

BOOK REPORT

Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community

By Huping Ling, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, (2004) ISBN: 1-59213-038-0

As reviewed by Walter Ko

Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community, the latest book by Professor Huping Ling, is a historical document. It is a collection of life stories of Chinese immigrants in the past 150 years in St. Louis, Missouri. Just like other ethnic groups, the Chinese endured hardships, discrimination and harassment to make a new life here. With determination, hard work and the power to overcome, they struggled to win the proper recognition and respect. As an old St. Louisian (1974 to present), I admire and appreciate Professor Ling's devotion, interest and research in bringing forth this book and honoring our city and its Chinese-Americans. The title, Chinese St. Louis, would have been more appropriate by changing it to "Chinese-Americans in St. Louis" as the book records the reality of such transition. The book is divided into two parts: "The Hop Alley, A community for survival (1860s-1960s)," and "Building a Cultural Community (1960s-2000s)." The Chinatown of St. Louis, named as Hop Alley, was the home of many early Chinese immigrants, and I can identify a few relatives' names of former Hop Alley residents in the laundry business. In the early 1900s, the founding father of the Chinese Republic, Dr. Sun Yat-sun, was reported by the Kansas City Star to pass through Missouri on his fundraising trip across America with the help of Chinese immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese immigration for 61 years.

This book devotes a section on interracial marriage, with the mention of Section 60 of Civil Code of 1880 to declare marriage between whites and Chinese "illegal and void." It did not mention

the Cable Act of 1922 in which if a white female marries a non-citizen foreigner, she will lose her citizenship.

On page 91, the book talks about the God [Guan Gong], the protector of merchants. Traditionally, Guan Gong is honored as the Warrior God of Fortune, especially favored by business people to scare off evil spirits and to promote good financial rewards. He is renowned for loyalty, righteousness, justice and fraternity. He is the one to call on because he will aid anyone needing assistance.

Professor Ling compiled a table on page 215 introducing Chinese American businesses, which was based on the yellow pages of two local Chinese newspapers. The yellow pages list the Chinese American businesses in St. Louis and also the advertisers. There are no Chinese in the funeral home business and retail optical goods but they are counted nevertheless.

In the restaurant business, Professor Ling gives credit to carry out chop suey restaurants. I would like to fill in the menu items of "pork and rice," "duck and noodle" and "St. Paul Sandwich." These items are exclusively available in the greater St. Louis area. St. Paul sandwich is even featured as being associated with St. Louis in a PBS program. There was a restaurant named Trader Vic's inside a hotel in downtown St. Louis in the 1970s. Its specialty was to serve different country cuisines, including Chinese. During his visit to St. Louis in 1975, President Gerald Ford had a Chinese dinner in this hotel restaurant. The food was so delicious and enjoyable that he

requested to thank personally and took a picture with the Chinese chef, Mr. Chen Chang Choy. This story made headlines and Mr. Chen was awarded nationally as "Chef of the Year."

As more Chinese-Americans settled in St Louis in the past forty years, it would have been helpful if Professor Ling had included a list of "Who's Who" highlighting the prominent local leaders holding the titles of Curator, Board of Directors and College Deans in organizations such as the International Institute, Washington University, Nurses Association, Alumni Association, United Nations Association-USA, Women Connection Network, Art Museum and Television stations. Of special note, in the past few years, a number of Chinese-Americans were recognized and honored for leadership and volunteer work by mainstream organizations such as the International Channel Network and St Andrews Resources for Seniors.

On page 219, Professor Ling says: "Politically they are either Pro-Nationalist or Pro-Communists in recent decades, this roughly equivalent to Pro-Taiwan or Pro-PRC." This is a dangerous oversimplified classification and it leaves a potentially wrong image of "foreign lobbyists or spies." People from Mainland China are not necessarily pro-communist, nor those from Taiwan pro-nationalist.

Furthermore, there are many Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans who actually are not connected with Chinese politics either pro-PRC or pro-Taiwan. They are pro-American in that they actively participate and are involved in American politics and democracy. A case in point was a group of Chinese Americans who campaigned with donation support to Maria Chappelle-Nadal, an African-American candidate for the Missouri House of Representatives. She won the primary and the election in November 2004. Even a high number of Chinese-American seniors registered and voted in the past three presidential elections.

Over the years, there have been many Chinese American leaders who volunteered their

talent, knowledge and time in introducing Chinese culture, philosophy and religion to the greater St Louis community. Among them, Dr T. C. Peng is a frequent community lecturer in teaching the culture, especially Confucianism to high school and college students. He actively participates in Interfaith Dialog and Interfaith Partnership, and was invited to Pope John Paul II Evening Prayer service during his 1999 visit to St Louis. Dr. Peng has been the managing editor for the cultural quarterly magazine, Chinese American Forum, published in St Louis and later in St. Charles from 1997 to 2004. Dr Peng was also a founding member, board member and President of the St Louis Chapter of the Organization of Chinese-Americans from 1970s to 1990s. Many others played their roles in the greater American society and are recognized in this book. Some parts of the Chinese American community history could be extended and be made more comprehensive by more interviews with those community leaders that actually established, supported and maintained community organizations such as Chinese Society, Organization of Chinese Americans, St Louis Chinese Association and the 80-20 Initiative.

On page 228, the book mentioned "Missouri Lieutenant Governor Joe Maxwell appointed two Chinese American women to the Missouri Community Service Commissioners for 3 year terms" as quoted from a report in the Chinese American Forum (CAF) October 2001 issue. Actually, Joe Maxwell was the Chair of Community Service Commission. CAF reported Governor Bob Holden made the appointments.

Dr. Ling did a fine job in bringing forth this wonderful book. It is an enjoyable book to read. She even writes a section on the cemetery Chinatown of Valhalla where the deceased rest in peace next to each other. She labored a long time in researching and conducting interviews to present the evolution of a mid-West city in the Chinese-American study. It is a history of how a group of Chinese in the laundry and restaurant businesses became Americans in professions

such as lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers, architects, accountants, bankers, entrepreneurs, insurance agents, real estate agents, librarians, and TV reporters. All play their role in the greater American society and are recognized as such. The St Louis Chinese-Americans contribute and participate in American society culturally, economically, politically and religiously in order to make St Louis a better place we all call home.

Walter Ko was born in China and grew up in Hong Kong. He came to America in 1973 and graduated from the University of Missouri at Rolla and the Central Missouri State University. Mr. Ko is a board member of this magazine.