

## BOOK REVIEW

# Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon

By Marie Rose Wong,

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Intro, 5 chapters. Epilogue, 337 pages, ISBN 0-295-98383-3

America is largely an unhappy saga which began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. Since the early arrivals from China landed on the Pacific coast, the story of their struggles was intertwined with the opening of the West and its rapid economic growth through mining, fishing, farming, railroad-building, manufacturing and urban development in California, Oregon and Washington. The concentration of Chinese laborers in the coastal towns and cities resulted in the formation of Chinatowns which survived decades of legal restrictions, organized acts of violence, economic pressure and racial discrimination. While the Chinatowns in major cities such as San Francisco, Portland, Tacoma and Seattle began under similar circumstances, each has transformed in different ways since the enactment of the exclusion laws in 1882 and 1892 and subsequent amendments.

Professor Marie Rose Wong's *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* is a study based on exhaustive archival research, and conducted with the analytical tools of the urban historian. The result is a fascinating chronicle of the growth and decline of the Chinese settlements in the downtown district of Portland which, together with the large vegetable farms to the west, once comprised the largest Chinatown in the entire



*Marie Rose Wong*

United States in terms of geographical coverage. The author begins with an overview of the American urban scene in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the important role of immigration Oregon, like California and Washington on the west coast, began attracting laborers from China in the mid-1800s, and Portland became its main port of entry. In the following half century, large numbers of Chinese workers were employed throughout the state, playing a vital role in the state's rapid economic growth in both the urban and rural sectors. Around the turn of the 20th century, Oregon's Chinese population ranked second to that of California in the whole country.

Chapters two, three, and four on "The Chinese Presence in Oregon", "Enforcement of Chinese Exclusion in Oregon", and "Peopling the Chinese Community of Oregon" are rich in detail and analysis from which a complex picture of opposing forces emerge. On the one hand, Oregon's civic leaders and mainstream press openly recognized the benefit of low-wage and diligent Chinese workers to the development goals of the new state, while on the other, agitation by labor unions and racial supremacists on the west coast led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its extension in 1892. These draconian laws specifically sought to curtail the entry of laborers, targeted the immigration of females, and barred all Chinese from the privilege of naturalization. Inasmuch as the administration

of federal regulations by local customs and immigration agents was sometimes ineffectual, often due to bureaucratic bungling and shortage of funding, illegal immigrants continued to gain entry into Oregon with the use of ingenious methods to overcome the barriers laid before them, Oregon's environment of civility and opposition to violence also allowed Chinese expelled from California and Washington to resettle in Portland, Deportation orders were frequently denied by the courts, and other channels of judicial mitigation also contributed to the stabilization of Oregon's Chinese population for more than two decades after the Exclusion Act went into effect. In the case of Portland, local officials and Chinese immigrant organizations were able to work together to permit the existence of several sizeable settlement clusters within the city for nearly half a century. This shifting pattern, as illustrated by several detailed maps, is described by the author as neither that of a ghetto nor an ethnic enclave. Rather, it was a series of "non-claves" which occupied valuable real estate along the Willamette River and Tanner Creek to the west. And for this reason, the Chinese Vegetable Gardens community, and the Old and New Chinatowns of Portland were eventually displaced or diminished not by coercive ordinances, but by successive waves of urban development projects beginning around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The final and longest chapter, "This place Called Chinatown", is a detailed portrayal of the physical setting and human activities within Portland's Chinatowns. The environment and its social ills, namely gambling, prostitution and opium, reflected the demographic anomalies of

the predominantly male community. The immigrants' cultural background and lifestyle set them apart from their neighbors, yet the two groups coexisted within the same general boundaries. The Chinese survived not only through hard work and mutual assistance mechanisms, but also because their leaders were able to make compromises and avoid conflict with the peer society. Some successful businessmen achieved considerable social status. Subsequently, the generations of American-born Chinese were better equipped to enter the mainstream due to their educational attainment and participation in civic affairs.

While the unique history of Portland's Chinatowns stands out among North American cities, readers of this story will also gain a broader perspective of the first hundred years of the Chinese American experience. The economic realities of immigrants seeking a better future, the social and legal roadblocks placed in their path, and the resulting demographic imbalances have left a somber legacy on the entire community. Even to this day, traces of this past can be seen in the large Chinatowns on both coasts of the United States. Professor Wong's scholarly work, with its copious notes, maps, charts and photographs, is not only a major contribution to the field of social history and ethnic studies, but can also provide insights for local leaders involved in urban planning and social policies related to minority communities. For the general reader interested in the regional history of the Pacific Northwest, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey* will bring to life many sights and sounds from a significant period to this region's relatively short history.