese culture as well as modern American culture. For instance, Chinatown stores and restaurants publicly displayed offerings to gods and goddesses; Chinese Americans drove hundreds of miles to clean their ancestral graves around the Qing Ming Festival, the traditional Chinese festival to remember the dead; and Chinese American parents would not open letters addressed to their children, for doing so was a violation of their children's right to privacy. Whereas the first two examples reflected Chinese traditional customs, the third was decidedly a reflection of American individualism.

While making such observations, I was wrapping up my Ph.D. coursework with an emphasis on the history of China-U.S. relations. Since the first major wave of Chinese immigration into the United States in the 1850s, China and the United States had encountered two very different fates in the evolutionary history of nation-states. Having just conquered the west coast of the North American continent, the United States began in the 1850s to rise as a world power. For China, the 1840s marked the beginning of humiliation and decline as a nation and a civilization. While the rise of the United States was accompanied by expansionism, industrialization, capitalist democracy, and Christianity, the decline of China was caused partly by Western expansionism and partly by internal struggles over how to cope with challenges posed by the aggressive outside forces in the modern world.

The most intense search for a modern China and modern Chinese identity happened in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The year 1911 witnessed an end to the century-old dynastic system in China and a declaration of the establishment of a modern republic. Such a fundamental change proved not to be an easy matter for China. Western and modern ideas such as capitalism failed to find national capital and an industrial base, thus opening China's market and resources further to outside exploitation. The idea of democracy conflicted with the Confucian hierarchy of social order. Greed for power led to attempts at monarchical restoration and warlords' competition for regional control, pushing China to the verge of disintegration as a unified nation. Intensified search for a way out of China's national crisis led to a cultural movement condemning Confucianism and Chinese tradition, to the embracing of Marxist ideas and formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and to the height of nationalism against imperialism. It was in early 1923 that the Guomindang (GMD, or the Nationalist Party), which led the 1911 revolution, decided to ally with the Soviet Union and

cooperate with the CCP in the national effort for a unified, independent, and modern China.

Knowledge of history and my own observations that being Chinese in the United States carried different meanings from being Chinese in the People's Republic of China combined to form my research questions. How did Chinese in the United States envision a modern China while China as a nation underwent such fundamental changes in the first few decades of the twentieth century? What did they think of the debates and politics in China? Did their experience in the United States affect their vision of a modern China? Did their exposure to American ideology and Christian values shape their sense of Chineseness as the old framework for Chinese identity faced challenges?

The more I think about the dichotomy of Chinese and American history in the modern world, the more aware I am of the interesting position occupied by Chinese in the United States. American Chinese in the early twentieth century were involved in the crosscurrents of conflicting and competing global forces. (Throughout this book I use the term *Chinese Americans* for people of Chinese ancestry who are American citizens; *American Chinese* and *Chinese in the United States* are used interchangeably to refer to any Chinese living in the United States.) As subjects of the dynastic China, they were carriers of traditional Chinese values; as immigrants suffering from discrimination and exclusion in the United States, they were victims of white racism and the weakened Chinese nation. How they survived exclusion and discrimination and how they envisioned and maintained Chineseness and adapted to American society became a much more interesting question for me than diplomatic relations between China and the United States. I decided to make my doctoral dissertation a study of the transformation of Chinese identity in the United States in the early twentieth century.

A review of existing literature on Chinese American studies encouraged my pursuit. Until very recently, Chinese American studies left the first few decades of the twentieth century almost unexamined. According to Sucheng Chan, one of the leading experts on Chinese American studies, the entire period between 1882 and 1943, the "age of exclusion," was "a deplorable lacuna in Chinese American historiography."² Students of the period before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 found materials with which to study the Chinese experience in the United States, many of them in English, including documentation of observations about the Chinese as a different race and debates over and violence against the Chinese presence in the United States. After the passage of the Exclusion Act, Chinese population decreased drastically, and Chi-

nese existence in the United States became much more precarious; as a result, there was little English-language documentation of the Chinese American experience.

Historians of Chinese American studies thus suffered from this lack of source materials for the period between 1882 and 1943. Earlier studies of this period, done mostly by social scientists, whose conclusions do not depend as heavily on first-hand documents as historians do, generally described this period as the "silent years," in which American Chinese scraped together a living by running restaurants, grocery stores, and laundries.³ For example, Paul Siu's sociological study concluded that the Chinese laundryman remained a sojourner, an immigrant who did not intend to take root in the host society, for more than a hundred years, from the 1850s to the 1950s.⁴ Journalists, with very little knowledge of Chinatown life in general, documented sensational stories of Chinese "tong wars" during this period, popularizing and reinforcing the violent and mysterious image of Chinese American experience presented by social scientists.⁵ According to these studies, the isolated Chinatown life prevented any contact between Chinese and mainstream American society and encouraged Chinese in the United States to maintain intact their traditional identity.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Pacific, in mainland China and Taiwan, studies of overseas Chinese, including Chinese in the United States, praised them as "the mother of the Chinese revolution."⁶ Before 1949, the Nationalist government in China used this image to solicit support, especially financial support, from Chinese in the United States. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, both the government in Beijing and that in Taipei have continued to compete for political loyalty and financial support from Chinese in the United States. To serve the political agendas of their respective governments, scholars on both sides of the Taiwan Straits have claimed that Chinese in the United States maintained political allegiance to China and supported Chinese revolutions. According to Ling-chi Wang, a scholar of Chinese American studies and a political activist, such politically oriented studies resulted in "extraterritorial domination" over Chinese in the United States, whereas Wang Gungwu, a specialist in southeast Asian Chinese studies, maintained that the general statement about overseas Chinese as the mother of Chinese revolution misrepresented the role overseas Chinese played in Chinese revolutions.⁷

With the growing awareness of the existence of Chinese-language source materials and with more Chinese American historians competent in the Chinese language, several studies of the Chinese American experience in the exclusion period appeared. Using Chinese- and English-lan-

guage source materials, these studies reconstructed various aspects of American Chinese community life and politics and told a more complete story of the Chinese American experience. Yet none of them aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of Chinese identity in the United States.⁸

Other scholars have been attempting to understand the transformation of Chinese identity in the United States. K. Scott Wong used the concept of transculturation, a process in which “marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant . . . culture,” to study the American Chinese identity transformation. He concluded that Chinese cultural elites, who had contacts with the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, combined the two worldviews—of traditional China and of the modern United States—to forge a “new and distinctively Chinese American cultural sensibility.”⁹

It is in this line of analysis that I attempt to understand Chinese identity transformation in the United States in the context of reforms and revolutions in China between 1911 and 1927. The year 1911 witnessed the climax of the debate between the reformist Baohuanghui (the Society to Protect the Emperor) and the revolutionary Tongmenghui (the Revolutionary Alliance) among Chinese in the United States. The period between 1924 and 1927 witnessed concerted efforts to build permanent Chinese American communities, either by politically and legally fighting for rights to establish families and preserve Chinese cultural practices or by physically constructing community facilities such as the Chinese Hospital.

The study takes a transpacific approach in that it regards reformist and revolutionary programs that aimed to modernize China as the background and impetus for the American Chinese identity transformation. Furthermore, it investigates public debates and community events concerning a modern China among American Chinese to assess the impact of life in the United States and exposure to American culture and ideology on the formation of a Chinese American identity. The study thus moves constantly across the Pacific between events in China and events within American Chinese communities.

Like the most recent studies of the Chinese American experience during the exclusion period, this study relies on American Chinese community newspapers as primary source material. The value of newspapers as primary source material lies in the role these newspapers played in the life of Chinese in the United States in the early twentieth century. According to Leong Gor Yun,¹⁰ author of *Chinatown Inside Out*, published in the 1930s, the influence of Chinese-language newspapers on American Chinese was “incalculable.” This is how Leong Gor Yun described