

Chinese Chicago: Transnational Migration and Business, 1870s-1940s

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Abstract

Since the mid-19th century, Chicago has been a cosmopolitan city and national hub for thousands of immigrants from around the world seeking fortunes in the new land. For the Chinese who first arrived on the West Coast, Chicago became a refuge to escape the rampant anti-Chinese sentiments in the west.

In the mid-1870s, Moy Dong Chow arrived in Chicago, and his two brothers, Moy Dong Hoy (Sam Moy) and Moy Dong Yee followed soon afterwards. By 1880, there were a hundred Chinese in the city. By the end of 1890, there were more than 500 Chinese lived on South Clark Street. This study closely examines how the transnational kinship networks played out in various aspects of the Chinese businesses in Chicago, through reconstructing the transnational Chinese businesses during the period of 1870s and 1930s. Many of the ethnic Chinese businesses, especially those of the large and complex ones, as evidenced by the various sources employed in this study, were deliberately created and sophisticated transnational businesses that were run by men with vision, practicality, and long-term goals. These businesses had effectively utilized transnational business networks in raising capital to get started, in procurements of merchandizes, in recruitment of employees, and in business operations, and had served Chinese communities on both ends of the transnational migration. Using archival manuscripts, censuses, news reports, and interviews, this study investigates how transnational migration has shaped the early Chinese community in Chicago.