

“Merchants, Students, and Laborers: The Intersections of Local, National, and Transnational History of Chinese America in New England, ca. 1840-1945”

Dr. Wing-kai To

Professor of History, Bridgewater State University

The Chinese American community in New England and its Chinatown in Boston, while smaller in comparison to the communities in New York and San Francisco, has maintained a rich history as one of the earliest and most enduring Chinese settlements in the United States. From the earlier China trade to the preservation of a Chinatown and the development of scattered Chinese businesses in towns and communities throughout New England, there is much to learn about the east coast experiences of Chinese American communities. A lack of natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and epidemics might have accounted for the stability in the settlement patterns of Boston Chinese. Yet in contrast to the violent anti-Chinese movement in the frontier west, the different roles of merchants, students, workers, and women in relation to the local economy and culture have also allowed Chinese Americans to become more integrated with other communities during the Exclusion Era (1882-1943).

This paper will explore the development of transnational resources and local culture in shaping the roles of Chinese American community in Boston from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries. Through case studies of merchants, students, and laborers as well as a comparison of their different experiences, this paper examines the evolution of Chinese American culture especially in the Exclusion Era. By utilizing both western accounts in the press and missionary writings as well as local Chinese records, it reveals that Chinese in Boston were able to develop their own school and community associations after an initial period of exclusion. The paper will compare the transition from “mercantile orientalism” to “early Chinatown” and “Chinese American transnationalism” in examining the evolution of the perceptions and roles of their community. Instead of addressing the more conventional legal and political perspectives of exclusion, I argue that the local Chinatown utilized both traditional Chinese and modern American networks in enhancing their community resources and social capital. Some settlers maintained connections with their homeland communities by creating a linkage between their qiaoxiang and their businesses in New England. Others participated in local community building efforts to build coalitions and stage protests to withstand the challenges of social exclusion. This paper builds on the author’s previous work on the photo history of Boston Chinese and discusses part of his larger study of Chinese American history in New England.