

Telling the Story of the Chinese of California in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries: A Collaborative Online Exhibition

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The Chinese in California, 1850-1925 is an online compilation drawn from collections at The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley; The Ethnic Studies Library, University of California Berkeley; and The California Historical Society, San Francisco. It illustrates nineteenth and early twentieth century Chinese immigration to California through about 8,000 images and pages of primary source materials such as photographs, original art, and illustrations; letters, excerpts from diaries, business records, and legal documents; as well as pamphlets, broadsides, speeches, sheet music, and other printed matter. These documents describe the experiences of Chinese immigrants in California, including the nature of inter-ethnic tensions. They also document the specific contributions of Chinese immigrants to commerce and business, architecture and art, agriculture and other industries, and cultural and social life in California. Chinatown in San Francisco receives special treatment as the oldest and largest community of Chinese in the United States. Also included is documentation of smaller Chinese communities throughout California, as well as material reflecting on the experiences of individuals. Although necessarily selective, such a large body of materials presents a full spectrum of representation and opinion.

Available locally and remotely to researchers and the general public, this website illustrates not only the migration of the community into California, but also the complex relations of the Chinese to other groups in California, most who came during the Gold Rush. Issues of identity and culture clash head on with prejudice and racism that the Chinese community faced in their attempts to integrate in the United States. The website can be used as a teaching tool for students in high school and undergraduates at colleges and universities and as a general orientation for researchers needing an overview of the topic. The fact that there is a wealth of primary documents that can be explored by researchers makes it particularly useful for giving the researcher a sense of the points of view of various creators of the documentation, and also allows for individual analysis of these primary resources.

I was the main coordinator of the project, and participated in selection at all libraries; wrote the narratives, along with my research assistant; coordinate work with the Library of Congress. I also organized two exhibitions related to these materials, one in which I co-curated the exhibition with colleagues at the California Historical Society, and the Chinese Historical Society of America, both in San Francisco. The website is available both on the American Memory site at The Library of Congress, and on the Online Archive of California, University of California. I will be discussing aspects of this website, and how to use it effectively.