

## BOOK REVIEW

# Chinese in Chicago 1870-1945

Walter Ko

Editors Chuimei Ho and Soo Lon Moy  
Chinatown Museum Foundation  
2005 Arcadia Publishing  
Chicago Illinois.  
ISBN 0-7385-3444-7 \$19.99

In November 2004, a book, “Chinese in St Louis” was published. A year later, there came a cousin “Chinese in Chicago 1870-1945”. It is a companion to the current photo exhibit “Paper Sons” (May 21 to December 1, 2005), organized by the Chinese American Museum of Chicago. It is a long overdue publication on Chinese immigrants during that period about their livelihoods, families, communities, cultures and inter-actions with the American mainstream in Chicago, Illinois and the neighboring States. Gleaning a good collection of photographs from personal files, government archives, church records, and libraries, this book offers a glance into the history of enduring hardship and struggle involved in making a new life in this new land, favorably referred as the gold mountain. These Chinese pioneers with their collective efforts, blood and tears, made Chicago Chinatown among the best in mid-west.

It is an enjoyable to read this book with the first four chapters written by three Chinese-Americans: Dr. Chuimei Ho, Ms. Grace Hong Chun and Ms. Soo Lan Moy, while the fifth and last chapter was written by Dr. Bennet Bronson, the curator for Asian culture at the Chicago Field Museum. In the introduction, the editors gave a short background on the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the related rise of ‘paper-sons’. This Act being one of the most infamous and tragic statutes, based on race and nationality, contradicted the American ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. ‘Paper-sons’-immigrants entering the country in other family identity papers - was a victim system born out of

the discriminatory and unfair treatment of the 1882 Act.

Chapter 1 tells of the early history of Chicago Chinese, operating 18 laundries and one tea shop as early as 1874. Chapter 2 highlights the livelihoods of Chinese in the laundry and restaurant business, along with grocers, carpenters, printers, entertainers and barbers. Chapter 3 covered the rise of Chinatown near downtown Chicago. Chapter 4 is titled ‘A world with few women’ describing the impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act’s restriction against Chinese women from entering US, except the wives of diplomats, merchants and scholars. The Cable Act of 1922, another discriminatory act not mentioned in the book, prevented American citizens from marrying aliens by taking away their citizenship status. Chapter 5, the last chapter, was titled ‘Becoming Americans’. It showed that after a long struggle, the immigrants were accepted politically and socially as Americans with two pictures of Chinese in uniform serving US Army in WW II (P.125).

This book, condensed from thousands of photos, is a community album of historical value and significance. The editors did a tremendous research job in making the exhibit and this book. It starts with current pictures of Chicago, and leads to other Chinatowns in the U.S. and Canada. However, the arrangement is not in a chronological order. In some pictures, readers with no knowledge of Chinese would not be able to match easily the description of the buildings (P.73). The Chinese in the pictures shows changes in dress code. While a

good portion of the portraits is in western style clothing, many family pictures are in traditional Chinese garments. A few of them is even in the Qing Dynasty official outfit. An interesting photo of two men (P.117) in contemporary 1920s American suits, ties, and hats, posed a fun picture as gangsters with a tough look. Actually they were law-abiding farmers from Michigan. Groups of pictures of the same person are used to tell their personal story. For example, on page 86, an American born woman was shown for different stages in her life.

For many readers, a timeline highlighting the major events such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, Founding of the new Republic of China, Sino-Japanese War, Japanese Attack of Pearl Harbor and Madam Chiang address to U.S. Congress, would be helpful for better understanding and comprehension. A simple map showing Chicago's old North, and South Chinatowns would be a helpful guide for nostalgic visitors.

For Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of Republic of China (1911), in his revolutionary struggle, the Chinese in Chicago was an important group to give political and financial support to his Tongming Hui (later became the Nationalist Party) and Hung Mon (Chinese Freemason) (Page 63-65).

The book not only documented the lives of Chicago Chinese residents but also included Chinese from other areas of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin states. On page 55, it showed three photos of a Michigan Chinese farmer selling his home-grown produce in Chicago Chinatown. On page 67, the caption tells about Guangong, the God of

Loyalty, Fraternity and Righteousness based on the historic novel of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in China (220-270AD).

It was a surprise to see that as early as 1911, the re-entry permit application was in Chinese and English. Many organizations were included in the book. The bilingual index was helpful to Chinese readers. A listing with a brief description would help readers understand the missions, notably the Six Companies. A lot of the younger generation does not know why the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (Zhonghua Huiguan) was known as the Six Companies. The Chinese American Citizens Alliance (Tongyuan Hui, Society for People of the Same Origin) was a nationwide association fighting for civil rights in the early years.

This book is a chapter in the American history on Chinese Americans in Chicago, Illinois, and represents an era of Chinese American struggle in coming and making a life in the mid-America. Against the odds, hardships and discrimination, they contributed to the American society with determination, endeavor and sacrifice. This book documents their journey and honors their odyssey. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and the subsequent waves of Chinese immigrants brought along changes in the Chinese American communities in Chicago and elsewhere. Understanding this forgotten history through this book encourages the new comers to actively participate in the American society in politics, economics, and society in general. In so doing, the history of 60 years of Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 by the U.S. Congress will not be repeated.

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**Walter Ko** grew up in Hong Kong and came to the U.S. in 1973. He was a graduate of University of Missouri at Rolla and Central Missouri State University. He has been a St. Louis resident over 30 years, and had been an Associate Editor, coordinator and now Board member of Chinese American Forum (CAF), a cultural quarterly published in St Louis, Missouri.