

The Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China's Policy toward Exclusion. By Yucheng Qin. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. Pp. x + 213. \$51.00.

For about one hundred years, from 1860s to 1960s, the Zhu Mei Zhonghua zong hui-guan 駐美中華總會館 (Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association or Chinese Six Companies) claimed to represent the interests and welfare of all the Chinese in the U.S. It was a claim, for reasons of ignorance, convenience and political expediency, recognized and accepted generally by government agencies at local, state, and national levels on both sides of the Pacific, especially by the City Hall, law-enforcement agencies, and anti-Chinese forces, such as organized labour and political parties in the U.S. Such claim of universal representation and leadership, however, was periodically challenged from within Chinatowns, such as the notorious highbinder “tongs” (*tang* 堂) in the 1880s and 1890s, the homeland-oriented political organizations, such as the Xingzhonghui 興中會 (1894), Baohuanghui 保皇會 (1894), Tongmenghui 同盟會 (1905), and Guomindang 國民黨 (1912), the modern, Western organizations, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (1908), YMCA, YWCA, and Christian churches in the 1910s and 1920s, the working-class groups, such as the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA), Chinatown branch of the International Lady's Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), and Chinese Seamen's Union (CSU) in the 1930s and 1940s, and the social service and civil rights organizations, such as anti-poverty programmes, college activists, Chinese Progressive Association (CPA) and Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the hegemonic power and legitimacy of the Chinese Six Companies persisted and was frequently used to maintain law and order within Chinatown by American government agencies and by the Manchu, and later, Guomindang governments to suppress political dissent and insure overseas Chinese loyalty to the homeland government.¹ In effect, the Chinese Six Companies became a quasi-government of Chinatown, sanctioned by governments of both China and the U.S.²

Given such a unique position of power, legitimacy, and prestige acquired by the Chinese Six Companies in the U.S., it is rather peculiar that no book, not even a few scholarly and substantial articles, has been written about this important organization in Chinese American life and history. To be sure, there are some prejudicial polemic and unabashed apologetic articles and pamphlets on the organization published over the last hundred years. But all, as correctly pointed out by the author, are of little value (pp. 2–3;

¹ H. Mark Lai, “China Politics and the U.S. Chinese Communities,” in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, ed. Emma Gee (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California, 1976), pp. 152–59.

² Him Mark Lai, “Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/Huiguan System,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives, 1987* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America).

p. 148, n. 13). In other words, its role has been a “puzzle” not just to an old China-hand, like the Reverend William Speer, writing about it back in 1868, but also to contemporary scholars of Chinese America, like Shih-shan Henry Tsai 蔡石山 and Yucheng Qin 秦玉成 of the U.S. (p. ix). In the words of Qin, “This puzzle had lasted more than a century! Perhaps I could be the one to solve it” (p. ix). The book under review is the outcome of his determination to unravel the historic enigma through research.

Did Qin succeed in solving the puzzle? The answer is both yes and no, and a lot more. If the intention of the book is to provide a comprehensive and critical appraisal of the history of Chinese Six Companies as an important institution in Chinese American history from the Gold Rush to the Act of 1904 when the U.S. Congress indefinitely extended, re-enacted, and continued all the Chinese exclusion laws, it did not succeed. The Chinese Six Companies, as the *de facto* quasi-government of Chinese America and the final arbitrator of conflicts within Chinatown, was more than just a spokesperson and defender of the rights of Chinese immigrants and a mere partner with and tutor/adviser of the Qing diplomats in the protracted fight against Chinese exclusion, the primary focus of the book. On the other hand, if the author’s intent is to examine just the role of the Chinese Six Companies in working hand in glove with the relatively insecure and inexperienced Manchu’s Zongli Yamen 總理衙門 and its diplomats in the struggle against Chinese exclusion, the book succeeds in providing the first comprehensive and detailed look into the political, diplomatic, legislative, and judicial process behind the enactment of various anti-Chinese laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in documenting the successes and failures of their joint efforts. Several scholars and historians have written in great details about the politics and diplomacy of Chinese exclusion, most notably, Mary Coolidge, Gunther Barth, Robert McClellan, Delber L. McKee, Shih-shan Henry Tsai and Michael H. Hunt, and Charles J. McClain.³ But, none provided the extent and depth, including Qin’s deft use of Chinese-language diplomatic and media sources, it justly deserves. It is also the author’s contention that in both treaty negotiations between the U.S. and China and legislative fights over various Chinese

³ Mary Roberts Coolidge, *Chinese Immigration* (New York: Arno Press, 1909); Gunther Paul Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850–1870* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Robert McClellan, *The Heathen Chinese: A Study of American Attitudes toward China, 1890–1905* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1971); Delber L. McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900–1906* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1977); Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868–1911* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1983); Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

exclusion laws, the policy stands adopted by Qing legation were essentially those of the Chinese Six Companies. In this regard, the book is also a significant contribution to the scholarship of diplomatic history of both China and the U.S.

As mentioned above, the book provides more than a mere attempt to solve the puzzle in history. Through his case study on the role played by the Chinese Six Companies in the history of diplomatic relations between China and the U.S., Qin adds a new dimension to the debate over the genesis of modern Chinese nationalism. According to him, modern Chinese nationalism first emerged in California from the struggle against Chinese exclusion by the *huiguan* or native-place associations and that the modern Chinese nationalist diplomacy of the Chinese Six Companies, a confederation of seven *huiguan*, in fact, set “the tone and format” for Qing’s diplomacy and “piloted China’s turn toward modern nationalist foreign relations” (p. 139). In other words, the anti-Chinese movement in the U.S. was “the catalyst” in the transition to and transformation of *huiguan* from place or district to nationalist orientation (p. 141).

This conclusion raises issues with the well-established culturalism-to-nationalism thesis. According to that thesis, China regarded itself as the centre of the world and therefore, accepted no state and culture as its equal. If there was going to be any relation with or diplomatic policy toward any country, the country concerned must be regarded as a “barbarian country,” submit itself to a ritualistic tribute system under the Chinese emperor, and come under the protection of the emperor.

What happened to this sinocentric self-image when China was repeatedly defeated in the hands of Western military and economic imperialism, beginning with the Opium War of 1839, and subjected to humiliation under a series of unequal treatments? What happened when Chinese overseas in Western countries and in countries colonized by Western powers found themselves despised and mistreated and their emperor utterly incapable of defending and protecting them from discriminatory laws and physical abuse and violence? According to Qin, there is a place for the culturalism-to-nationalism thesis. However, he thinks it is wrong to ignore or marginalize the important transition from attachment to native place to nationalism among the Chinese in the U.S., the central thesis of his book. To him, Chinese immigrants in the U.S. formed first the *huiguan* or native-place associations for mutual aid and transnational homeland ties in 1850s and later, united all the *huiguan* into the Chinese Six Companies in 1860s to respond to racist challenges, at a time when Qing’s diplomacy and the Zongli Yamen, established in 1861, were still at their infancy. He writes, “The Six Companies stepped into the void created by the slow and ineffective responses from the Qing government. In the process of adopting new policies and strategies to counter racism, the Six Companies’ native-place sentiments evolved into modern nationalism. Unprepared for the practice of modern national diplomacy, the Qing legation turned to the Six Companies for help, and then took over their techniques and arguments. Thus the Six Companies was a major influence in generating the nationalist turn of China’s approach to foreign relation in the nineteenth century” (pp. 1, 142). He further concludes, “I have no hesitation in saying that to

disregard the Six Companies [in this transition] is to misread the histories of China, Sino-American relations, and Chinese Americans in the nineteenth century” (p. 4).

However, Professor Qin falls short of suggesting that modern Chinese nationalism emerged first among the Chinese in the U.S. who then brought it home through their transnational ties with Guangdong, the fountainhead of both nationalist reform and revolutionary movements, led respectively by Kang Youwei 康有為 of Nanhai 南海 and Dr Sun Yatsen 孫逸仙 of Xiangshan 香山 (today’s Zhongshan 中山) beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁴ The process of this emergence began vaguely in the arguments against Chinese exclusion and discrimination advanced by the merchant leaders of the *huiguan* in 1850s and 1860s. To be sure, they rested their arguments on the doctrine of equality and fairness imbedded in the Declaration of Independence and the mandates of the U.S. Constitution and on the importance of China trade to U.S. economic interests. But buried in their arguments was a rising awareness that their mistreatment in the U.S. was inextricably linked to and the direct result of China’s relative economic and military backwardness or weakness and Chinese government’s inability to protect its own people at home and abroad.

By linking their ill treatment in the U.S. to homeland weakness and impotence, they quickly looked for ways to modernize and strengthen China as the first and indispensable step toward protecting their interests and rights in foreign countries. This idea soon propelled the Chinese in the U.S. to invest their earnings in homeland modernization and development projects in utilities, transportation, telecommunication, and manufacturing, rather than military hardware. It was quickly followed by yet another realization that economic and technological modernization alone was insufficient in making China strong: it must be accompanied by reforms and transformations of the Chinese system of government. This, of course, was the genesis of the political reform and revolutionary movements among the Cantonese in Guangdong toward the end of the nineteenth century.

It was, therefore, not an accident that the 1905 Chinese nationwide boycott targeting specifically American import as a political and economic protest against the mistreatment of Chinese in the U.S.⁵ As Wang Guanhua 王冠華 convincingly demonstrated in his recent book, the boycott was the first mass media driven popular nationalist outburst across China in modern Chinese history.⁶ The boycott was instigated by the Baohuanghui in the U.S., whose membership was predominantly the Cantonese merchants and the

⁴ L. Eve Armentrout Ma, *Revolutionaries, Monarchists, and Chinatowns: Chinese Politics in the Americas and the 1911 Revolution* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1990).

⁵ Zhang Cunwu 張存武, *Guangxu sa-yi nian Zhong-Mei gongyue fengchao* 光緒卅一年中美工約風潮 (The storm in 1905 over the Sino-American labour treaty) (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1966); Ma, *Revolutionaries, Monarchists, and Chinatowns*.

⁶ Wang Guanhua, *In Search of Justice: The 1905–1906 Chinese Anti-American Boycott* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001).

leaders in the *huiguan*, and supported by most of the chambers of commerce in major cities throughout China. Unfortunately, for unknown reasons, the boycott of 1905 was conspicuously kept out of Qin's analysis. It would have given his thesis a compelling, if not the most compelling support.

Finally, linking the treatment of Chinese in the U.S. to the relative power of homeland government and the need to transform it was a two-edge sword. Both the reform and revolutionary movements in the U.S. and throughout the Chinese diaspora may have seen themselves as nationalist and patriotic movements, they were viewed by the Manchu government with suspicion and hostility. Extraterritorial repressive measures were undertaken by the homeland government and its diplomats to curb and suppress dissident the movements abroad and in home villages (pp. 131–33).⁷ Because of its earlier close cooperation with the Qing government, the Chinese Six Companies became the tool and propaganda mouthpiece of the government in suppressing political activities and dissidents deemed disloyal by the homeland government.⁸ Even the legitimate civil rights movements on behalf of discriminated Chinese Americans came to be viewed as a threat to the hegemony of the Chinese Six Companies and a challenge to the authority of the homeland government.⁹

Ironically, with the rise of China as the second most powerful economic power next to the U.S. in the twenty-first century, the fervent hope of oppressed Chinese Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, very quickly came to be viewed by politicians and mass media in the U.S. as a threat to the global hegemony of U.S. and unfortunately, Chinese American minority, racially profiled, came to be viewed as a threat to the internal security of the U.S., even as their social and economic status rises. The most powerful symbol of this recent reversal is the unjust prosecution and persecution of Chinese American nuclear scientist, Dr Wen Ho Lee 李文和, in 1999 and 2000 for helping China to steal American nuclear secrets. Not a shred of evidence was uncovered and the only reason for his prosecution was his racial origin.¹⁰

⁷ Liu Boji 劉伯驥, *Meiguo huaqiao shi* 美國華僑史 (History of the overseas Chinese in the U.S.) (Taipei: Xingzheng yuan Qiaowu weiyuanhui 行政院僑務委員會, 1976); Lai, "China Politics and the U.S. Chinese Communities."

⁸ Brett de Bary and Victor Nee, "The Kuomintang in Chinatown," in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, pp. 146–51.

⁹ Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Yu Renqiu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Dan Stober and Ian Hoffman, *A Convenient Spy: Wen Ho Lee and the Politics of Nuclear Espionage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Wen Ho Lee, *My Country versus Me: The First-Hand Account by the Los Alamos Scientist Who Was Falsely Accused of Being a Spy* (New York: Hyperion, 2001).

Qin's book is the first step toward filling in the knowledge gaps we have on the important role of the Chinese Six Companies in Chinese American history and the role of Chinese Americans in the diplomatic history of the U.S. and China. The book successfully demonstrated the historical significance of this institution. However, as I pointed out above, its role in the Chinese American community is rather complex and at times even contradictory to its own organizational missions, if not detrimental to the welfare and rights of Chinese Americans. Other Chinese American leaders, such as Wong Chin Foo 王清福, Walter U. Lum 林華耀, and Ng Poon Chew 伍盤照, also took part in the fight against Chinese exclusion outside the circle of Chinese Six Companies and the Qing diplomats. Their contributions deserve to be included. In short, we need further comprehensive studies on this organization in the context of Chinese America.

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Individualism in Early China: Human Agency and the Self in Thought and Politics. By Erica Fox Brindley. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010. Pp. xxx + 207. \$52.00.

Erica Brindley seems to have set herself an impossible task: to write a book about something that doesn't exist. One would be truly hard-pressed to find any such thing as "individualism" in early China, at least as that term is usually defined ("a social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual").¹ As the author herself states, "there is no clear term in early Chinese that might translate consistently into 'individual'" (p. xxx). The concept of individual autonomy derives from the Enlightenment, and the English word "individualism" itself does not seem to predate the early nineteenth century. The title of this book is perhaps intended to be provocative, and in that it succeeds.

Brindley's decision to focus on the concept of individualism in early China is grounded in contemporary debates on "Asian values" and "Western-style human rights"; she concludes her Preface by saying she hopes that her work "will help pave the way for a more culturally sensitive approach to modern conceptions of human rights, individualism, and freedom for contemporary China as well as other cultures influenced by the early traditions of China" (p. xii). This is, in other words, a book with an agenda: the author's intent is to argue against the widespread notion that China has "a culture of

¹ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d ed., unabridged (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 974.