

BOOK REVIEW

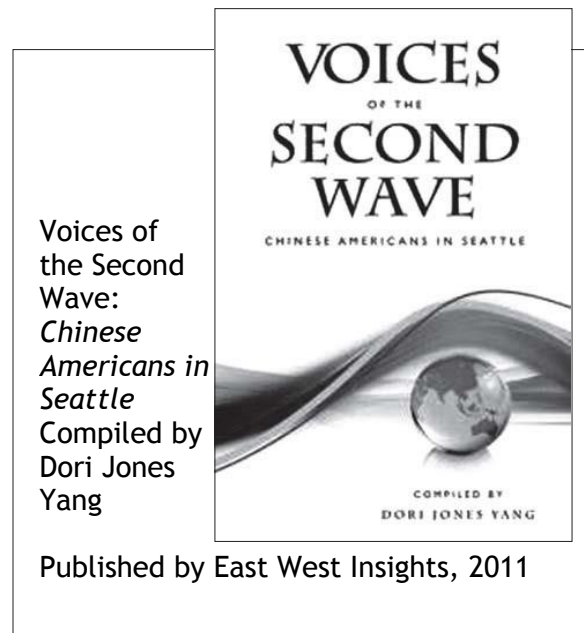
The Immigrant Experience

The second wave has been composed of a totally different group of Chinese.

By Foster Stockwell

Many Americans have an outdated image of Chinese immigrants. They assume all are restaurant workers or laundrymen. This may have been true more than fifty years ago because the first wave of Chinese immigrants, who came between the early 1800s and 1882, were mostly poor peasants from the coastal areas of southern China hired to build the Transcontinental and other railroads across America. They were lured here by dreams of high wages and hope of participating in the 1849 gold rush. Those who managed to stay eventually found employment in the only positions then available to them—running laundries and restaurants. But Americans didn't really welcome these immigrants and in 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, a blatantly racist law that barred further immigration from China until 1943 when the Magnison Act was passed that repealed the Exclusion Act. Chinese immigrants were then once again permitted to come.

The second wave of immigrants has been composed of a totally different group of Chinese, well-educated people who came to further their education and sometimes as refugees escaping the results of the Japanese invasion of China and the later Communist revolution there. Unlike those of the first wave, whose descendants mostly remained in isolated "China Towns," these second-wave immigrants, not allowed to return to China, got jobs and settled here. They tended to live in university communities and more affluent suburbs of big cities. They took positions as teachers and engineers, and some of them have achieved high status within their communities. These second-wave Chinese have had limited contact with those of the first wave. They don't



even speak the same dialect. Those of the first wave speak only Cantonese; those of the second speak primarily Mandarin.

The oral histories of 35 of these second-wave Chinese-Americans, included in this ground-breaking book, are fascinating and often bittersweet accounts of persons finding it difficult to adjust to many obstacles, such as the language barrier, racial and cultural differences, and discrimination, but eventually achieving success in their chosen fields and assimilating into American society.

Most of the persons profiled attended the best high school and colleges in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong; received graduate degrees from leading colleges and universities in the U.S. typically in engineering or the sciences; and had outstanding careers in the private sector, many with the Boeing Aircraft Company. A third of the

oral histories are by women, and two of the accounts are by individuals born in the U.S who tell about the experiences of their parents.

Some of the better known ones in this book include the former Seattle Community College President Peter C. Ku, Bellevue City Council member **Conrad Lee**, CEO and developer Paul Bao-Ho Liao, architect Dennis Su, writer **Lensey Namioka**, Professor Isabella Yen, Boeing engineer and community



Conrad Lee

leader Winnie Lee, and **Yih-Ho Michael Pao**, who started and ran three high-tech companies. Although all of those included have



Lensey Namioka



Yih-Ho Michael Pao

lived much of their lives in the greater Seattle area, their experiences are typical of the second-wave Chinese immigrants

throughout the United States.

Chen Shi-Han, a retired genetics researcher at the University of Washington Medical School says, “The first wave of Chinese built railroads, dug mines, farmed and fished. In our generation we were digging with our brainpower. We got degrees and got jobs. After just a couple of years of post-graduate work, if you worked hard, you could find a good job. All of my friends were like me. Almost all of them got their PhD degrees and did post-doctorates. Most of them got pretty good jobs in either

industrial work or the academic field. Some of them even set up companies to do clinical work.”

C. C. Tien, a longtime Boeing engineer and now editor of the Chinese American Forum, tells of an early experience when he was working in New York City, near Wall Street. “One of my American friends, an engineer, said to me, ‘I didn’t know China had engineers. I thought they were all laborers, cooks, launderers.’” Tien, whose brother became chancellor of UC Berkeley, goes on to say that one of his concerns is that, “U.S.born people in the younger generation don’t understand that the rest of the world is not like the United States. There are many people in poor, backward, and unfortunate situations. I hope young people will have a more global view about things, not just think, ‘I live well,’ and that’s it. Sure they want to be rich and famous, but that’s not the end.”



C. C. Tien

The Business Diplomat to China, **George Koo**, strikes a cautionary note in pointing out that, “In the United States, racial discrimination against the Chinese runs deep. As early as three years ago, the BBC was here interviewing the FBI special agent in charge of Silicon Valley, and he was quoted as saying, ‘You can’t trust these Chinese running around Silicon Valley. You never know which ones are going to be spies for China.’ Making blanket statements about Chinese people. I get very upset about these things, and I do what I can to provide a counterpoint. I feel it’s my duty to do so because we’ve paid our taxes, made our contributions, and we belong here.”



George Koo

Anyone interested in the immigrant experience will find this book of oral histories fascinating reading. It helps to fill out the record

of the Chinese in America, which until recently was almost exclusively known as a record of railroad builders and persons living in “China Town” enclaves.

The compiler of this collection of oral histories, Dori Jones Yang, is a former correspondent for Business Week in Hong Kong. She now lives in the Seattle area with her husband, who is one of those interviewed. She has offered to help Chinese in other parts of America put together similar oral histories of those living in these areas.



Gary Locke

Gary Locke, the former governor of Washington State and now U.S. Ambassador to China put it well when he said, “This book reveals a generation of Chinese Americans that has long been overlooked by historians. These lives of some of Seattle’s leading citizens will fascinate and delight.”

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