

Exile Between Two Continents:  
Chinese American Experiences during China's Resistance War (1937-1945)

The existing scholarship on Asian American history has focused on Japanese-American experience during WWII. While Scott Wong's recent book *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Harvard, 2005) adds the important and missing experiences of second-generation Chinese Americans, it uses only English-language materials and limits itself mostly to their experiences in the Continental US and Hawaii. On the other hand, scholars of early Chinese-American literature face the perennial challenge of the paucity of writings authored by ordinary Chinese Americans, and have to content themselves with a handful of Chinese-American autobiographies (e.g., Kim). In contrast, my project looks at the unique yet unstudied (self) representations of the experiences of second-generation Chinese Americans who returned to China in order to serve the "old country" in its life-and-death struggle against Japanese military aggression in the 1930s and 1940s. I will investigate not only how these returned Chinese Americans reflected the cultural and sociopolitical context in their writings, but also, more importantly, how they actively created meanings and fashioned their own *bildungsroman* against all odds by integrating and appropriating various cultural traditions. Furthermore, I will examine both their English-language works and their attempts at Chinese prose-writing.

First-generation Chinese-American authors, often scholars, ambassadors, and businessmen out of the purview of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1861-1950s), considered themselves "ambassadors of goodwill," and felt secure in their self-perceived superior education, social class, and bicultural position in the US. In comparison, second-generation Chinese Americans, native born and raised in a land that excluded Chinese

immigrants and denied their naturalization rights on the basis of race alone, faced the more challenging task of pursuing assimilation even while marginalized in society. Not only did they have to shuttle between two cultures, between their American schools and Chinese homes, they also had to battle racial discrimination in education, employment, and general society in its most blatant forms. More adroit orally and literally in English than in Chinese, they also formed different relations to Chinese and American literary traditions than the first generation. Adding to this already volatile mix of cultural negotiation and power struggle was the tumultuous historical background of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the looming world war. As such, the second-generation Chinese Americans' return to their parents' native country enabled their acts of multi-faceted signification: while for some it provided an alternative to racial discrimination, unemployment, and poverty in the US, for others it also symbolized a filial act of seeking out their roots and contributing to their "motherland." However, their experiences in China exposed them to other forms of prejudices as well, this time from their parents' people who regarded their cultural hybridity with suspicion, and often charged them with having forgotten their cultural loyalty and thus not being sufficiently "Chinese."

Negotiating wartime poverty, life-threatening dangers of constant air-raids, and the awkward position of exile between two continents and two cultures while living in the Chinese hinterland in the 1930s and 1940s, the second-generation Chinese Americans nevertheless wrote about their sense of exhilaration and belonging as well as helplessness and frustration. As such, this group of materials bears out what Lisa Lowe calls Asian-American literature's resistance to the "formal abstraction of aestheticization and canonization" ("Canon, Institutionalization, Identity," 54), in that they reveal not only the

heterogeneity of Chinese American experiences and ways of self-representation, but also the diversity and inherent inequality of the material conditions of their production and reception. Furthermore, since the authors attempted both to re-imagine the self and to make sense of their heritage, these materials also provide an invaluable vehicle with which to explore the theoretical question of whether travel and displacement, more than stasis and roots, shape cultural meanings and collective identities. This new perspective will yield particularly rewarding insights for my project, since as a racially marginalized group in the US for almost a century, Chinese Americans had constantly grappled with issues of authenticity and cultural roots, with assimilation and loyalty to the “old country.” Therefore, a re-focus on “routes” rather than “roots” would provide a more nuanced study of both Chinese-American experiences and the “unfinished modernity” of Chinese culture from the unique perspective of reinterpretations by Chinese Americans.

My current project has grown out of my specialty in modern Chinese fiction and gender and women’s studies. I have published a book entitled *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Purdue, 2004), in which I examine the ways that modern Chinese intellectuals deployed the fictional representation of the liberated Chinese woman in order to promote their particular agenda of Chinese modernization. By researching and writing about Chinese American experiences, I am exploring theoretical questions--such as the impact of cultural exchanges on Chinese modernization, Chinese women’s experiences of modernization and colonization, and narrative transformations and innovations in Chinese literature--similar to those pursued in my early work.

Furthermore, for my new project I can build on the skills in interdisciplinary research I have gained and utilize the contacts I have established while conducting my

last project, entitled “Ginling College (1915-1952): The Making of A Family Saga.” In it I examined the production, circulation, and consumption of the history of Ginling College, an all-women’s missionary institution originally founded by female American missionaries in Nanjing, China. Among other things, my study exposed the collective traumas inflicted on the Chinese people by the Japanese military during China’s Resistance War. Moreover, it also revealed the two-way exchange and complex configuration of gender, culture, race, and religion in a Chinese-American context.

Ultimately, the interdisciplinary and cross-cultural nature of my project promises a rewarding configuration of and contribution to both Chinese studies and Chinese-American studies. It also enables me to bring my training in literary analysis and gender studies into conjunction with my developing interests and skills in Asian-American Studies and Trauma Studies, and thereby to examine some crucial questions in the study of Chinese American experiences and modern Chinese historiography from a unique interdisciplinary perspective.